

NOVEL

5

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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Hub?!

She gasped. He looked down at his own program languidly, snuggled against Rishe.



It was a rare sort of smile
for Arnold, like he couldn't
contain his emotions.

*"I see the appeal
plenty already."*



*“Forgive me... I’m going
to touch you in a way
you won’t want.”*

Arnold entwined his fingers
in hers, cradling Rishe’s hand
like it was the most precious
thing in the world.





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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. 5

Rūpu 7-kai-me no Akuyaku Reijō wa, Moto Tekikoku de Jiyū
Kimamana Hanayome Seikatsu o Mankitsu suru Vol. 5

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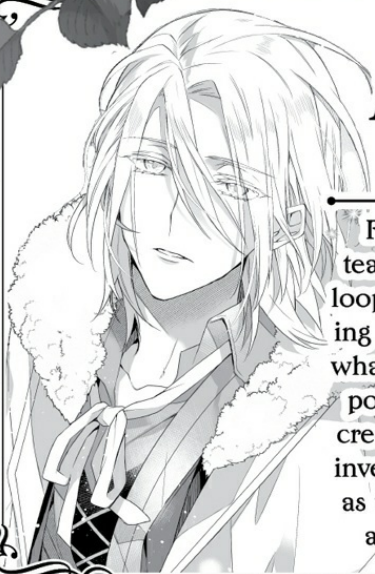
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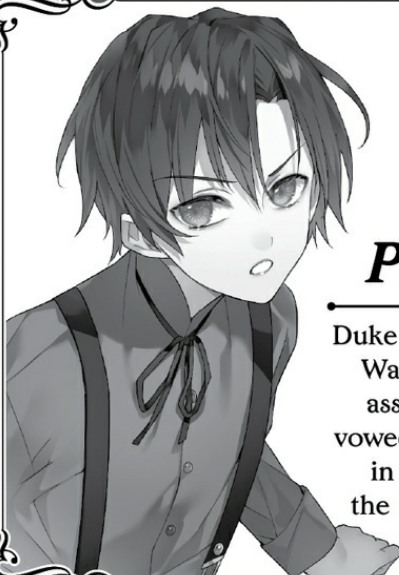
Michel Hévin

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 She was withdrawn and insecure until an incident helped her recover some confidence.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.

Chapter 1

A GREAT CROWD WAS GATHERED in the imperial capital's finest theater, hearts swelling with anticipation for tonight's performance. In a lobby past the VIP entrance, nobles mingled in fine dress, exchanging social pleasantries before the show. The atmosphere in the lobby was relaxed, but there was a faint ripple of excitement in the air—until all eyes turned to the newest arrivals.

"Rishe, your hand."

"Yes, Your Highness."

Rishe took Arnold's hand at his urging. When she did, she sensed the amicable chatter of the lobby shift. Her ears picked up all sorts of gasps and murmurs.

Well, yes, I suppose they would be surprised...

The nobles scrutinized Rishe, all dressed up for the theater, and then Arnold beside her. Wearing formal attire with black gloves and a red cloak, Arnold appeared as if he'd rather be anywhere but here.

For the royalty and nobility, the theater was a social venue. But from what Rishe heard, Arnold had never so much as shown his face at a party before Rishe's arrival—including events at the imperial palace. The nobles must've been quite shocked to see the antisocial prince escorting a lady to the theater.

I only just mentioned the theater, and he was able to get seats in a matter of days?

As she walked across the red carpet, Rishe thought back to a few days before.

It was less than a month until their wedding now, and the preparations were picking up fast. Having borrowed Arnold's office to go over some things with Oliver, Rishe had spontaneously let slip a wish: *"They're showing an opera in the imperial capital's theater? Oh, I'd love to go..."*

She hadn't even intended to be heard, but Arnold lifted his head from the documents at his desk as the words left her lips. She'd looked up from her own work in response.

He said, *"Very well. Give me some time."*

"Huh?"

"Oliver."

"Of course. As you wish, my lord."

Rishe had merely blinked, thinking, *Surely not*. Yet just a few days later, they had secured seats for the opera.

I understand how His Highness works so quickly now... Once he makes a decision, he acts on it without a moment's delay.

One peek at Arnold's profile revealed his immense displeasure. He must have found all the attention irritating. When he noticed Rishe's gaze, however, his severe expression suddenly softened. He remained silent and stoic, but there was a look of tranquility in his eyes. Arnold reached out with his free hand and touched Rishe's earring.

"Eep!"

"Your hair's getting caught in this thin chain," he said, gently running a finger over the earring chain before tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. The sensation tickled her even though it was dulled by his gloves.

The surrounding nobles reacted as if they'd witnessed something they shouldn't have, and the buzz in the lobby grew louder. It all felt oddly embarrassing to Rishe.

"Thank you, Your Highness..."

"Mm."

Rishe's cheeks were flushed, but Arnold was as unflappable as ever. The two of them climbed a staircase to the upper level, hand in hand, when someone

called out to them.

“Prince Arnold! Lady Rishe!”

They turned in unison to face a tall man with cropped brown hair and a stick-straight posture. He was clad in the uniform of Galkhein’s knights.

“Rudolf Gert Gutheil, at your service.”

Rishe stiffened at the name. She could only hope that Arnold hadn’t noticed.

“I appreciate you appointing me for your security for today. I will work with your Imperial Guard to ensure the safety of this floor.”

“I’ve reserved the entire top level, so you’re not to allow a single person entry. No exceptions will be made, noble or otherwise.”

“Yes, Your Highness. As you command.”

Their exchange finished, Rishe curtsied to the man who’d introduced himself as Gutheil. “Thank you, Sir Gutheil.”

“I will put my very life on the line so you may enjoy tonight’s performance with no interruptions.” Gutheil delivered the somewhat overblown line without a hint of insincerity. There was a firm will in his almond-shaped eyes, and Rishe knew he was both a skilled swordsman and a talented commander on the battlefield.

This man will be Prince Arnold’s direct subordinate in the future, a key figure in his world conquest.

Rishe didn’t allow her misgivings to show on her face, of course. She let Arnold escort her to the top floor. It was unlikely that anyone noticed Rishe’s wariness of their appointed guard tonight.

Emperor Arnold Hein had five retainers who answered directly to him on the battlefield. Whenever Arnold wasn’t there, they carried out his orders and delivered him whatever victories he requested in the war. It was thanks to the

support of these five knights that Arnold was able to conquer the world in such a short time. One of them was Rudolf Gert Gutheil, who had introduced himself to Rishe and Arnold as their guard for the evening.

I never imagined I'd meet him here...

Rishe sat in the royal box seat on the fourth floor of the theater and cast her gaze down. The red velour seating was fluffy, with cushions here and there throughout the box. It was couch seating, not individual seats, so she sat beside Arnold. There was plenty of room in the box, but she found herself easing into a spot where she would be shoulder to shoulder with him.

She flipped through the program, pretending to read it. *None of Prince Arnold's future retainers currently serve him. I thought I still had time before I needed to keep an eye on them.*

Rishe lowered the program and said, "May I ask how Sir Gutheil came to be our security for this evening, Prince Arnold? I noticed there were many who are not of your Imperial Guard among the forces stationed in the hall."

Arnold stared at her in surprise.

"Your Highness?"

"There are some fifty knights in my Imperial Guard. There must be ones you haven't spoken to yet. You don't mean to say you've memorized all their faces, do you?"

"Hmm? Of course I did. The Imperial Guard are the retainers you've personally acknowledged, are they not?"

The Imperial Guard were knights Arnold had chosen to report to him. Rishe knew that, despite appearances, Arnold cared a great deal for his subordinates. As his future empress, she would never forget their names or faces, even if she'd only met them once before.

His expression tender, Arnold replied, "My Imperial Guard are somewhat short-staffed now that I've sent a number of them to Coyolles. As such, I

decided it was time to expand their scale.”

“You’re choosing new Imperial Guards, then...”

She was getting a bad feeling about this. Arnold’s Imperial Guard currently numbered fifty, but even in a small nation like Hermitry, it was normal for a force of a hundred or more to protect the crown prince.

Fifty Imperial Guards are simply too few for a huge country like Galkhein, much less one with such a military focus. I understand that, but I have no way of knowing whether that’s the only reason behind this. In all my past lives, Prince Arnold killed his own father two years from now and became the emperor... I’m sure the forces he used to achieve it were his Imperial Guards.

Ergo, Arnold’s “expanding the scale” of his Imperial Guards might have been a necessary step toward his future war.

I’ll have to gather more information while preparing for the wedding.

Now was not the time to be thinking about this, however. Arnold was sure to be suspicious if she appeared too fixated on the matter, so she schooled her expression and traced over the names on the program.

“I didn’t know Sylvia was the star of tonight’s show. It’s been so long since I’ve heard her sing! I’m really looking forward to this.”

“You’ve seen the leading lady perform before?”

“Yes. It was, um...” She paused for a moment to make sure she wasn’t getting any of her past-life memories confused. “...with my previous fiancé, Prince Dietrich!”

Arnold fell silent.

“It should be a different show tonight, but she was the prima donna in that production as well. Her voice was so clear and powerful, it really moved me.”

Still the prince said nothing.

“Even Prince Dietrich enjoyed it. He would always get bored in the middle of

any other shows.”

Once she finished speaking, Arnold’s gaze dropped.

Will he enjoy the opera? Rishe wondered as she flipped back to the previous page in the program. *He doesn’t seem very interested, but he said this was his first time attending an opera. I think he should at least experience it before he makes a decision, rather than writing it off without trying it.*

Something occurred to Rishe then. “Do you have any questions about opera, Your Highness? If I’m able to answer, I—”

A heavy weight settled on her, and she gasped. *Huh?!*

As she blinked in surprise, Arnold laid his head on her shoulder. He had reclined against the backrest and was looking down at his own program languidly, snuggled against Rishe. His elbow rested on a cushion between them, and he had put most of his weight on it, so he wasn’t terribly heavy. But she could definitely feel a weight—*his* weight—on her shoulder.

Heat suffused Rishe’s cheeks. Somehow, it wasn’t just their bodies that were close but their hearts as well. “Um, Your Highness...?” she whispered. They were in the theater, after all. They couldn’t make too much noise.

“What is it?” Arnold’s tone was the same as ever. He spoke as if he’d always sat this way, like it was the most natural thing in the world. Yet there was also a certain listlessness to his voice.

Her heart pounding, Rishe gazed down at Arnold and asked him, “Are...are you sleepy?”

Arnold’s eyes flicked toward her. Rishe normally had to crane her neck to look at him; it was her first time seeing him from this angle. Her heart throbbed as she stared down into his beautiful, sea-blue eyes.

“That’s not it.”

Then what is it?

Paying no mind to Rishe’s bewilderment, Arnold said to her, “You’ll answer

my questions, won't you?"

Of course, but why in this position?! she thought, but she didn't have the courage to ask out loud. She was certain that Arnold had noticed both her surprise and her flushed cheeks. In fact, he looked like the cat that got the cream as he observed her from his current position. Still, he made no move except to study his program again.

"What is an opera, anyway?"

"Erm..."

Arnold's breath tickled her ear. Did his voice sound deeper than usual because of the theater's acoustics? Her pulse quickened at the sound. As she'd been asked a question, however, she intended to answer it in good faith.

"In theater, the story is only told through acting. In opera, the performers also sing."

"Huh," Arnold grunted. He shifted, and Rishe heard the rustling of his hair. She could feel his body heat on her shoulder, which just reminded her of their closeness.

Arnold peeled off one of his black gloves. The movement was slow and somehow picturesque. Rishe gulped, watching him. His large, bare hand slunk to Rishe's lap and flipped the pages of the program resting there.

"Do you like this particular show?"

"W-well...this troupe doesn't publicize the contents of the show beforehand. Not knowing the story until it begins is part of the appeal." Rishe remembered Dietrich complaining about that. The memory rose to mind at the exact same time Arnold's eyes slid toward hers again.

"What kind of stories have you seen before?"

He must have wanted to guess tonight's show. Rishe met his gaze and took a deep breath to calm herself.

"One was about a wedding in a world with magic. A princess had a political

marriage, and the story told of a vow they would share in the form of a kiss...”

She trailed off, staring into Arnold’s blue eyes. The candlelight from their box seat danced on his long lashes, casting shadows over his pale cheeks. Even in the dim lighting, his eyes called to mind gemstones.

Unable to tear her gaze away from his, Rishe thought, *Wait. Marriage rites?*

In less than a month, Rishe would be married to Arnold. She knew that, of course, and she was busy getting ready for the event each day. The details of the ceremony were quite similar to those in Rishe’s homeland. Thus, she’d only briefly scanned the itinerary and instead prioritized preventing Arnold’s war.

At that moment, however, Rishe became newly aware of one fact.

Exchanging a kiss in a wedding ceremony... Won’t we be doing that as well?

“...Rishe?” She had frozen in place, and Arnold’s gaze turned dubious.

In Galkhein’s wedding ceremony, the bride and groom say their vows in front of the goddess and become husband and wife... In the palace chapel, they exchange vows, and then...

They kissed.

Rishe blinked, registering the fact anew. *A vow in the form of a kiss? Between Prince Arnold and me? In front of all the guests attending our wedding?*

“Hey. What’s wrong?” Arnold sat up and studied her face.

She’d been freed from the weight on her shoulder, but they were still close. And because their faces were but a hair’s breadth apart, she was vividly reminded of an incident two months ago: Theodore had called Rishe to the chapel, and she and Arnold had spoken there. After that, he had taken her chin in his hand and kissed her.

“Hngh...”

Her already hot face burned even hotter. Rishe shoved the moment to the back of her mind. She knew there must have been *some* reason Arnold did it.

But puzzling it out overwhelmed her, so she'd avoided it altogether.

"What? Don't tell me you have a fever."

"Y-Your Highness, I...!"

Arnold reached out to touch her forehead. Rishe grabbed his hand and brought it down to her lap. She squeezed it between her own hands. It didn't change the fact that they were touching now, but initiating it herself was much better for her heart than letting Arnold touch her at will.

"I'm fine... Nothing's wrong..."

Arnold was frowning, a complex expression on his face. He was a swordsman, so he probably hated having his hands bound. Rishe was sorry to make him uncomfortable, but she really didn't want him to touch her any further. She was sure she would cry if she thought about that kiss again when they were this close.



A bell rang, signaling the start of the performance. Rishe did her best to act like nothing happened and put on a brave face. “I-It’s starting!”

“...”

The theater staff extinguished the lamps here and there among the seats. As the venue dimmed, the buzz of the crowd rose in anticipation. A moment later, silence fell as if on cue. But while this silence normally excited Rishe, right now it was just another inconvenience.

Prince Arnold will be able to hear my heart pounding!

Although the opera was about to begin, she couldn’t even concentrate on the stage. She wanted to see Arnold’s expression, but she didn’t have the courage to meet his gaze. As her thoughts spun, the thick red curtain went up.

A lone woman stood on the stage, illuminated by a chandelier. Rishe and Arnold were up on the fourth floor, so they couldn’t see her face without opera glasses. Still, the woman resembled a blooming flower. Her bewitching beauty was obvious even at this distance. Her long, glossy hair was almost crimson, her dress a vibrant red. She sauntered forward, slowly extending an arm.

At that moment, Rishe noticed something strange. Arnold seemed to have sensed the same thing. Rishe shook off her confusion and focused on the diva.

Something’s wrong...

Just when Rishe picked up some opera glasses to get a closer look...

“Ah!”

Sylvia collapsed.

Rishe leapt to her feet and spun around. Arnold seemed to know exactly what she wished to ask without her saying anything. “You’re free to act as you wish.”

“Thank you, Your Highness!” Grateful to Arnold from the bottom of her heart, Rishe rushed out of the royal box. She pushed through the first of the double doors, then the second, emerging in the hall. An unfamiliar knight guarding the

room let out a cry of surprise. Apologizing to him, Rishe looked down the hall.

I only sense knights on this floor and the lower one... There's no time to run down the stairs!

Heading for the spiral staircase, she kicked off her shoes and jumped up onto the handrail, her dress fluttering behind her.

"Wha—?! Lady Rishe?!"

She ignored the knight's voice as she sailed down the railing. In less than a minute, she arrived on the first floor, where her usual guards were stationed. Though they were surprised to see her, they were also accustomed to her behavior. They quickly got over their shock. "An emergency, Lady Rishe?! I will take your shoes. This way."

"Thank you, Kamil! You as well, Dennis!" She pressed her shoes into the guard's waiting hands and ran off, calling to them as she passed, "Please summon a doctor! Contact the theater staff and the opera troupe! Prince Arnold will have his own instructions, so someone please join him on the fourth floor!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

Arnold's Imperial Guards acted immediately. Parting with them, Rishe headed straight for the greenroom. Due to her habit of confirming the emergency exits in every new place, she'd already studied the theater's floor plan from a map posted on one of the walls. Arnold had the same habit; their security detail had been startled when they both met in front of the stairs.

She arrived at the greenroom door, finding it deserted where she expected to see theater security posted.

"Sylvia! Sylvia, pull yourself together!"

"Pardon me!" Rishe said, and the pale faces of the opera troupe all turned to her. "I have some training as an apothecary. Please allow me to perform first aid until a doctor arrives!"

“Agh... Yes, please!” A panicked man quickly moved aside for Rishe.

Sylvia lay on the greenroom floor, her face white as a sheet even under the vibrant theatrical makeup.

“Miss Sylvia, please respond in some way if you can hear my voice.”

Sylvia’s face was creased with pain, but she managed a small nod.

She’s conscious and not bleeding, but her pulse is rapid. More than anything, her breathing was shallow.

As gently as she could so as not to distress the songstress further, Rishe asked, “Does your head hurt, Miss Sylvia? I’m going to touch your shoulders. Did you feel that on both sides?”

“Yes...I just...can’t breathe...”

“Got it. One moment.” Rishe grabbed a nearby shawl—supposedly a prop—and draped it over Sylvia. She reached behind Sylvia’s dress and loosened her corset, lifting her into a sitting position with the shawl covering her for modesty.

A member of the opera troupe stammered, “Sh-shouldn’t she lie down?”

“It’s easier to breathe in a sitting position than lying down. Well, depending on external wounds, of course. Does Miss Sylvia have any chronic conditions?”

“I don’t think so, but she hadn’t seemed well these last few days...”

Sylvia was breathing easier with Rishe supporting her upright.

“You’re all right. You’ll be all right. Breathe slowly, and just focus on staying comfortable as much as you can.” Rishe rubbed Sylvia’s shoulders. She seemed to have brought the songstress some relief; her quick, shallow breaths were gradually slowing.

Her life doesn’t seem to be in danger, and whatever this is, I don’t think it will cause lasting harm... That said, she’ll need to be treated someplace she can relax.

They weren't far from the audience seats, so the murmuring of the crowd drifted into the room. Rishe couldn't pick out individual voices, but surprise, confusion, and discontent were apparent at the curtain's abrupt lowering. Those voices would only serve to worsen Sylvia's condition.

It would take too long to bring her somewhere she can rest while we wait for the doctor to arrive, but I have no medicine or tools here to treat her with.

The door to the greenroom opened, and Rishe raised her head. "Prince Arnold."

"Th-the *prince*?!" A commotion rose up around them.

Arnold's eyes swept over the greenroom before settling on Rishe. "Entrust the patient to the knights. They'll carry her to our carriage."

"But what about the doctor?"

"You've examined her, haven't you? If you've taken care of her preliminary treatment, it'll be faster to bring her to a doctor than wait for one."

Rishe nodded, sensing the trust in his voice. "We'll have to ask the audience to remain in their seats. If even a tenth of them leave, we won't be able to transport Miss Sylvia."

"I've already asked my knights to instruct the audience to remain seated. They've also been ordered to restrict traffic on the street from here to the clinic."

It was just like Arnold to make such quick judgments and act on them just as fast. He'd handled everything Rishe herself hadn't had time to get to.

"Do we need to construct something to get her to the carriage?"

"No, that would take too long. It would be better to have someone carry her instead."

"Understood." Arnold turned to the hallway and ordered one of the knights there, "Move the patient to the carriage."

“Yes, sir.”

Rishe balked at the knight who’d responded: It was Gutheil, Arnold’s future retainer, who strode into the room.

But why?

He shouldn’t have even been one of Arnold’s Imperial Guards at the moment. Who exactly was responsible for getting him so close to Arnold so quickly, and why?

Was it Prince Arnold who brought Sir Gutheil here? Does he already plan to make Sir Gutheil one of his Imperial Guard?

That meant Arnold was one step closer to killing his father and starting the war that would ravage the world.

As Rishe silently regarded the man, Gutheil crouched before Sylvia. “Pardon me, my lady... I hope you’ll forgive a boorish man like myself laying his hands on you.”

With that preface, Gutheil cradled Sylvia in his arms like she might break with the slightest jolt. He had her in a very stable hold that didn’t cause any undue suffering.

For now, Rishe left her to him and stood. “Take her to the carriage. My knights know where we’re going.”

“Understood. I’ll head there now.”



Rishe caught her breath and watched Gutheil leave. Part of her wanted to board the carriage as well, but she knew more people riding in it would only slow it down. Sylvia's condition didn't seem to require constant attention, and Rishe was sure that any doctor Arnold had arranged for would have reliable skills.

I should leave the rest to the knights.

Left behind in the room, Rishe felt the eyes of everyone present shifting to her and Arnold. A well-dressed, middle-aged man stepped up to Arnold and bowed to him, his expression stiff.

"Y-Your Highness...thank you so much for visiting our theater today. As the director of the venue, I must express my sincerest appreciation and apologies. I planned to visit you after the show, but for something like this to happen when you were here personally, I..."

"..."

"Er, please pardon the impertinent question, but this lovely maiden who was so kind as to attend to Sylvia? Might she be...?"

Grimacing, Arnold responded, "My wife," without sparing so much as a glance at Rishe.

I'm not your wife yet! Rishe spluttered internally while the color drained from the director's face.

"P-p-please forgive my rudeness!"

Everyone in the room hung their heads so fast, Rishe almost felt a gust of wind. She rushed to assuage their worries. "Please, think nothing of it! In fact, I appreciate you allowing me to perform first aid after bursting into the room completely unannounced."

It was a crisis involving a popular diva, and a complete stranger barged onto the scene. It wouldn't have been odd if they'd found her suspicious and thrown her out instead of letting her do first aid.

This exchange was of no interest to Arnold, who told the director, “Henceforth, you should have staff in place should anyone in the theater suddenly fall ill. Let’s go, Rishe. I can’t imagine they’ll put on the show without their star.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Rishe acquiesced, though she couldn’t get Gutheil out of her mind. *It would be unnatural for me to ask after him for no particular reason.* She padded to Arnold’s side before remembering that she wasn’t wearing any shoes.

Arnold noticed at the same moment. “Kamil.”

“Yes, sir. Lady Rishe, I have your footwear here.”

“Sorry about that. Thank you, Kami—”

Rishe reached out for the shoes, but Arnold snatched them first. In one fluid motion, he sat Rishe down in a nearby chair and knelt in front of her before she could even recover from her surprise.

“Y-Your Highness, please!”

No sooner than she yelped had Arnold slipped the first shoe onto her foot. He’d done it like it was completely natural, but this was an absurd turn of events. *Arnold* was kneeling on the floor, helping a woman into her shoes!

“Um, you don’t need to do that! I-I can put them on myself!”

“It’s fine. Stay still.”

“Ugh...”

The director, the performers, and all the knights in the hallway gaped at Arnold, but the crown prince paid them no mind.

“There,” he said when he was finished, standing and holding his hand out to Rishe.

“Thank you...” Rishe was dizzy with embarrassment and awkwardness, but she took his hand to stand, grateful all the same.

He's always been rather lenient with me, but he seems almost sweet lately...or maybe coddling's the word?

She curtsied to the opera troupe, who scrambled to return the gesture instead of just gawking at her. They headed into the hallway followed by four Imperial Guards. As Arnold escorted her, Rishe looked up at his profile. Why *was* Arnold so kind to her?

“Er, Your Highness—”

But before she could ask him, a disgruntled shout cut through the hallway: “Argh! I’m telling you to let me through!”

Down the hall, someone was arguing with Arnold’s knights.

“Again, there’s been an emergency! If you would please just understand—”

“It is precisely *because* it is an emergency that I must act! How could you not understand that?!”

Is someone from the audience trying to get outside? Their voice, though...
Rishe felt a strange sensation coming over her.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I just...feel like that voice sounds very familiar...”

Rishe peered down the hall, and Arnold followed her gaze. The hallway curved to match the round shape of the stage, so they couldn’t see all the way to its end. But as they drew closer to the source of the voice, Rishe heard it loud and clear.

The color drained from her face. “It couldn’t be...”

Arnold eyed her with curiosity as she stopped in her tracks. She needed time to process this information. Time that she didn’t have, as a familiar head of lustrous blond hair was already coming into view.

“Damn it, how dare you stand in my way?! I didn’t want to resort to this, but if you would obstruct justice itself, then I must put my illustrious skill with a

sword to—hmm?”

Aaaaah, our eyes met!

Rishe nearly jolted the moment those emerald eyes ensnared her. Simultaneously, the temperature around Arnold dropped several degrees. The Imperial Guards went rigid with fright, but the one arguing with them didn't even seem to notice.

There's no mistaking it. Even if I wish there were!

“Huh?! What are *you* doing here?! Aha, I know! The very goddess herself has proven to be my ally, hasn't she?! Would you let me go, you blasted knights?! Who the hell do you think I am?!”

I see he still has plenty of unearned confidence...

“Rishe! Don't just stand there! Do something about these men! Don't you hear me?!”

“I'm the one who wants to know what *you're* doing here.” Rishe sighed, holding her forehead. “Prince Dietrich...”

“Hah!” The man puffing his chest out, even as the knights around him pushed him back, was Rishe's former fiancé. “Why, because it's *me*, of course!”

Chapter 2

RISHE HEARD THAT the matter of her engagement had been decided about a month after her birth—that is, immediately following the birth of Hermity's Prince Dietrich. Rishe had lived her entire life as the sole daughter of a duke *and* as a future crown princess. As for Dietrich, the crown prince, he had always been her fiancé as well as a childhood friend of sorts.

"Rishe! I heard you did better than me on that test! You got a perfect score!"

When they were young, Dietrich often flew into a rage whenever he saw Rishe.

"Well, we received a very clear textbook in preparation for the exam, Your Highness. Our tutor even offered to explain anything we didn't understand."

"Urk!"

"We have another test tomorrow with the same questions on it, don't we?"

Rishe's education as the future crown princess included things like supporting and encouraging her husband. But even without those lessons, she would surely have told Dietrich the same thing, as she believed it from the bottom of her heart.

"I'm sure that if you read the textbook carefully, you'll be able to get a perfect score as well, Your Highness!"

"I..."

"So why don't we study together today, Prince Dietrich?"

"Argh! Shut up, shut up, shut up!" Dietrich smacked Rishe's proffered hand aside and glowered at her. He was bright red up to his ears, brow scrunched up in frustration. "I'm a genius, you know! I got thirty-five whole points without studying one bit! That's why I'm way more impressive than you! You only got a hundred points after studying really hard! Th-that's right...have confidence,

Dietrich!” After muttering that last bit to himself, Dietrich jabbed a finger at Rishe. “Don’t take me lightly, Rishe! One of these days! You’re gonna bow before my true greatness! You hear me?!”

“Oh... There he goes...”

Rishe could still remember the sight of Dietrich running off down the palace halls. Of course, a knight had spotted him almost immediately and brought him right back.

These exchanges weren’t limited to matters of studying, however. As the two of them grew, Dietrich laid a constant stream of complaints at Rishe’s feet.

“This won’t do! It won’t do at all! A woman riding a horse herself?! People will think it’s because I’m a lousy rider!”

“You want to sneak into the city? Imagine what would happen if you were caught! People would doubt my own dignity as your fiancé!”

“Instead of poking your nose into many different fields, don’t you think it would be best to focus on your duties as crown princess? If you keep this up, you’ll just end up with half-baked knowledge in a handful of fields!”

The one thing Dietrich and her parents hadn’t objected to was her learning swordplay for self-defense.

“You want to learn how to wield a sword? Come to think of it, there *is* precedent for a queen saving her king from an assassination using her own self-defense skills, isn’t there? Very well. I think I’ll join you! It’s fun to swing a sword around!”

It lasted for only a moment. When they had their first bout a year or so later, Rishe was far and away the victor. Infuriated, he forbade her from studying swordplay any further.

“It’s as I thought! A sword-wielding queen is outrageous! Such a violent woman is not fit to be queen of this country!”

And upon arriving home, Rishe found that all of her practice equipment had

been disposed of.

“If His Highness doesn’t like it, then of course you have no right to continue.”

“M-Mother, please...”

“I know your father and I commanded you to be excellent, but that was only so that you may become the perfect queen. If your skills only displease His Highness...” Rishe’s mother had been stern and cold, as if Rishe were nothing more than a disobedient child. “Then there is no worth in those skills.”

Rishe was thirteen back then. At the time, she’d been convinced that her only value was as the future crown princess, so she swallowed her objections and did her very best to support Dietrich. She had helped him study and took on the role of correcting his bad behavior. It was her fate to be his queen, so all of this was only natural.

She graduated from the royal academy, and when she was poised to begin her real training as the future queen, at a ball on the first day of the fifth month that year...

“Rishe Irmgard Weitzner! You are a vile woman! A truly malicious creature unworthy of the crown prince!” Dietrich thrust his finger at her and shouted as he’d always done throughout their childhood. “As of this instant, our engagement is off!”

In that moment, Rishe was finally free.

In my first life, I was so confused during that moment that I couldn’t exactly think of myself as being free.

Surfacing from her reverie, Rishe sighed. She had moved to a room loaned to them by the theater staff. It was one of several rooms where the royalty and nobility could meet and chat before or after a performance. There was no table, just several chairs facing one another. Rishe sat on a couch, across from Dietrich, and stared at him glumly.

“Heh. I haven’t seen your face in a few months, but you seem to be doing a lot better than I expected! You must be thrilled at our reunion!”

In all my lives, I’ve never once seen Prince Dietrich after we broke off our engagement—not until now.

“Did you hear me, Rishe? Are you listening? Rishe!”

There are all sorts of things I’d like to work out at the moment, but first things first...

Rishe let go of her forehead and peeked over at Arnold. He was seated next to her on the couch, his brow slightly furrowed. That much was fine. What concerned Rishe was the placement of his right hand.

Why is Prince Arnold’s hand around my waist?!

And he was holding her snugly against him as well. Meanwhile, his other elbow lay on the armrest, his hand pillowed his cheek, and his legs were crossed as he looked idly at Dietrich.

We had no choice but to borrow a room since we can’t exactly ignore him, but still.

Rishe recalled the fit Dietrich had thrown a few minutes earlier. Upon recognizing Dietrich, Arnold acted first—he’d grasped Rishe’s hand and immediately tried to exit the theater. But Dietrich, like an insistent toddler, had demanded that they acknowledge his presence; thus, Rishe relented and kept Arnold from leaving. They borrowed the room because it would have imposed on everyone else if they continued quarreling in the hallway.

I’m going to go out on a limb and say that Prince Arnold is not fond of people like Prince Dietrich.

From Rishe’s observations at balls and other social gatherings, Arnold’s patience for loud people was as thin as fraying thread.

But that doesn’t explain why he’s holding me so close!

They were even closer than they’d been in the royal box. It wasn’t like they

were dancing or anything. Being joined at the hip with Arnold in front of others made Rishe restless.

“P-Prince Arnold, I can ask what Prince Dietrich’s business here is on my own.” Rishe watched him, uncomfortable to her core, and murmured, “If you would rather not be present for this, you could wait in another room...”

“Hey, Rishe! You’re talking about me, aren’t you? I can tell!”

Arnold ignored Dietrich, eyes falling on Rishe. “I’m not leaving.”

“Huh?”

“I’m staying here with you,” he said firmly.

Agh! Those almost sounded like the words of a faithful lover. Rishe’s heart banged against her rib cage. She lowered her gaze, deeply embarrassed. That was when Dietrich finally noticed how they were positioned.

“What’s with the way you’re sitting?! You’re not even married yet, and you’re holding her waist?!” Dietrich turned a brilliant shade of scarlet as he gaped at Arnold. “It’s...it’s obscene!”

“*What?*”

“Whoa!”

The force of Arnold’s short response catapulted Dietrich off his chair. There was an ice-cold bloodlust in Arnold’s voice that chilled even Rishe’s spine. And even after shutting Dietrich up, the malice did not recede from his eyes.

“Um, I feel like I have to apologize for this,” Rishe said to Arnold, nothing short of mesmerized as Dietrich shrank beneath his heavy stare.

“Why should *you* have to apologize?” The only thing soft and sweet about Arnold in that moment were the words he uttered to Rishe. Giving Dietrich another icy glare, Arnold unhurriedly opened his mouth and said, “So?”

“Ugh...” Dietrich recoiled from the short question. “I-I’m talking to Rishe right now, not you!”

“I’ve only allowed you to be here because Rishe desires to speak with you. Don’t forget that you’re not in a position to casually meet with the crown princess of this country.”

“Rishe isn’t your princess yet! It’s too early to treat her like she belongs to you!”

Arnold looked down at Dietrich with open scorn. “It seems you have a fundamental misunderstanding of the role of a husband.”

“What?!”

“Rishe will be my wife, but she will not be my property. The only person whom she belongs to is herself.”

“Augh!”

“I do not intend to restrict Rishe’s actions in any way so long as they do not endanger her. The person I am not allowing to act freely here is *you*. Do you understand that?”

He really has always supported whatever I wanted to do. That’s the only reason we’re here.

With a voice so low it was like fog curling against the ground, Arnold said, “You will answer Rishe’s first question. What do you think you’re doing in this country?”

He’s really angry now...

He may have been crown prince of one of the most powerful countries in the world, but even Arnold usually spoke with more tact. At the very least, he wouldn’t have bossed royalty of another country around. Speaking with Dietrich really must have put a strain on his mental health.

Rishe got to the point to move things along. “I’ve actually been exchanging letters with Lady Mary, Prince Dietrich.”

“What? You have?!”

“She informed me that she has been devoting herself to your education since my departure from Hermity.”

Dietrich flinched in alarm.

Almost immediately after Rishe’s arrival in Galkhein, she had received a thorough apology from Mary in the mail. It contained pages and pages of regrets for the way she’d treated Rishe and the things she planned to do to make up for her transgressions. Chief among these was the matter of Dietrich’s future.

“Lady Mary told me that she would stay at your side and make sure you became a respectable person even if she did not become the crown princess.”

A strangled groan escaped Dietrich’s throat.

“I always had my doubts. I couldn’t imagine you’d withstand such an education even if it was coming from your beloved Lady Mary.” Rishe pinned Dietrich with her narrowed eyes. “Tell me, Prince Dietrich. You fled from Hermity, didn’t you?”

“O-o-of *course* not!” he spluttered.

“Keep your distance. Sit *down*.”

“Eek!”

Dietrich had sprung up with the force of his shout, but Arnold’s cold intimidation forced him back down to his seat. At the same time, Arnold pulled Rishe even closer—and Rishe’s heart almost leapt out of her chest.

“To even *suggest* that I would flee! Why, it’s outrageous!”

Forget that. Why does it feel like Prince Arnold is trying to protect me?!

Back on the couch, Dietrich frantically searched for the right words. “Mary is a very delicate girl! The way I broke off my engagement with you weighed too heavily on her! Suddenly, she started saying things like, ‘What we did to Lady Rishe was absolutely unconscionable! We must change to honor her magnanimous spirit!’”

Despite the distracting pounding of her heart due to her closeness to Arnold, Rishe said calmly, “Erm, please do not trouble yourself on my account. I do appreciate Lady Mary’s feelings, though.”

“You don’t know what she’s like now! Ever since then, Mary’s always got a textbook in her right hand and a thick cane in her left! And she smiles and says, ‘Let’s study hard again today, Prince Dietrich,’ while bending the cane!”

I kind of want to see that, to be honest...

In any case, it sounded like Rishe was right. “His Majesty the King and everyone else are giving Lady Mary their full support, aren’t they?”

“Gaaah!”

“I suppose you couldn’t handle the schooling, etiquette lessons, repeated attempts to teach you how to rule... Feeling as if there was nowhere else to go in Hermyty, you came to Galkhein. Am I correct?”

The room fell silent. Arnold said nothing, but at this point he was eyeing Dietrich as though the man were trash lying by the roadside.

Rishe sighed. “Prince Dietrich. Neither Lady Mary nor His Majesty do the things they do out of cruelty. That was never my intention either. Any counsel I gave you was out of nothing more than a desire to support you. And you’ve—”

“Wh-who do you think I am?!” Dietrich shouted, interrupting her. “I’m not so far gone that I need people ganging up to teach me! I’ve always been told that I was very gifted! That I could do it if I tried!”

“But you never once *did* try, did you?”

“Ghk!” Dietrich clutched at his chest like something had struck him in the heart.

“‘You can do it if you try,’ is just another way of saying, ‘You can’t do it because you’re not trying.’ Tools that you never take out of storage may as well not exist.”

“Uuugh...!”

“Being in a situation where you’re *able* to try whenever you wish is a privilege.” She was more diplomatic when they were engaged, but right now, Rishe wanted to get this over with for the sake of Arnold’s mental health. “No matter how much they may have wished to learn, all the maids who work for me had to spend their youths caring for younger siblings. Have you ever imagined being in a situation where you were not even afforded the luxury to *make an effort* to learn something?”

“Guh!”

“Lady Mary was the same, was she not? She sought a marriage with an affluent partner for the sake of her family and thus made every effort to obtain acceptance into the academy. After all she has accomplished, have you even given any thought to how she devotes herself to you so completely ‘even if she does not become the crown princess’?”

“I-I—” Dietrich’s expression changed when Rishe brought Mary into the conversation. Nevertheless, he clenched his fists and squeezed out the words, “Wh-what do you know?! Even I tried for a few days after I was born!”

“Infants are not capable of that level of resolve.”

“That’s not the point! You’d never understand how I feel!” Dietrich shouted, red-faced. “Being born as the crown prince when I didn’t want to be, and always having *you* around!”

Rishe blinked at the unexpected revelation.

“You always, *always* stood in my way, Rishe! You scored better on tests, learned faster, and always had the adults’ attention!”

“What...?”

“They were *my* tutors, but *you* were the one who spoke with them like you were equals! When I brought you to the riding grounds, you won the horses over before I did! You could always run faster than me, and you destroyed me

when we had sword matches!”

Rishe pressed her lips together, unsure of what to say.

“No matter how I tried, there was no way I could ever compare to you! Even I have things that I excel at. If only I hadn’t been born the crown prince, I would have been lauded for my abilities, I just know it... But since I *was* born the crown prince, why couldn’t I possess the skills you do?! Those feelings have always plagued me...”

Dietrich hung his head once more before the shell-shocked Rishe. She was further surprised when he began sniffing. She floundered, thoroughly uncertain of what to say to him, until Dietrich spoke again with a shaky voice.

“The truth is...I always wanted to be like you!”

H-he’s crying! Rishe was speechless. They’d grown up together for almost fifteen years, but she’d never once seen Dietrich cry. *Maybe I went too far...*

Panicked, she glanced over at Arnold. Of late, she’d been relying on him whenever she wasn’t sure what to do. She regretted this behavior, all too aware that she was taking advantage of his kindness.

I’m sure he’s just as thrown by this situation as I am. Rishe chastised herself for seeking his help, but he simply regarded her with a look that said he had no choice but to act.

“Very well. Leave this to me.”

“Huh?!”

Apparently, he’d picked up on just how stumped Rishe was. *Is Prince Arnold really going to comfort Prince Dietrich? I suppose it’s possible he’s really a very kind person at heart.*

Arnold turned to Dietrich and began, “No matter your reasons or circumstances...”

Hmm? That didn’t sound like the start of a comforting sentence.

“...it does not excuse annulling your engagement with Rishe and trying to banish her from her homeland when she was at no fault whatsoever,” he finished.

“Hrk!”

P-Prince Arnoold!

Dietrich crumpled into a sobbing mess. “Gah! I...I...!”

Yet Arnold struck mercilessly, peering down his nose at the crying Dietrich. “Do you even understand that stripping a noblewoman of her support system and banishing her to a place where she has no connections may as well be a death sentence?”

“A death sentence?!”

“To claim that you intended otherwise goes beyond mere foolishness. Moreover, to feign blindness to your own incompetence and heap the blame on Rishe’s shoulders is complete nonsense.”

“Ack! P-Prince Arnold!” Rishe stopped him, whispering into his ear, “Wh-why are you rubbing salt in his wounds?!”

“What? You mean you weren’t implying you didn’t mind if I struck the final blow?”

“Of course I wasn’t! You knew exactly what I was trying to say, didn’t you, Your Highness?!”

Arnold matched her volume, whispering back to her, “I have no reason to show this man sympathy.”

It’s exactly as you say! Rishe’s hand once again found her forehead.

“In fact, you’re far too lenient with him. This is the man who broke off his engagement to you, you know.”

“Well, my engagement to Prince Dietrich held no value to me. Why would I be upset about someone divesting me of something I didn’t want?”

“...Are you sure you’re not twisting the knife more than I am?”

Rishe and Arnold continued their whispered conversation, completely ignoring Dietrich at this point. Eventually, he started muttering to himself as well.

“I-If only I were born in a different situation, I would have been able to shine my brightest, I know it. I wasn’t born the crown prince because I *wanted* to be...”

Arnold rounded on him. “And do you think Rishe was practically born your fiancée because she wanted to be?”

“I-I...!”

Arnold recrossed his legs, observing Dietrich with pure disgust. “I have no choice but to ask—do you think the woman you envy so much has expended no effort in her life up until now?”

Dietrich averted his eyes.

Resting his chin in his hand, Arnold told him, “It’s been a mere two months since Rishe came to Galkhein. Yet if I bring her to a party, she knows the faces of every person in attendance and can even remember their preferred conversation topics.”

Rishe’s eyes widened in surprise.

“W-well, of course. Rishe has always had a good memory.”

“This is not a matter of simply having a good memory. No matter how insipid the conversation is, Rishe listens with complete sincerity. Moreover, she does her own research into the subject before the next time she converses with that person, even though this does not benefit her in any way.”

“Oh, Prince Arnold...”

“A rotten noble once asked her a question about an obscure piece of Galkhein history. She was only able to give him a well-thought-out answer because she sacrifices sleep to study this country despite the fact that no one expects her

to.” Arnold’s blue-eyed gaze fell on Rishe. “She regularly supplies the barracks with fortifying food and drink. Even if it does not benefit her, if it will benefit me, she watches out for my Imperial Guards—many of whom she only has a passing familiarity with.”

I didn’t know he was watching me so closely... Rishe felt her cheeks heating up from the warmth of Arnold’s gaze.

“I can give countless examples of such behavior. I’m sure there are infinitely more that take place outside of my notice.”

“Y-you give me far too much credit, Your Highness. I’ve done nothing deserving of such high praise.”

“You should take more pride in the things you’ve built for yourself.” Arnold’s large hand cupped her face, his thumb stroking her cheek. “Make him understand all the effort you’ve put in to serve as crown princess.”

“Ngh...”

It was true. Arnold’s examples were things Rishe did not do merely as part of her plan to avoid the war. Since she was appearing at parties as Arnold’s fiancée, she avoided any behavior that would sully his reputation. She’d learned about Arnold’s Imperial Guards because she wanted to know what sort of vassals he chose and how he treated them.

I’m doing these things simply because I want to, so it should feel strange for him to praise me for it, but...

Warmth blossomed in her chest all the same.

Arnold’s hand slowly drew away from her cheek. Rishe covered her face, hiding the flush spreading across it. She considered Arnold’s words even as her embarrassment tormented her. Dietrich’s reaction, meanwhile, was to double over and start groaning.

“Auuugh!”

Oh! That’s right! Prince Dietrich! This was no time to be going all weak in the

knees. Rishe needed to get Arnold away from Dietrich immediately.

“Was I wrong...?”

She pulled herself together, considering her options. *If things go the same way as in all my previous lives, then not even a year from now, Prince Dietrich will attempt a coup against his father and fail.*

When she’d heard the rumors in her past lives, her chief response had been exasperation. It was far too pathetic an attempt to even be called a coup d’état. Dietrich had let his vassals incite him to action, but his traitorous plot against his father was discovered almost immediately. He had had no time to gather weaponry or leak state secrets. His coup ended without him striking a single blow against his father and without the king’s knights even getting involved. The way Rishe heard it, his treachery had been discovered so early, Dietrich had no time to even execute the plan—early enough that his only crime was *plotting* insurrection against the king.

Still, even *scheming* such a thing was a serious crime. Dietrich had been stripped of his authority as crown prince and placed under house arrest. The mantle of crown prince of Hermyty had passed to Dietrich’s much younger brother.

He’s the exact opposite of Prince Arnold.

Arnold, who had seized the throne from his father in every one of Rishe’s past lives, met her eyes with curiosity.

In the fifteen years I was Dietrich’s fiancée, it was ingrained in me not to interfere with him. Even if I don’t stop him, the only thing he stands to lose in his coup is his status as crown prince.

Rishe groaned, deep in thought.

Today, Prince Dietrich is taking to heart remonstrations that would normally go in one ear and out the other... Is it due to Lady Mary’s efforts? Or Prince Arnold’s intensity? The way things are going, I might be able to help him.

That was when Dietrich's head whipped up. "No—I'm...I'm not wrong! Hold your head up high, Dietrich!"

"Huh?"

"Now is the time to tell you the *true* reason I came to Galkhein before your sixteenth birthday!"

Rishe stared at him in a daze. He was being nonsensical, to say nothing of the fact that he sounded like he was crying. "My birthday?"

She was indeed going to turn sixteen nine days from today, on the thirtieth day of the seventh month. But what did that have to do with anything?

"Like Hermitry, Galkhein forbids anyone under sixteen to marry. While you remain fifteen, you cannot *officially* be considered Galkhein's crown princess-to-be!"

Dietrich's passionate declaration only further confused Rishe.

"What, you don't understand? I'm telling you I'm here to save you before you can be legally wed."

"Save me? From what, exactly?"

"Why," he cried, pointing dramatically at her, "from the engagement that you obviously do not desire!"

Rishe was struck speechless yet again.

"Really, I can't believe my father! Offering up my precious childhood friend to a man known for his cruelty and brutality... It's just too awful!" Though he was still sniffing, Dietrich seemed to have regained his confidence. "But I will not yield, not even before a nation as great as Galkhein! I'm here to save you while there's still time!"

"..."

"No sooner than I arrived in the capital did I see Sylvia's name, leading me to stop by the theater on a whim! And look at that—we ran into each other shortly

after! Hmm, the more I think about it, the more I'm sure the goddess is on my side!"

"..."

"Rejoice, Rishe! We'll celebrate your birthday back in Hermity!"

Dietrich then turned a teary glare on Arnold. "Prince Arnold Hein! I do not fear you! Well, in truth, I fear you a little, or a little more than a little... But this, too, is a trial I must overcome! For I am the future king, and I am full of kingly qualities!"

He was being awfully rude to Arnold, but the man in question seemed as if he could not care less. In his mind, Dietrich was probably not even worth humoring with a response. Without a reaction to Dietrich's declaration, Arnold turned instead to Rishe. "You must be satisfied by now."

"..."

"We're leaving. Knights, hand him over to whoever's responsible for him."

"Wha—?! Y-you're throwing me out?!"

Rishe took a deep breath, lowered her head, and slowly began, "Prince Dietrich..."

Dietrich perked up.

"I have nothing to say to you in regard to our engagement or my banishment. However..." Rishe looked Dietrich squarely in the eye. "I cannot overlook your speaking ill of Prince Arnold."

"Rishe, you..."

Although she had scolded Dietrich countless times over the last fifteen years, her tone had never been as harsh as it was now. Dietrich was frozen in surprise before her, unable to form a coherent reply.

"Prince Arnold is the kindest anyone's ever been to me. He permits me to go out into town, provides horses for me to ride, and even trains me in

swordsmanship from time to time. All things I was not allowed to do when I was your fiancée.”

Arnold had never been angry with Rishe for sneaking into town. He’d allowed her to fix up the detached palace for her own purposes, grow medicinal herbs in her garden, and select and educate her own maids. If Rishe asked him for a bout, he would make time in his busy schedule to spar with her. He always respected her choices. To a noblewoman—to Rishe—nothing could be more important.

“He is always concerned for me and my health and makes sure I can live freely. Prince Arnold only scolds me when I do something dangerous. Yet you spout this nonsense about ‘saving me’...”

A moment later, Rishe felt herself clinging to Arnold out of sheer momentum. The two men both turned wide eyes on her.

“...”

“Wh-wh-wha—?!”



Arnold appeared thin for a swordsman, yet when she wrapped her arms around him, she was acutely aware of his robust physique and firm muscles. Shoving that thought to the back of her mind, Rishe glared sharply at Dietrich.

“I’ll prove just how wonderful a husband Prince Arnold can be!”

“H-h-h-h-h-have it your way!”

“...”

Of course, she could only maintain the position for a few seconds. Rishe would end up apologizing to Arnold in the carriage ride home later, her face bright red.

“Please accept my most sincere apologies, really...”

“Right.”

In the carriage ride back to the palace, Rishe hung her head low. She couldn’t even meet Arnold’s eyes across from her. All she could do was tremble and apologize fervently again and again.

I-I think my face is on fire!

An awkward atmosphere had been permeating the carriage for some time now, and every time Rishe gave it thought, all the more did she wish for the floor to swallow her whole. Not only were her cheeks red; the heat reached all the way up to her ears.

It was all because of what Rishe did in the theater. She had told Dietrich that she would prove how kind Arnold was. As a result, Dietrich ended up staying in Galkhein for several more days. Last but not least was the way Rishe had touched Arnold. Put all that together and you got a suffocatingly uncomfortable carriage ride.

Ugh, what have I done?! Not only did I argue with Dietrich and declare the strangest war in the world against him, but I even clung to Prince Arnold...

She'd gone further than merely putting one's hand on another's waist in public. Remembering how surprised Arnold had been when she'd pressed herself against him, Rishe wanted to bury her face in her hands. Worse yet, Arnold was quieter than usual, and the silence was torturing her.

"I already made you go out of your way to provide a place for Prince Dietrich and me to speak, and then on top of that..."

Arnold sighed as Rishe continued to apologize. "I have no intention of limiting your activities in any way. You are free to meet with whomever you wish to meet with and speak with whomever you wish to speak with."

"Your Highness, I..."

Normally, Rishe would not be granted such freedom. Dietrich's conduct was normal; her mother's actions were correct. It was Arnold's behavior that was strange. This was not the typical way noble ladies or royal wives were treated.

"I really do want Prince Dietrich to understand just how kind you are," she said, peeved.

Arnold gave her a wry smile. "The man spoke nothing but truth. You're the one being naive."

"That's not true."

"More importantly, if he's going to be staying in the capital, then you should make him atone for the absurd crime he pinned on you," Arnold said—but Dietrich's breaking off their engagement was something Rishe was *thankful* for.

"I'm much more upset about him speaking ill of you than anything he's done to me."

"Nothing a person like him says could ever mean anything to me. He can fuss all he likes, but..." Arnold lowered his voice. "I won't allow him to belittle you."

Rishe's heart somersaulted again. *He's so considerate of me.*

Just what about him was cruel or brutal? If she said that to Dietrich, he would scrounge up some excuse. To prove it to him, she would have to use something

other than words.

“I *was* surprised by what you said, though.”

Rishe startled when Arnold brought them back on topic.

“It’s rare for you to act that way.”

“I-I’m sorry for grabbing you, Your Highness...”

“That’s not what I meant,” he said, frowning for some reason. He tilted his head to the side. “You seem franker with him than you are with other people.”

“Urgh...” Rishe was aware of her tendency to get carried away when talking to Dietrich. “I’m used to scolding Prince Dietrich because I was his minder for so long. I realize I can be quite harsh with him sometimes. We’re childhood friends as well, after all.”

Arnold stared at her with his elbow on the window frame. “Rishe.”

“Hmm?”

He patted the seat next to him. Rishe wasn’t sure why he wanted her to sit beside him, but she got up and plopped down next to him.

She raised her head, and he returned her gaze, asking her, “You won’t scold me?”

“Huh?” Rishe stared back at him in surprise.

Does he mean in relation to his duties?

Arnold watched her with a face devoid of expression, awaiting her reply. Confused, Rishe nevertheless answered his question honestly.

“I would never scold you, Prince Arnold. With Dietrich, I tend to worry that I’m the only one encouraging him to change his behavior.”

Arnold reached out while she spoke and tucked her hair behind her ear. His fingers brushed her earrings like they had earlier in the theater.

“But you’d be fine without me, Prince Arnold... Ngh...” Rishe hunched her

shoulders from the ticklish sensation, then peeked timidly at Arnold.

He lowered his blue eyes before saying, "I'm not so sure about that."

Rishe wasn't certain how to respond. After a moment, she posited, "Do you *want* someone to scold you sometimes?"

It appeared as if Arnold didn't know how to answer. He hadn't affirmed her guess, but he hadn't argued, so she tried to think of something to scold him for.

"Like, 'You mustn't work so late into the night every night'?"

"I could say the same to you."

"Or 'Please take more time to rest and relax'?"

"Again, same to you."

"Hmm. Maybe 'You should allocate more of your own work to others'?"

"...Rishe."

Mixing in a bit of humor with her genuine beliefs, Rishe said next, "Then what about 'If you're suspicious of someone, please inform me'?"

Arnold's eyes darkened, narrowing with mirth. "You're going to have to do better than that with your leading questions," he said, voice slightly husky. He'd seen through her immediately.

"It was just a gut feeling. I have no evidence to support it yet."

"Is that 'gut feeling' why you were so on edge around Gutheil?"

Here I thought I was discreet about it.

Arnold noticed even the most trivial things about Rishe. But the reason Rishe was suspicious of Gutheil was that she knew the future, and she couldn't very well tell him that.

"It wasn't anything about Sir Gutheil specifically," Rishe fibbed. "I just thought the security situation today wasn't very like you, Your Highness."

"Oh?"

“Even if they are shorthanded now, your Imperial Guards have always been an elite few. A night at the theater just didn’t seem like something that necessitated their cooperation with another force.”

It wasn’t like they were visiting a different country. Their plans today should have involved a completely uneventful trip to the theater and nothing more.

“If you’re increasing their numbers now, does that mean you’re concerned about the current military force at your disposal?”

Rishe stared at Arnold intently. *I’m worried about whether or not he’s preparing for the war.*

His blue eyes were like the ocean. She felt like she would never reach their true depths no matter how long she stared into them.

That’s not the only reason, though. If he has a concern, I want to assuage his fears as much as I can.

She was well aware of how difficult that would be. Upon arriving in Galkhein, she’d asked Arnold to confide in her as much as he was comfortable. It was after Theodore had abducted her, or thereabouts. At the time, her words hadn’t gotten through to Arnold at all.

Perhaps it’s just wishful thinking on my part.

Just as the thought crossed her mind, Arnold looked down and said, “Fabrannia is a foolish country.”

Rishe started. It was the country that Princess Harriet—whom they’d just met—had almost married into. Fabrannia had been manufacturing counterfeit coins in other countries’ currencies. They had ordered Harriet to circulate the counterfeit coins in Galkhein, but when their plot was discovered, Harriet decided to dissolve her engagement. Her homeland—Siguel—was preparing to press charges against Fabrannia. Even so, Rishe hadn’t expected to hear Arnold bring Fabrannia up here.

With his usual dispassionate air, Arnold went on, “Fabrannia does not do

significant trade with Galkhein. Though they manufactured large quantities of counterfeit currency, they have few opportunities to make use of it. Why do you suppose they did it, then?”

“The Fabrannian king one-sidedly harbored hatred for Galkhein, didn’t he? He was denied a marriage with one of your sisters. Though his actions were illogical, was his misplaced ire not the reason he chose Galkhein currency specifically?”

Rishe internally brushed off her comment even as she uttered it. *It’s not Fabrannia’s actions that Prince Arnold is questioning.*

He seemed to realize she’d come to that conclusion as well. “It’s clear that Fabrannia wished to take some sort of aggressive action against Galkhein, even if it meant doing something foolish. The problem lies in someone spurring them in that direction.”

“You believe someone instigated the Fabrannian royal family to create counterfeit currency...to attack Galkhein in some way?”

It didn’t strike her as outlandish. A world war had just ended two years ago, and the world’s major powers were all making various moves even during peacetime—boosting national defense, for example. And doing *that* might involve sapping power from potential enemies in case of future conflict.

There are only three other countries powerful enough to compete with Galkhein in the war in the future.

Arnold leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. “If you make any obvious moves to improve the strength of your military, intelligence agents lurking in your country will leak that information.”

Rishe agreed. In her fifth life, she’d belonged to a group of intelligence operatives who did that exact kind of work. Her “hunters” had never been ordered to infiltrate Galkhein, but that was because Siguel had been focused on other targets.

“Other countries are cause enough for worry, but my father is an even bigger concern. I have no idea how he’ll react to Fabrannia’s actions upon learning of them. So if I want to amass military strength, I must do it in a way that avoids my father’s eyes as well.”

Is that the only reason he avoids his father so completely?

Rumors of the current emperor’s aggressive personality had reached her ears. It was her understanding that if he learned of any suspicious actions taken by other countries, he might very well respond with an invasion. There was another possible reason for Arnold’s secrecy, however: He may have been plotting to murder his father and subsequently begin a revolution.

I really want to look into Sir Gutheil because he’s connected to Prince Arnold in the future...but it would be too suspicious for me to start prying out of the blue.

Rishe needed a reason to approach him. She was also concerned about Sylvia’s well-being, since he’d carried her away.

Then there’s dealing with Prince Dietrich...

She sensed Arnold’s gaze on her and lifted her head. Her heart throbbed when she locked eyes with him from up close. “What is it?”

“That man mentioned a birthday celebration.”

Rishe blinked, lashes fluttering.

“Are birthdays...normally celebrated?”

His question caused her some confusion, but then Rishe realized that Arnold was unfamiliar with the custom. “Do you not celebrate your birthday, Prince Arnold?”

“There’s a party every year, but I’ve never attended.” It was like the idea of doing so had never even occurred to him. She noted that his face was beautiful even with an expression of utter indifference.

I do recall hearing that none of Galkhein’s royal family—save the emperor—ever appear in public. The emperor was probably the only one who ever

celebrated, then.

“Does Oliver do anything for it?”

“Why do you bring him up? I’ve ordered him to not act differently with me no matter the occasion.”

From what Rishe had heard, Arnold wasn’t close to anyone in his family. His relationship with his father was hostile, and his birth mother had despised him. His sisters lived separately from him, and he’d only reconciled with Theodore recently. If he’d ordered even Oliver to not do anything for him, then in all likelihood, he was completely unfamiliar with birthday celebrations.

“I suppose I wouldn’t say they’re always celebrated without fail, but...at the very least, I’d like to celebrate the birthdays of the people I’m close to.”

“I see.”

“Would you permit us to celebrate your next birthday? It’s the twenty-eighth of the twelfth month, right?” Rishe looked up at Arnold and smiled. “We’ll be married by then. We don’t have to have a party. We can just celebrate with a few close friends! We’ll invite Oliver and Prince Theodore and eat a bunch of tasty food!”

She was getting excited imagining it. If she had the chance, she wanted to do something Arnold would enjoy. Of course, that sentiment wasn’t limited to his birthday alone, but it was a good opportunity for a celebration.

“You can do as you like.” Arnold sighed. “But *your* birthday is coming up first.”

“Oh. That’s right.”

Though his tone was somewhat exasperated, Arnold gently asked, “If we’re supposed to celebrate, then we’ll celebrate however much you want. What do you wish to do?”

Rishe went still for just a moment, but not because she couldn’t think of what she wanted. Arnold must have noticed as well.

“Rishe?”

“The thing is, while I love celebrating other people’s birthdays, I don’t particularly like to think about mine.”

Arnold donned a puzzled look of his own.

In part, it’s because death could come for me at any moment once I turn twenty.

Rishe always died sometime after turning twenty and returned to her fifteenth year, to the moment Dietrich broke off their engagement. The day she died varied depending on the life she lived, but it was always at age twenty. Every time her birthday came around, she couldn’t help thinking of the sand in the hourglass. But that wasn’t the only reason she wasn’t fond of her own birthday.

“You see, I’ve also never had my family celebrate my birthday before.”

The truth was, she was in no position to teach Arnold about the subject.

“When I was young, I was just so busy studying. My schedule was far too packed to make time for celebrating... Oh! I had formal parties a few times, though!”

She was dizzyingly busy during those parties as well. She’d had to go about greeting various people, with no time to eat or even drink anything.

“No matter how brilliant you are, it’s all meaningless since you were born a girl. Your only purpose in life is to support the crown prince.”

“You will marry someone influential in society. A woman’s true happiness is to wed a powerful man and have a child with him, and nothing more.”

“Today is your birthday? I know that. I’m your mother, after all.”

She could still recall her parents’ exact words.

“More importantly, have you made progress in your studies today?”

Massaging her cheeks so she wouldn’t make any faces, Rishe continued, “Anyway, I’m not really sure what to do when it comes to my own birthday.”

Even after leaving her homeland and interacting with all sorts of people in her previous lives, she hadn't told many of them her birthday. Instead, she'd thrown lavish celebrations for other people's birthdays to share in their joy.

I wonder what Prince Arnold thinks of this? Rishe glanced up at him, still pressing down on her cheeks.

"Should we not do anything, then?" he asked, waiting for her answer.

Rishe trained her gaze to her shoes and contemplated the matter. Once again, Arnold was endeavoring to respect her wishes. She only spent a few seconds thinking before slowly shaking her head.

"I want to celebrate...with you, Prince Arnold." It embarrassed her to say so, and she felt like a child.

Arnold just said "Understood" like this was any other conversation and then lightly caressed her hair.

Rishe sighed with relief. "This all, um, feels a bit strange. I've never really told anyone about it before."

"Yeah, you don't really talk about your own feelings."

"Do I not?"

Now that he mentioned it, maybe he was right. It was all because Rishe's looping gave her too many secrets, but she hadn't even realized that she never voiced her feelings until Arnold had pointed it out.

"Hee hee hee."

"What's so funny?"

"I just thought you might know me better than I know myself." The thought tickled her.

Instead of responding, Arnold stroked her hair again.

Prince Arnold really is every bit the wonderful husband I told Prince Dietrich he was...but I must do my part as well. After all, I proposed to him on the beach in

Vinrhys.

She reaffirmed her determination.

I must become the best future wife I can be! For now, I'll prove to Prince Dietrich how kind Prince Arnold is and investigate Sir Gutheil... Though I'm worried about how Miss Sylvia is doing, so I'll inquire after her health tomorrow... Oh, but my biggest job is preparing for the wedding...

At that moment, she recalled the plot of the opera she'd been recounting earlier.

The wedding.

Then Rishe stared up at Arnold next to her.

"What?"

At the wedding... Her gaze lingered on Arnold's lips, and she gulped. *I'll have to...kiss him again...*

Rishe whipped her head toward the window before her face turned red again. Arnold appeared not to notice, but this might have been an emergency. After all, Rishe had no idea how she was going to prepare herself for the event.

Wh-what do I do?!

Completely thrown, Rishe spent the rest of the carriage ride back to the palace considering the greatest challenge she'd faced in any of her lives up to now.

Chapter 3

“AND THAT CONCLUDES my report on last night’s affair. I can’t believe I declared to my former fiancé that I would prove how wonderful a husband Prince Arnold is...”

Rishe finished her report to Theodore in the middle of her herb garden. She placed the herbs she’d gathered in her basket and stood, holding down her straw hat.

A little ways away, under the shade of a tree, Theodore pressed his fingers to his temples. “What am I to do about this? I can’t tell anymore whether you’re asking for advice or just bragging about your relationship.”

“Pardon, Prince Theodore? I’m sorry, the cicadas are so loud, I couldn’t hear that!”

“Nah, it was nothing,” Theodore replied with a glowing smile.

Rishe picked up her basket and trotted over to the shade where Theodore sat, her lemon-colored dress billowing in the breeze. “I can list any number of Prince Arnold’s wonderful qualities, but I want a way to get Prince Dietrich to really understand instead of just telling him.”

“So you came to me for help?”

Theodore respected his brother, Arnold, dearly. He knew Arnold’s good qualities well, yet he didn’t seem sympathetic to Rishe’s plight.

“I understand what you’re here for, but I’m afraid I won’t be able to help you.”

“What?! Even though this is an opportunity for you to thoroughly discuss each and every good quality of your older brother’s?!”

“Well, you’re not talking about his qualities as a man or as a brother but as a husband, aren’t you? You’re the only person in the world who can claim to have

any expertise on the subject, my dear sister.”

“Hrk!”

Theodore closed his eyes solemnly and placed a hand over his heart like a pious believer, though there was a streak of mirth in his voice. “It’s too bad, but I’ll have to limit myself to merely watching over you as your younger brother. Though please do engrave each and every one of my brother’s reactions into your memory. And give that reprobate Dietrich a good pummeling for me.”

“J-just because you have a cute face doesn’t mean you can say things like that!”

“In any case, you just have to show the guy the loving relationship between you two, don’t you? Just act even closer than you normally do while you’re in front of him.”

Theodore made it sound like the simplest thing in the world, but for Rishe, it was anything but. She also wanted to avoid bothering Arnold as much as she could since it was her slip of the tongue that had caused all this ruckus in the first place.

I’m worried I’ll do something strange if I spend too much time at Prince Arnold’s side anyway...

Once again, Rishe was considering her latest problem: the realization that she would have to kiss Arnold at their wedding. Theodore regarded her with open curiosity now that her expression had suddenly changed, but there was no way she could tell him the reason behind it.

I can’t ask Prince Theodore about the kiss. I’m sure he doesn’t want to hear about that sort of thing in regard to his brother. Rishe had no siblings of her own, but she did have a cousin who was going to succeed the Weitzner name after her marriage, so she could understand Theodore’s position somewhat.

I’d like to ask Prince Theodore about Sir Gutheil as well, but I have no good pretext for it. I can’t make any hasty moves, lest I come off as suspicious.

Her musings were interrupted by Elsie's arrival. "Good day, Lady Rishe. Your Highness."

"Hey, Elsie. You're really working hard lately, aren't you? My dear sister and Kamil are always praising your efforts."

"Oh, th-thank you, Your Highness...but I still have a long way to go!" Elsie shook her head, embarrassed, before looking up at Rishe. "Lady Rishe, we've received word that a visitor without an appointment is at the palace gates asking for you. Another maid is taking word to Sir Oliver."

Don't tell me Prince Dietrich is storming the castle! Rishe's face paled at her first guess, but the name Elsie gave her was one she wasn't expecting to hear.

"Um, word was it was a woman. S-Syl..." Elsie carefully read the name off a note pulled from her pocket. " Sylvia Hollingworth."

Rishe blinked, wide-eyed.

Word of Rishe's visitor traveled from the maids to Oliver to Arnold, and she was permitted to enter the palace and taken to a reception room.

Rishe parted with Theodore, hurriedly changed into a dress more appropriate for receiving guests, and headed for the reception room with two of her guards. She opened the door to find a red-haired woman resembling a flower in full bloom.

"I apologize for keeping you. I am Rishe Irmgard Weitzner."

"Please, no apologies necessary! I'm honored to make your acquaintance." The woman stood and curtsied gracefully. "My name is Sylvia Hollingworth. Thank you so much for your help last night."

"Please rise, Miss Sylvia. How are you feeling? You didn't aggravate your condition coming all the way here, did you?"

Her complexion *did* seem to be better, but such an effect could be achieved with makeup, so Rishe wasn't comfortable going off of that detail alone.

Despite her worry for the songstress, Sylvia shook her head elegantly.

“I received some medicine from the doctor you sent me and rested well last night. I was already feeling better by the time I went to bed, and by morning, I was completely recovered.”

“I’m glad to hear it,” Rishe said, though she was still worried Sylvia was secretly pushing herself. Last night, it seemed like Sylvia had fainted and then regained only partial consciousness. If she had suffered an attack from an illness of some sort, it was very rare to recover completely a day after such severe symptoms. Still, she *did* appear healthy to Rishe’s careful eye.

“It’s all thanks to you, Lady Rishe. I wish I could treat you to the performance you were supposed to see last night right away, but the show has been postponed a whole week...” Sylvia wilted, truly disappointed.

Rishe smiled. “I’d also love to see you perform as soon as possible, but I must insist that you take the time to recover.”

“It’s just...you never know which day might be your last, you know?” Sylvia said with a smile of her own. Rishe started, and Sylvia looked her in the eye as she added, “The performer *or* the audience. No one knows when they will take their last breath.”

She pressed a graceful hand to her chest in a refined, captivating gesture. Her eyes, framed by long lashes, were powerfully magnetic. “I was born to sing, you see. That’s why I itch to stand on the stage as many times as I possibly can.” She laughed bashfully. “Or so I’d like to say, but I can hardly claim such a thing after canceling a performance due to poor health.”

Rishe chuckled. “I’ll admit, I do want to hear you sing, but I also wish you wouldn’t push yourself, Miss Sylvia.”

Sylvia’s shy smile returned. “Lady Rishe, please just call me Sylvia. There’s no need for you to treat me with such formality.”

“Only if you do the same for me. Please, call me Rishe.”

“I couldn’t! I would normally never even be able to meet with the future crown princess!”

“Oh? In that sense, am I not just a fan of the opera who would normally never be able to meet the diva herself?”

After all, the audience was not typically afforded the opportunity to speak with the performers.

Sylvia wore naked surprise on her face before bursting into laughter. “Ah ha ha! Very well. Rishe, then.”

“It’s a pleasure, Sylvia.”

Rishe’s guards watched over the exchange with sunny smiles. Rishe shook Sylvia’s hand and recalled what she could about the songstress.

Sylvia Hollingworth belonged to a traveling opera troupe and had made a name for herself in many different countries. Her singing voice and beauty were obvious draws, but she also had a talent for acting that enchanted the audience, captivating all those who watched her perform. She was active in the future as well, her songs giving courage to many people in the tough times after the war began.

“I saw you perform a year ago in my homeland of Hermitry.”

“Really? I’m thrilled to hear it! A year ago in Hermitry... Was it ‘The Fairy’s Wedding,’ then?”

“It was so wonderful! Especially at the end, when the princess exchanged her vows with a kiss—” Rishe gasped, cutting herself off.

“What is it, Rishe?”

“I’m sorry, Sylvia. This is a bit of a strange question to ask when we’ve only just become friends, but...” Rishe squeezed Sylvia’s gloved hands and said with complete sincerity, “I’d like to know more about that kiss.”

They moved to one of the visitors' gardens, where Rishe gave Sylvia a quick once-over. Then Rishe called for her maids and had a tea set prepared at a light-blue table. Along with their tea came a variety of small cakes of every color.

Gold fork in hand, Sylvia asked Rishe what she had meant earlier. "Is your wedding kiss troubling you, Rishe?"

"Mrgh... I wouldn't say it's *troubling* me. I'm just...embarrassed." Simply putting it into words left Rishe feeling rather besieged. She'd dismissed the thought of asking Theodore about this, but even having the conversation with another woman made her nervous. "You have to kiss in your shows sometimes, right, Sylvia? Is there anything you do to prepare yourself, or to put the thought of who might be watching out of your mind?"

"Unfortunately, I don't think I'll be much help to you," Sylvia said simply. "When I sing, I *become* the character I'm playing. I just feel that it's only natural to kiss the person I love in that moment, so the thought doesn't bother me in the slightest."

"The person you love...in that role?"

"Yes. During a performance, I truly love the person playing my partner. Just on the stage, of course." Sylvia put her elbows on the table and set her chin atop her laced fingers, grinning at Rishe. "After a truly incredible performance, however, the feeling can linger after the curtain falls, and we end up staying together even after the show is over."

"Wow..." Rishe breathed a sigh of awe. This was a world completely unknown to her.

Sylvia giggled. Cutting up a raspberry mousse cake, she said, "I've loved enough to fill an ocean."

"Then, the rumors about your love life..."

"Oh, you've heard them? Yes, they were all fantastic." The diva spoke so lightly, she might as well have been singing.

Sylvia had a reputation as a prodigy of the theater, but there was one more thing she was known for—and that was having many lovers. Rishe had never paid that rumor much attention, but now she was hearing from the woman herself that it was all true.

“I feel that my singing becomes richer each time I experience love,” Sylvia told Rishe, her chest puffing up with pride. “My heart pounds and aches, nourishing my voice! That’s why I *love* love. And when my voice gets all the nourishment it needs, we can both part with a smile.”

“Nourishment for your voice, you say...”

“Yes. You receive something different from each person you love, after all.” She glanced down. “Just kidding. I’m sure people just see me as a fickle woman.”

“No, I think you’re amazing, Sylvia!” Rishe exclaimed, prompting Sylvia to look taken aback. “I feel like I understand a part of what makes your singing so incredible now. You pour everything you’ve experienced in your life into your singing, don’t you?”

Sylvia’s lips parted in surprise.

“It’s amazing that you can use your experiences to sustain you like that. That’s exactly how I want to live too!” Rishe told her.

Sylvia blinked several times before beaming like a flower unfurling its petals. “Hee hee! Oh, Rishe! It’s the first time in my life anyone’s understood what I meant when I talk about love!”

The lady had a maturity to her, but she was absolutely adorable when she smiled. Her happiness was infectious, and Rishe found her own smile mirroring Sylvia’s. Yet the songstress’s next words cracked her calm.

“Are you not in love, Rishe?”

“Wha—?!” Rishe almost dropped her teacup in surprise. “Wh-what? Why?!”

“Well, if you’re worrying about the kiss at your wedding...”

“When did I say anything about love?!”

“Hmm.” Sylvia leaned in till the tip of her nose was mere inches from Rishe’s. Rishe got a whiff of a high-quality, sweet-scented perfume. Sylvia stared at Rishe with alluring eyes framed by those doll-like lashes. “If you just close your eyes, won’t it be over before you know it?”

“Huh?! Is that how it works?!”

“For you to be placing such importance on it...I was thinking maybe you entered into a political marriage but then wound up falling in love despite yourself.”

Rishe felt like her heart was going to leap right out of her chest. “I-I am still yet a humble disciple. N-nothing of the sort has occurred!”

“A disciple of what?! Let me ask then, Rishe.” Sylvia’s painted lips curled up in a smile once more. “Does every little thing your husband-to-be does interest you? Do you wish you knew what goes on in his head?”

Well, of course. Rishe’s thoughts naturally turned to Arnold. *I wish I knew when he plans to initiate his revolution against his father, and why he proposed to me...*

“Do you wonder who he’s with when he’s not with you?”

He might be with Sir Gutheil right now! What if he’s not merely expanding his Imperial Guard but actively planning future invasions?!

“Do you find yourself thinking about your future with him before you can help it?!”

I only hope to avoid the war and live in peace!

“If so, then it’s love.”

Rishe whipped her head back and forth in denial. “No! I really think it’s something different!”

“Are you sure? Doesn’t your heart get all fluttery when you think about him?”

It's certainly harrowing to consider what might happen if I can't stop him!

Rishe took a sip of her tea to disguise the anxiety she was feeling. Sylvia, on the other hand, was visibly disappointed.

"Well, that's too bad. I wanted to talk about love with a girlfriend over tea... But if you're so upset by the thought of kissing him when you're not in love, is the crown prince so loathsome to you?"

"Not at all! Prince Arnold is wasted on someone like me!" Arnold was not at fault in the least. The problem in this situation lay entirely with Rishe. Her cake sat forgotten as Rishe fervently defended her fiancé. "He's kind, deeply knowledgeable, strong, and incredibly skilled in matters of politics! He's always considerate of me and of his retainers as well. I honestly can't even find the words to describe how much I respect him."

For some reason, Rishe couldn't stop trying to convince people of how wonderful Arnold was. Sylvia listened patiently before taking Rishe's hand and giving her a smile that belonged on the face of the goddess herself.

"You have my support, even if your feelings are one-sided."

"Gah! That's not... That's not what I—"

Sylvia giggled and smiled fondly. "How wonderful... I'd like to fall in love again soon too..."

"You would 'too'...? Are you not in love with anyone right now?" Rishe asked.

"In my dreams, perhaps." When Rishe tilted her head curiously, Sylvia shrugged. "I remember you helping me when I collapsed last night, but then it gets hazy again... I feel like I can remember a man holding me, though."

"Huh?!" Rishe blurted.

"I know you were the one watching over me and that I was a bit out of it," Sylvia said hastily. "But the man I dreamed about was such a gentleman, even though the way he spoke was a little rough... My first thought on waking was how I wished I'd be able to see him again." She laughed. "How silly of me,

wanting to meet a man I dreamed up.”

Rishe blinked. “Sylvia.”

“Today was a good day anyway, though. After all, I met *you*, and you’re so wonderful.”

“A knight carried you to the carriage from the greenroom last night.”

“Huh?”

He’d knelt down next to Sylvia and picked her up almost reverently.

“His name is Sir Gutheil. A tall gentleman...”

Sylvia’s eyes opened wide. “Wh-why, Rishe!” She grabbed Rishe’s hands once more, and Rishe gave her a firm nod.

Thus, Rishe obtained just the pretext she needed to meet Gutheil the knight.

During the war in the future, Rudolf Gert Gutheil served as Arnold’s aide in his invasion of the western continent. Rishe heard that he earned this lofty position not just for his competence as a commander but also for his astute use of intelligence. Of course, she had heard this during the war, and it wasn’t as if she could simply believe whatever she heard about Galkhein at the time. It was perfectly possible that the information itself was intentionally leaked in the service of some strategy.

Prince Arnold manipulates his own reputation, after all. Despite his brilliant political moves, he never publicizes his own involvement and instead maintains his “cruel and brutal prince” image.

Rishe learned from Arnold and Harriet not to believe every rumor she heard. That made it even more vital that she get the measure of Gutheil herself.

“Hmm. So the songstress Sylvia is interested in our knight Gutheil, eh?”

Theodore had just arrived in the garden and was propping up his chin with one hand. His eyes rested on a man and woman walking through the riot of

flowers. Poking at a cake that Rishe had set in front of him, he said, "Well, Gutheil's a pretty attractive man. Not as much as my brother, of course, but he's got manly features and sharp brows. He's tall and well built too."

"Sylvia didn't seem to remember his appearance all that well. She just said she felt very safe in his arms."

"You were moved to help the lovestruck songstress out, were you, Sister?"

Rishe glanced at the pair on the other side of the garden. "It's a good thing you just happened to be passing by, Prince Theodore!"

"Mm. I was quite worried about what I might be getting roped into when you suddenly asked me if I knew him."

On the other side of the garden, Sylvia was smiling at a nervous Gutheil.

"I'm sorry. Sylvia wanted to thank him, and I wouldn't have been able to arrange for their meeting myself." Rishe had no power to ask anything of Arnold's knights, as she was just his fiancée at this point. She would have had to go through Arnold, but she'd heard that he would be busy with work in his office all morning. "I'm glad Sir Gutheil was kind enough to agree to meet with her as well..."

"Yeah. The way I see it, he doesn't look *completely* uninterested."

"You can tell?"

From where Rishe and Theodore were sitting, they couldn't hear the pair's conversation. But the soft smile on Sylvia's face was plain for anyone to see. To Rishe, Gutheil was simply nervous the whole time, so she wondered how Theodore could tell whether he was interested. She cocked her head to one side, and Theodore grinned sunnily at her.

"You really are naive in the ways of love, sister dearest! Apart from Elsie, you're probably the only one who hasn't noticed the huge crush Kamil has on her!"

"Wh-what?!"

Kamil was one of Rishe's guards. Both he and Elsie originally hailed from the slums, and they had known each other since they were small. Rishe was completely unaware of the "huge crush" Kamil had on his childhood friend.

"I've not yet studied the ways of love..."

"Huh? Studied?!"

Rishe lowered her head. *Besides, I hardly have time for that now. I can't even consider it until I've fulfilled my vow.*

The thought was almost unconscious, and it was gone from her mind by the time she raised her head once more.

"What sort of man would you say Sir Gutheil is, Prince Theodore?" Rishe steered the conversation back on topic by asking what she really wanted to know. Part of it was simple information-gathering, but she also wanted to know as much as she could get away with knowing for the sake of her new friend, Sylvia.

"He's the serious type, I think. The man's twenty-three and tall, even among the knights. He's got skills with a sword and took his studies seriously too. Seems like he's a little high-strung, like he's the sort of guy to get hung up on stuff, but you could just say that means he's diligent. Just..." Chin still in his hand, Theodore gave Rishe a pointed look. "Listen. If you asked me about Gutheil, it means you know why I know him, right? That means you've heard he may become one of my brother's Imperial Guards."

"...I haven't heard anything about Sir Gutheil specifically, but Prince Arnold did tell me he was thinking about expanding his Imperial Guard, yes."

"A question for you, then. What do the retainers my brother chooses all have in common?"

"Other than the fact that they're all highly skilled, you mean?"

Theodore had issued her a challenge, but Rishe raised the white flag right away.

“I could never hope to compare to you when it comes to knowledge of your beloved brother, Prince Theodore.”

“Heh heh heh. Well, I’ll just have to tell you, then.” Theodore’s eyes, a slightly deeper blue than Arnold’s, narrowed with pride. The next moment, however, the expression had been wiped from his face as he murmured, “They’re all talented but oppressed in some way—so that talent has never been acknowledged, you see.”

Rishe realized he was spot-on.

“Take Oliver, for example. He was a knight with a bright future. The firstborn son of a marquess appointed by the emperor himself, with impressive swordsmanship and a talent for command as well. Not that I want to admit it.”

“I heard he injured himself training when he was young and was never able to pursue knighthood again after that.”

“Exactly. His father, Lord Friedheim, instructed him with a rigor that bordered on violence. As a result, he ended up unable to even grip a sword. The marquess deemed him worthless, and my brother made him his attendant after he was disowned by his family.”

It was a much more tragic tale than the version Rishe had heard.

“Kamil is the same, as a talented man from the slums who was never given a fair chance. Galkhein’s claim as a meritocracy gives people all the more reason to compete fiercely with one another. The people who work most closely for my brother were all denied opportunities due to their origins or whatever else.”

“That’s what Prince Arnold—”

“He’s very thorough about it too. Even his warhorse, Hildebrand, is a good horse, but one treated terribly by his previous owner. He was on the verge of death when my brother took him in.”

Rishe had ridden that very horse just a few days ago. He was a fantastic mount who responded perfectly to every one of Arnold’s instructions. Horses

were clever animals and very sensitive to a person's feelings. He likely understood that Arnold had saved his life.

"That being the case, he still only takes on people with exceptional abilities. If they're not talented, then he won't so much as bat an eye no matter how wretched their environment may be." Theodore turned his pretty eyes on Rishe. "Do you understand what I'm getting at, my dear sister?"

"You mean to say there's a reason Sir Gutheil is even a candidate for Imperial Guard of the crown prince?"

"Correct. Gutheil, you see..." Theodore lowered his voice and whispered the rest to Rishe.

"...Is that true?"

"Who can say? That's all I've managed to dig up on him, anyway." Theodore cocked his head while Rishe mentally organized the information he'd given her. "Will any of that help you support your friend in her romance, though?"

"Yes, I believe it will," Rishe said with a smile. It wasn't the whole truth, but it wasn't a lie either. "I must express my admiration for your information network once more, Prince Theodore. I would expect nothing less from Prince Arnold's brother himself."

"Heh heh heh. Go ahead, compliment my connection to my brother even more. I'm competing with Oliver right now, you know. He thinks he knows my brother better than me. That's the whole reason I investigated the candidates for his Imperial Guard."

I can't imagine Oliver expressing interest in such a contest. Rishe kept that thought to herself.

It was then that Sylvia and Gutheil completed their circuit of the garden.

"Might you meet with me again sometime, Sir Gutheil?"

"Sure, erm...if you wouldn't mind..."

They've even made plans for another date! Things were moving much faster

than Rishe expected.

As Rishe gawked at them, Gutheil hesitantly began, “But, Lady Sylvia...are you truly well? You were so light when I held you yesterday. That was worrying enough on its own.”

Sylvia beamed at him. Even Rishe found the expression positively angelic. “Just hearing of your concern for me is a delight. I assure you, I feel fine now.”

“You’re sure you’re not pushing yourself? I only just realized I should’ve had you refrain from walking around the garden. Please forgive my utter lack of consideration.”

“Nonsense. I could tell you were walking slowly for my sake.”

“Well, if the fresh air was good for you, then I’m happy to have helped.”

Rishe could sense just how concerned Gutheil was for Sylvia by the way he sighed when he heard she was okay. Sylvia gave her a little wave and mouthed “thank you,” and Rishe returned the smile.

If only they could spend a little more time together.

Theodore piped up, “The songstress is heading home, then? But just imagine the rumors that would spread about the palace’s lack of manners if we let such a famous performer return all on her own.”

“My, Prince Theodore...!”

“Gutheil, I command you to see the lady home safely.”

Though Gutheil was caught off guard, he quickly met Sylvia’s eyes and bowed his head deeply. “Understood, Your Highness. I will protect her with my very life.”

Rishe could not help feeling touched by Theodore’s consideration when she saw how Sylvia’s eyes sparkled. She bid the diva goodbye, promising to speak with her again in the near future, before seeing her off. As Sylvia left with Gutheil, her blossoming smile returned to her lips.

“Cleverly done, Prince Theodore. There won’t be any problems with Sir Gutheil’s schedule?”

“I’ll give the knights some excuse. He doesn’t have any duties that can’t be delegated anyway.”

“Despite his outstanding capabilities, you mean?” Maybe it had something to do with the secret Theodore had shared with her. “Now that we’ve come this far, I have another small favor I’d like to ask of you.”

“Oh, I just *knew* you were going to get me wrapped up in something weird!” Theodore protested. Yet not only did he hear Rishe out, but he even said in response, “Well, that’s not any different from what I’ve done before. It’s a bit frightening how accustomed I’m growing to this, isn’t it?”

Ultimately, he readily agreed to her request.

That afternoon, something else occurred that was of particular interest to Rishe. It did not directly involve her, however—it involved her current fiancé, Arnold, and her former fiancé, Dietrich.

“Thank you so much for today, Prince Arnold.” Dressed for a soirée, Rishe thanked Arnold on their way to the party hall. “I never thought you would allow Prince Dietrich to accompany you on your afternoon duties...”

Arnold replied with nothing but silence.

Oliver had reported the occurrence to her after she’d parted with Sylvia and Gutheil, while she was in a meeting about the wedding. She’d been sincerely surprised to hear it, but the idea had apparently been Oliver’s to begin with. He’d suggested that Arnold stop by to pick up Dietrich during his business in the capital and show the foreign prince how he worked.

“*Won’t he be in Prince Arnold’s way, though?*”

“*Oh, I’m sure he will. I’ve heard all the rumors about Prince Dietrich, you know.*”

“Oliver!”

“I doubt it will be a problem. A slight disturbance will not have much effect on my lord’s activities. And I’m sure it will be worthwhile for Prince Dietrich to see another royal around his age at work.”

Rishe realized something when she saw the bright smile on his face. *“Oliver, are you...having a bit of fun?”*

“Ha ha ha, why, perish the thought! I’m sure it will be just as valuable an experience for my lord to interact with someone his age who is of a similar standing.”

Would it be a *good* experience, though? Rishe had been concerned, but when she learned that Arnold had agreed, she figured she would just leave things to him.

“W-was everything okay? Prince Dietrich didn’t cause you any headaches?”

“Not really. No matter who accompanies me on my business, it doesn’t change the work involved.”

Before Rishe could protest, there was a rustling from the shrubbery on the side of the path. Rishe was surprised, but not by the noise. It was because in the split second they heard the noise, Arnold stepped protectively in front of her.

“Prince Arnold...” Rishe peeked out from behind Arnold’s large frame. They both turned to scan the shrubbery. *“It’s...a cat.”*

“So it seems.”

From the shadows emerged a black cat still small enough to be called a kitten. Rishe stepped out from behind Arnold and knelt, holding her hand out toward it. Judging by how it didn’t crouch down low, it seemed to be accustomed to people.

“C’mere, kitty...”

“...”

“Aww, it ran away.”

The cat must have had plans after this, just as they did. Rishe stood, slightly disappointed, and took Arnold’s arm once more.

“Thank you for protecting me...but you could tell it was only an animal as well, couldn’t you, Prince Arnold?”

“That doesn’t guarantee your safety. If a beast was able to infiltrate the palace in the first place, that just means we need to improve on our current security.”

“You’re calling that *kitten* a beast?”

Arnold was right, of course. The fact that there was a route the kitten could use to get into the palace was a problem. If someone brought the animal in, then there was an issue with the checking of the guests’ belongings. And if it had gotten in on its own, that was evidence that, for instance, the ramparts could be breached by way of a tree.

Prince Arnold makes use of even the most trivial bits of information when he makes decisions. There was plenty to learn from how Arnold saw the world. As Rishe considered this, she thought, *He must know what Prince Theodore told me about Sir Gutheil.*

They arrived at the party hall after exchanging only trifling small talk. The moment the doors to the hall opened, a soft cheer blew through the room. The hall was filled with significant figures, all holding glasses of wine. As Rishe bathed in their scrutiny, she casually confirmed the identities of each individual she walked by.

There are a few people here I’m not acquainted with yet. Is that Lady Diekmeier in the dress that’s modeled after a rose? The woman Lord Hannawald is escorting must be his wife. He mentioned her to me before. The current emperor is supposed to be the host of this party, but he’s absent as always. Prince Arnold is attending in his place...

She got that far before she raised her head, having sensed an intense stare. She met Arnold's eyes immediately, and his expression softened as he studied her. Rische's heart skipped a beat, and a buzz swept through the crowd at the same time.

"H-hey, have you ever seen such a tender look on Prince Arnold's face before?"

Was Prince Arnold always watching me as I attended parties like this in the past? Rische wondered, remembering what he'd said to Dietrich the day before. Although the thought flustered her, it also made her happy.

A man she'd never met before approached them. "I...I'm pleased to see you enjoying yourself tonight, Prince Arnold. It's been some time since we last met, but I'm glad you're doing well."

"Lord Egel," Arnold said icily.

Lord Egel. Prince Theodore told me that the current emperor values this marquess.

While Rische wanted to greet the man as well, she couldn't say anything until Arnold introduced her. Until then, she bowed her head politely and listened to their conversation.

"First, please allow me to congratulate you on your engagement. A real wonder, that. As far as I'm aware, you've never spared so much as a glance at a member of the fairer sex, and now you've finally chosen a bride..."

"..."

"I may be biased, but I believe my own daughter is rather pretty. It's terribly disappointing that she never caught your eye. That brings me to a rather surprising rumor I heard—is it true, Your Highness, that you're absolutely infatuated with your fiancée?"

Rische's shoulders twitched, her head still bowed. *Lord Egel governs a region in the west, doesn't he? How the heck did he hear a rumor like that?!*

Surely this was the time to make her introductions, but Rishe felt so awkward that she could no longer raise her head. A moment later, however, Arnold cupped her chin.

“What an interesting rumor.” He gave a gentle tug, and she had no choice but to meet his eyes. His hand still on her face, he gazed down at her with a soft smile that turned daring as he pulled Rishe closer by the waist. “Is there some problem if it’s true?”

Eep!

Rishe wasn’t sure what to make of his provocative smile. The marquess was equally speechless, prompting Arnold to snort and take Rishe by the hand.

“Let’s go, Rishe. You can make your introductions later.”

“R-right. Excuse us!” Rishe felt bad for the informal manner of their parting, but the marquess was equally flustered as he left. Heart hammering in her chest, Rishe gazed up at Arnold. “Was...was that all right?”

“Was what all right?”

Are you serious?!

Rishe could think of any number of issues with that exchange, but apparently none of it bothered Arnold. She didn’t have the courage to go into specifics, so all she could do was fall silent.

“You don’t need to introduce yourself to him right now. More importantly...”

Rishe followed Arnold’s gaze and realized what he was getting at. “Right.”

In a corner of the venue, Dietrich—who should have spent the whole afternoon with Arnold—was peeking out from behind a pillar, trembling.

Wh-why is Prince Dietrich cowering like that with tears in his eyes, like a little puppy? The weepy way he quivered made him look just like his father, the king of Hermity. Oh, Prince Dietrich, you have to be more confident at soirées! And it’s not good manners to be by yourself so early in the evening...

Arnold stared at her wordlessly.

Rishe returned his gaze, arm linked with his, and realized, *Wait! It's not my responsibility to be counseling Prince Dietrich anymore!* At last comprehending the reason for Arnold's expression, Rishe nodded at him. *I understand. Leave this to me, Prince Arnold!*

Arnold seemed as if he wanted to say something to her, but he ultimately stayed quiet. Rishe collected herself and called out to the pillar.

"Good evening, Prince Dietrich. I hear you accompanied Prince Arnold today during his work. What did you think of what you saw?"

"Wh-wh-what did I *think* of it?!" Dietrich leapt out from behind the pillar and advanced on Rishe, tears still in his eyes. "I-I-I—"

"Please calm yourself, Your Highness! Let's take this out to the balcony, shall we?!"

Other partygoers were trading hushed whispers, surprised by Dietrich's behavior. Rishe hurriedly led him and Arnold out onto a balcony, where they could speak freely.

"L-Lord Arnold! Do you always cram so much work into your schedule?!"

"I do."

"That can't be! There's no way! You must have packed so much into your schedule today just to scare me!"

Rishe blinked at Arnold once more in surprise. "Did you really have that much work to do today, Prince Arnold?"

"No? I had *less* to do than usual. Oliver went and changed my schedule on me." Arnold wore the same inscrutable expression he always did. He was completely unperturbed, whereas Dietrich was clutching at his head and squirming. "I even took a break because I couldn't bear this one's constant pestering."

"That's what's so strange about it!" Dietrich countered. "You worked all the

way until evening with only one break?! It was just work, travel, work, travel, work, work, work! And you were doing paperwork inside the carriage while we traveled! Have you never even heard of coach-sickness before?!”

“Really, Prince Arnold...” Rishe sighed. “You must take more frequent breaks.”

“I could say the exact same to you.”

“Why are you two acting as if this is just a typical day for you?!” Dietrich panted like he was exhausted. Thankfully, the energy it was taking him just to breathe meant he wasn’t actually producing much volume when he yelled. “Are you human?! Is that stamina of yours human?!”

Prince Arnold’s workload seems excessive, even to me. No wonder it scared Prince Dietrich... The other prince must have been shocked to see how Arnold worked up close. Rishe couldn’t even imagine the two of them sharing a carriage.

Shoulders heaving, Dietrich took a deep breath before asking Arnold, “Have you ever even questioned it before?” His expression hardened, his tone becoming more serious. “Royalty must spend morning to night thinking of their subjects and sacrificing their time for the sake of their country. No matter how hard they may work, no one will praise them for it. Self-sacrifice is only natural, absolute devotion is a given, and if you can’t achieve that, you’ll be cast aside as unnecessary.” Dietrich scowled. “You can’t choose how you want to live. Your subjects may think you live affluently, but the truth is, there’s nothing free about your life! You’re bound by custom, captive to the way others see you, and at the end of it all...”

“What of it?”

Dietrich froze at Arnold’s matter-of-fact tone.

“Of course royalty has no right to a human life.”

“What’re you...?”

“Do you not understand? The life of a king or an emperor is weightier than

the lives of millions of his subjects.”

Rishe gulped.

“If a small country is invaded by a larger one, it can send out thousands of soldiers and it won’t make a difference. But if the king of that country offers his own life, the war is over.” Arnold tapped his throat with his middle finger. “The king has a duty to each and every one of his subjects. Whether you understand that or not, a royal is nothing more than a pawn in a much larger game.”

“A pawn?”

“Neither you nor I have the right to live life as human beings.”

A chill ran down Rishe’s spine at Arnold’s plain assertion.

“Y-you talk as if you think we all have to be ready to give our lives for our countries someday! Don’t you think that’s a little extreme?!”

Arnold smiled scornfully, a dark light in his blue eyes. “That was your obligation the moment you were born as crown prince.”

Dietrich gritted his teeth and turned his back on them, fleeing back into the party. Rishe followed a few steps after him, then stopped. It was now just her and Arnold out on the balcony together.

“Rishe.”

The summer breeze blew through the silence stretching between them. Rishe raised her head timidly when Arnold called her name. Her eyes met Arnold’s from a few meters away. She could find no words to say, and Arnold sighed.

“What was it you said to that cat earlier?”

“Sorry?”

His pensive gaze landed on his shoes. “Right. I remember.” Arnold turned to her again and extended his hand, his voice just as soft as the expression on his face. “C’mere, you.”

“Huh?!” Rishe’s cheeks flushed. The line was completely unexpected coming

from Arnold.

Did Prince Arnold just call me like a cat?! It just wasn't fair—though if someone asked her exactly *what* wasn't fair, she didn't think she'd be able to answer.

As she groped for a reply, Arnold tilted his head and smirked. "Hmm?"

Rishe finally gave in, taking a step toward him. She took his proffered hand and let him pull her the rest of the way.

I need to ask.

She studied Arnold in earnest, their fingers still entwined. "If war breaks out again in the future..." It took considerable courage for Rishe to bring up this hypothetical with Arnold, but she didn't tear her gaze from his blue eyes. Quietly, so that no one else would hear, she asked him, "To what end would you offer up your own life?"

Arnold smiled. "I'm not interested in hypotheticals."

"But you're prepared to make use of it, are you not?"

"Kings and emperors bear the full responsibility for their countries," he stated as if they were discussing the weather. "A crown prince is only born to take on that burden. You could say that's doubly true for me."

Rishe flinched. Arnold's father had not accepted any of the children born to him without a specific hair and eye color. Arnold was likely not his true firstborn son. He was only the crown prince because his father had killed any brothers who came before him.

Prince Arnold bears no responsibility for that. She squeezed his fingers. *Yet he feels his very existence is a sin...*

A devastating sadness weighed on Rishe's heart. Only a moment ago, Arnold had said that royalty had no right to a human life. He didn't seem to want that for his brother Theodore or his sisters, though. Nor for his empress-to-be.

The only people he feels don't deserve to be human are his father and himself.

Does he realize that?

He touched Rishe's cheek. "You're pouting."

Since he'd already seen through her attempt to hide it, she let the expression show fully on her face. "I am, because I'm angry...but I'm angry at myself."

"Whatever for?"

"I just feel so useless." Rishe hung her head, pursing her lips. "I want you to be happy, Prince Arnold."

Arnold regarded Rishe with astonishment.

"I wish your future could be nothing but happiness...even if you don't think you deserve it." No, just *wishing* wasn't enough. "I'll try to be more creative."

"...Creative."

"We'll eat the most delicious food in the world, sleep on beds so fluffy you'll want to just melt into them, and see sights so beautiful it makes you dizzy..." She listed everything she could think of, carefully scrutinizing each suggestion. "I'll give you experiences like that to show you the appeal of being happy."

She was absolutely serious, but Arnold just stared at her in bewilderment before chuckling quietly. "Heh." It was a rare sort of smile for Arnold, like he couldn't contain his emotions. "I see the appeal plenty already."

He set his hand atop Rishe's head, and she tilted it to the side in confusion. Then Arnold donned the teasing smile she was more accustomed to.

"And what about you? Have you decided how you want to celebrate your birthday yet?"

Rishe flinched, not expecting him to turn the tables on her.

"Is there anything you want?"

"Ugh... Can I say I want what *you* want, Prince Arnold?"

"I don't think so."

“Urgh...”

Rishe’s birthday was eight days away. She knew if she didn’t make up her mind soon, there wouldn’t be any time to prepare for it—but she just couldn’t think of anything.

“It’s like you have no desires.”

“You’re the last person I want to hear that from, Prince Arnold!”

“Oh?”

Rishe’s heart thudded against her rib cage when that teasing smile appeared. She was sure Arnold didn’t mean anything by it, but she couldn’t help thinking of what she knew was coming.

I haven’t solved the issue of the kiss at our wedding either! And I don’t have many days left to figure that out! And...

Rishe glanced back toward the party hall, where Arnold’s knights were providing security. She had to do more digging on Gutheil as well.

I need to figure all this out, one after another. First, I’ll investigate tomorrow using the method I asked of Prince Theodore.

Chapter 4

THE NEXT DAY, new knights scrambled around the training grounds, picking up after a lesson.

“Sven, can you hand me that cloth?”

“Yeah. That wooden sword might be splintering, so be careful with it.”

“Thanks! I’ll sand it down.”

Accustomed to the work after many long days of training, the two knights performed some maintenance on the weapons before putting them away.

One of them, a recent recruit named Sven, sighed while rolling his eyes at the other. “Sheesh. I didn’t think you’d be the one helping out since we’re short-handed with Fritz gone.”

“Me?” Rishe looked up from her work.

“Haven’t seen you since our special training, but you’re just as handy as ever, Lucius.”

“Heh heh heh.” Rishe, in her male guise as “Lucius,” smiled at Sven. The two had become fast friends during their morning practice sessions together. “I’m glad to see you seem to be doing well too, Sven. Did you bulk up a bit since the last time I saw you?”

“Of course I did. I’ve kept up morning training sessions even without you and Fritz around,” he muttered. For all his grumbling, it was clear that he was truly putting in the effort. “I really wanted to see Fritz too...”

Thinking of the friend she hadn’t seen once since that special training, Rishe smiled sadly. She’d snuck into the cadet training, but she hadn’t been able to keep up with it at all due to her lack of stamina—but Fritz had always been a source of encouragement to her. They’d gotten close while Rishe had been disguised as a boy, and they’d parted without him learning the truth about her.

She felt guilty for lying to him all that time, but she still wished she could see his smiling face again.

“He accompanied Lord Lawvine back to Ceutena, didn’t he?” she asked Sven.

“It’s his hometown, so...Lord Lawvine said he’d be able to hold his head up high if he went back with the area’s regent to let everyone know he’d made it as a knight.”

Just like I thought, Lord Lawvine’s passionate when it comes to nurturing young talent.

Lawvine was a count who governed the northern region of Galkhein. He’d served as the knight cadets’ instructor during their special training. Rishe heard that the man had lost his child in the war. That may have been one reason he approached their training with such kind consideration.

Lord Lawvine tries to stop Prince Arnold’s war in the future, and he’s executed for it. I still don’t know the reason for that tragedy.

She wanted to meet with Lawvine again as well. He would visit the capital for her wedding, though. For now, she had to focus on what was right in front of her.

As she continued to clean up the training grounds, she snuck a glance at another area. Many knights gathered in the training grounds each morning. They were divided into units and followed the orders of their unit commanders, so while they were working, they didn’t often interact with members of other units. The few chances they got were when they were in the barracks and when they were doing morning training. Arnold and his Imperial Guard were a separate entity, so they seldom showed their faces here.

Rishe had her eye on one knight among them who had just finished training: Gutheil. The man wiped away his sweat and turned toward a wooden sword lying on the ground. He picked it up without hesitation and patted the dirt from it.

Cleaning up the training grounds is a job for the new recruits. Yet Sir Gutheil is helping as if it's completely natural for him to do. There were plenty of knights who never spared the training grounds so much as a glance after they were finished with their workout, so Gutheil's behavior was rather unusual. *He really is the diligent type. He was taking his training seriously too.*

There was one other thing she was curious about as well. "Hey, Sven...that big guy with the brown hair who's helping out with the cleaning..."

"Sir Gutheil?"

"He seems really nice, so why does it look like people are giving him the cold shoulder?" she asked him.

Sven made a sour face in response. "You can't really blame them. It's probably awkward for them too. You might not know this, but..." He glanced around, making sure no one was listening to them before whispering to Rische, "His father betrayed Galkhein."

It was the same thing Theodore revealed in the garden the day before. Still, Rische pretended as if she were hearing it for the first time and asked, "Betrayed Galkhein? What do you mean?"

"The previous head of the family, Sir Gutheil's father, was a noble and a knight of Galkhein too. He was important enough to lead his own unit, but he took the information his position gave him access to and leaked it to an enemy nation."

Again, it lined up with Theodore's intel.

"So he was a spy for another country?"

"I dunno what kinda damage the leak actually did. I think it was like ten years ago? Back when we were kids, there was this big thing about Sir Gutheil the knight captain being a turncoat. Maybe you were too little to remember."

She smiled like he'd hit upon the answer—but in reality, she didn't know because she wasn't from Galkhein.

Sven didn't suspect a thing. "Leaking intelligence is a capital crime. Sir Gutheil's father was executed and stripped of his peerage. It's been however many years now and his son's still getting the cold shoulder."

Everything so far matched up with what she'd heard from Theodore.

"Sir Gutheil's super strong, isn't he? He beat everyone he was up against in his matches."

"Lord Lawvine praised his skill too. He trained Sir Gutheil when he was a rookie."

"And everyone still treats him coldly?"

"From what I can tell, all the work he gets is patrolling in town. And not in the slums, or anywhere else there's likely to be trouble, but in residential areas where half the time the work is just giving someone directions."

Which meant Gutheil fit the bill for one of Arnold's retainers: He was a talented individual who wasn't given a fair shake due to circumstances beyond his control.

"Well, espionage is a serious crime, but that was his father. Sir Gutheil hasn't committed any crimes."

"And he hasn't been executed. He wasn't punished at all aside from losing his home and peerage. But there's nothing you can do about the way people look at you when your family member's a traitor."

Maybe it was only natural for the people close to an accused spy to suffer a loss of trust as well, but it just didn't sit right with Rishe. "It's not like crime is contagious. They might be family, but they're different people..."

Rishe found herself picturing Arnold. *Prince Arnold is the same. He feels he bears responsibility for the sins his father committed... That's why he feigns similarity to his father.*

She took a short breath. If she wanted to learn more about Gutheil himself, she'd have to investigate further. She picked up the wooden swords nearby and

told Sven, “I don’t think we have any more time for maintenance today. I’ll put away all the ones that need sanding yet. Is there anything you want me to grab from storage?”

“Get me a broom, then?”

“Sure thing!”

Rishe snuck another glance at Gutheil as she headed to the back of the training grounds. The knights kept their distance from him, and he worked in silence as he picked up after them.

What should I do? Sir Gutheil knows the face of Prince Arnold’s fiancée. I may be dressed as a boy, but I can’t get too close to him.

Though she’d gotten information from Theodore and gossip from Sven, rumors were just that—rumors. She’d need another perspective if she wanted to know the truth about him.

Arriving at the storage shed, she put away the swords that couldn’t be used again without some maintenance. *I could come up with a different disguise...but I’m not confident about disguising my face. He’s probably the only person who could—*

“Whatcha doin’?”

Rishe jumped. The voice had come from right next to her ear. She hadn’t sensed anyone nearby, but someone had managed to get just behind her. Almost close enough to touch her.

The person behind Rishe trapped her in place by lodging their hand against the wall next to her, whispering, “And what’s with the outfit? Though it looks pretty good on you, ‘Lucius.’”

Rishe closed her eyes and sighed without turning around. “I’m a little flattered to hear you compliment my disguise...Raul.”

There was a snicker behind her. Rishe put away the rest of the swords, asking, “What are you doing here? Don’t you need to be guarding Princess Harriet?”

“Well, the real Curtis should be arriving in Vinrhys soon. I left my men to guard her, so I’m doing some sightseeing in the capital.”

“There’s certainly plenty to see in the palace.” Rishe finished her work and turned around at last. She was startled to see Raul standing there without a disguise.

“I see. You’ve used makeup to give yourself a more masculine look.” Raul put a hand to his chin as he looked Rishe up and down. “You’re too delicate to pass yourself off as a man, though. You’ve bound your chest, sure, but that training uniform looks like it’s wearing you.”

“Ugh... I can’t fill it out with anything if I’m going to be moving around in it.”

“Eh, the way you carry yourself isn’t bad. And I see you’ve tucked that long hair of yours under a short wig. If I didn’t know your real identity, I really would think you were just a delicate boy with a feminine face.”

“Really? Thank you!” She couldn’t help thanking him sincerely for the compliment, but she hadn’t forgotten her original question. “...So?”

“Ha ha, you don’t have to glare at me like that! I’m just doing some reconnaissance! And don’t worry, I have permission from your husband. I told him I wanted to see how Galkhein trains its knights so we could better protect our printing technologies, and he told me, ‘Do what you want.’ Apparently, he couldn’t possibly care less!” Raul made peace signs with both hands, but Rishe found this a bit suspicious.

“Prince Arnold really gave you permission to observe the knights?”

“Well, not *his* knights.”

I guess that’s a little more reasonable?

The future army of knights under Arnold’s command was said to be the best in the world, largely due to Arnold’s training methods. Currently, only his Imperial Guard were receiving his special method of instruction. Maybe Arnold didn’t care what other countries learned as long as it had nothing to do with his

training plans.

Still, Rishe narrowed her eyes and said, “Unfortunately, I’m not confident in my ability to see through your lies or Prince Arnold’s.”

“Hmm?”

“That said, I have the utmost faith in you. Neither you nor His Highness would do anything dangerous if you didn’t stand to gain anything from it.”

The suspicious smile on Raul’s face faltered, replaced with a different sort of grin. “I’ll never be able to compete with you, will I?”

“Raul...”

“I get it already. Can you promise me one thing, though? Keep what I’m about to tell you a secret from your Prince Arnold, will you?” Raul put a finger to his lips, a touch more serious than usual.

“I promise.”

“Good girl.” He paused. “What your prince is worried about is foreign spies.”

Rishe’s eyes nearly popped out. “He suspects the palace has been breached by intelligence operatives?”

“Well, I’m not sure. But that’s part of what I’m investigating here.”

“Under Prince Arnold’s orders.”

“It’s a favor. I owe quite a lot to you and your lovely husband, you know?” His tone was as flippant as ever, but Raul was likely being genuine. And if Arnold was really worried about spies, there was no one better to investigate than Raul, who was a talented spy himself. “Besides, if there really was someone who proposed the counterfeiting scheme to Fabrannia and put Harriet through all that, then I have plenty of reason to investigate myself.”

So their interests aligned.

It made sense to Rishe. At the same time, she recalled what had happened the night before. *This must be why Prince Arnold was so cautious of the kitten*

we saw on the way to the party... He had to have known it was only an animal in the bushes as soon as he sensed it, yet Arnold had still hid Rische behind him.

"If a beast was able to infiltrate the palace in the first place, that just means we need to improve on our current security."

That wasn't just a hypothetical. Arnold had his guard up because he already suspected flaws in the palace's security.

He didn't react to that tiny noise out of pure reflex. It was because he thinks there may be spies in the palace. Rische grimaced, disappointed in herself for not picking up on Arnold's suspicion. Not only had she failed to pick up on his misgivings and thus failed to help him, but she'd also thoughtlessly allowed him to protect her. She would never stop Arnold's war if she carried on like this.

If Prince Arnold suspects spies in the palace, there's something else I have to consider.

What crossed her mind now was Gutheil.

Sir Gutheil's father was executed for espionage. Is it just a coincidence that Prince Arnold is considering expanding his Imperial Guard, with Sir Gutheil as a candidate, while this spy business is underway?

She could come up with as many theories as she wanted, but they would remain just that: theories.

"You seem to be giving this a lot of thought, Lucius."

"Raul..." Rische scrutinized him from a mere hair's breadth away. "Could you give me an entirely different face?"

"What? Why? Your face is so cute! I don't want to change it," Raul said with a hollow smile.

"You don't really believe that, and it's written all over *your* face," Rische told him. The women Raul courted all fit a single type: mature, with enchanting features. The type Rische was not.

"Ha ha, only joking. Honestly, I need certain tools to change someone's face.

They must be made with the structure of the wearer's face in mind, so I can't make any for you right away."

Doesn't seem like he'll do it for me. He never taught this to us in my fifth life...

He probably *couldn't* teach it to anyone else. Raul was the leader of his hunters, and there were plenty of things the previous leader had taught only him. It stood to reason that he'd keep some teachings secret from the rest.

"Then if you find any evidence of spying, may I ask you to report your results to me as well?"

"If you'll keep it a secret from your prince."

"Of course. I'd also prefer if Prince Arnold didn't find out."

Raul gave her his usual light smile, holding out his pinky. "It's a promise, then."

"A custom from the eastern country, eh? Indeed it is." Rishe tapped her own pinky finger to Raul's.

Raul sucked in a breath, then stepped back. "Oh yes, do be careful. I'm making my report to your prince right here in the training grounds, you see."

"Huh?! You mean Prince Arnold is coming here?!"

"Ha ha ha! If you want to get away, you'd better run!"

Rishe's face went pale. She'd gone to Theodore for help in sneaking into today's knight training, but it was a secret from Arnold. "I-I have to go! I'm sorry, Raul! Let's talk later!"

"Sure, sure. See you then."

She parted with the carefree, waving Raul and burst out of the storage shed. While she hadn't managed to get close to Gutheil, she'd obtained useful enough information.

I need to get to my next appointment!

Well, that should do it. Raul stretched as he watched Rishe make her escape from the training grounds. *The trick to lying is to mix in some truth...and to stack two lies, one on top of the other. If someone with good instincts sees through you, you can say you'll tell them the truth and only reveal the first lie.*

It was just like wearing a second disguise underneath your first. When your cover was blown, you merely showed them your second disguise. Of course, there weren't many people Raul had to use this double lie technique on.

Still, I can't believe I was instructed to give her a double lie under the assumption that she'd see through the first. Brimming with mirth but not letting it show, Raul closed his eyes. *It's not like I really lied to her, I just didn't tell her the whole truth. What a cruel husband you are, Prince Arnold.*

Raul had no choice but to obey his commands. He felt no guilt over lying to Rishe. Living this way was his role as the head of his band of hunters. *It is true that I want to help, though, Princess Rishe.*

Not that she was officially crown princess yet. Raul stretched again, then headed off to make his report.

That night, Rishe let out a quiet cry in the kitchen of the detached palace, attempting a particular endeavor on her own.

"Whoa!"

This kitchen was mostly used for boiling water or reheating food, so it was typically deserted. Late at night, there were no maids present, so there should have been no one to discover her doings. Yet only a few moments later, Rishe heard footsteps, and her panic spiked.

"What's wrong?"

"Oh, Prince Arnold!" Rishe whirled around to find a rare sight: Arnold staring wide-eyed at the mess she'd made of the kitchen.

"This is..."

“I-I’m sorry!”

Something white and fluffy had spilled from a large pot, blanketing the floor all around Rishe. And it wasn’t just the floor—the table the pot sat on, the chair next to that table, and even Rishe’s dress and hair were covered in the stuff.

Arnold pinched a bit of the substance floating in the air between his fingers and squinted at it. “White petals... No, snow?”

“Um, I made it hoping it might look like both, really.” She tried to cover the top of the pot with her arms, but it was futile; the substance continued to leak through the gaps.

Arnold stared at Rishe—who was now covered in the fluffy substance—before saying, “If it’s edible, I’ll do what I can to help.”

“No! Th-this wasn’t me messing up at cooking!”

Rishe flushed red at Arnold’s staid suggestion. Cooking was not among her many skills, and Arnold was the only person who ever finished any meals she made, so she leapt to defend herself. Or maybe Arnold was only saying that because he knew she didn’t like to waste even pepper-spiked wine.

“It’s not food. It’s a theater prop I was thinking I might be able to create with alchemy.”

“A prop?”

Slightly embarrassed, Rishe nodded and explained herself to Arnold. She’d discussed all sorts of things with Sylvia when the songstress visited the palace the day before. It had taken Rishe some time to bring up the matter of the kiss after they’d moved to the gardens. One topic Sylvia had raised was this:

“The opera you saw had a scene where there was a shower of petals at the end, right? Yes, the confetti! It’s a beautiful sight, but the effect takes a lot of work.”

“It does seem like an incredible amount of labor to make all that scrap paper. How do you do it?”

“Hee hee hee. Simple elbow grease, that’s all! One time, they even had us performers hold scissors and cut them up while we practiced our lines. It’s a lot of work to clean up too. It’s not like they melt over time. Sometimes they’ll get stuck on the ceiling and fall down at the worst moment during a performance the next day!”

Upon hearing that, Rishe told Sylvia, *“I could make something like that, I think. Something that’s pretty, that you can make a lot of at once, and that will vanish over time like snow.”*

“You could?!”

She had everything she needed in stock already, in fact. She’d ordered it from the Aria Trading Company for something else.

“So, you see, if you mix elements extracted from several medicinal plants, you can dry the mixture into a powder that expands into this snow-like substance when you add water to it.” From across the table, Rishe showed Arnold a small dish with a semi-translucent powder in it. Arnold studied the mixture carefully.

“Then if you take this snow-like substance and put pressure on it...” Rishe scooped up some of the fluff and balled it up like she was making a snowball. When she opened her hands, she was holding something resembling a handful of confetti. “It breaks up into scraps like this. See? They’re like petals.”

“I see.” Arnold pinched the “petal” Rishe held out to him. He held it up to a wall-mounted lamp and let the light shine through it. “This is another application of alchemy, then.”

“Yes! Mysterious, isn’t it? Just by mixing elements found in the natural world, you can create something brand-new.”

“And this is the result of trying to mass-produce the substance in this kitchen.”

“Look, I’m really sorry about that...” She hadn’t thought she’d produce so much.

I didn't expect this result! I did this experiment in the castle in Coyolles in a past life using the same quantities of plant matter and water, so why did it expand so much? The amount of water? The composition of the water? The temperature, the humidity...? Ugh, there are too many possible factors!

In her third life, she'd studied frantically under the genius Michel Hévin, forgoing sleep to experiment on the forefront of alchemical research. She felt all too keenly now that even *that* hadn't been enough to sate her thirst for knowledge—but while it was frustrating, it was also exciting to still have so much to learn.

I'll have to write another letter to Professor Michel. Oh, I know! I'll enclose a sample...

“...”

“Oh!”

Sensing Arnold's gaze, Rishe snapped out of her thoughts.

“Please don't worry. All this fluff will melt in time!”

“It'll melt? So it'll leave behind water?”

“Yes. But there's really only a small amount of water in it, so the rest will evaporate. The components that make it up are transparent and nontoxic, so there's very little work needed to clean it up.”

All they really had to worry about was making sure they brushed the substance off any expensive costumes. Sylvia's troupe should have no trouble adopting and adapting.

The original plan was to develop something with water in it that could be buried in desert regions to help plants grow. This prototype was eventually discarded, since it melts over time...but if it can be used for something like this, then maybe all that experimentation wasn't a complete waste.

She smiled, fondly remembering those days. Arnold reached over and touched her coral-colored hair. Rishe jumped, but he was merely plucking a

flake of artificial snow from her locks. She did her best to stay still so he could remove it.

“You were already growing the plants used in this substance?”

She jumped again at the question. “Er...there was just something I wanted to try for my own curiosity...”

“Oh?”

As he pulled his fingers away from Rishe’s hair, Arnold gazed kindly at her. Rishe interpreted it to mean she would have to elaborate. She knew she had a lot of secrets, so she wanted to be upfront about the things she didn’t have to hide. If only she didn’t have to feel so embarrassed about it.

“There are flowers all over Galkhein’s capital, aren’t there? The day I arrived here, petals were falling from windowsills on every house, and it was so beautiful...”

“...”

“So, I was talking with a few people, like Oliver, about how it would be wonderful if we could have petals fluttering in the air...”

“Fluttering where?”

“Hrk!” Feeling her cheeks heat up, Rishe blurted, “At our wedding!”

Arnold inhaled, surprised, and then simply said, “Oh.”

“Yeah...” Rishe clutched at her dress. The kitchen was silent, and the foam swayed around them.

Is he going to call me frivolous? After all, to Arnold, this was nothing more than a marriage of convenience. He might have incredibly serious reasons for it that Rishe couldn’t even begin to imagine. She’d also heard that she was little more than a hostage for Galkhein’s political leadership.

She couldn’t bear not knowing what he thought anymore and peeked up at him, her head still lowered. Arnold met her eye, his face expressionless as

always but somehow soft as well.

“Do you not dread the wedding?”

Rishe was shocked by the question. “Why do you say that?”

“It’s a stifling event that you have to spend many long hours preparing for. Not only are there countless arrangements to be made, but you must also entertain each and every one of the guests. It’s a great burden for you, isn’t it?”

“Well, yes, there’s a lot to prepare, but...” Those preparations were convenient for Rishe’s purposes. The guests she had to entertain were important figures who would have a significant effect on the future—like King Zahad, who would oppose Arnold’s war. It behooved her to be ready to meet with them for more than just the wedding ceremony.

But even without all that... With full confidence, she told Arnold, “I’m eagerly looking forward to the wedding.”

“Really now?”

“Yes! After all, I’ve never experienced my own wedding before.”

Arnold quietly returned her gaze. The *“in any of my six past lives”* was implied, but the prince could only assume she meant in the fifteen years since she’d been born.

“Doing anything for the first time is exciting, and I can’t wait to wear my wedding dress. It must feel different to experience a wedding as a bride than just as a guest too!”

“...”

“I’m so looking forward to your outfit as well, Prince Arnold! And your jewelry and hairstyle... Oh, and the Crusade psalms that will be read during the ceremony!”

Just enumerating the things she anticipated got her heart racing. She held up a finger with each one and ran out almost immediately.

“My artificial snow and flower petal experiment went well. I didn’t plan to fill up the kitchen, but that just means I can make more than I expected with a small amount of materials—which is even better!”

While Rishe rambled on with sparkles in her eyes, Arnold propped his elbows on the table and watched her with deep affection.

“Oh! And then there’s—”

Ack! The kiss!

Arnold narrowed his eyes. “What is it?”

“N-no! Nothing!” Rishe clapped her hands over her mouth, suddenly feeling very awkward. Arnold must have found it strange that her face was reddening. She glanced at him and found him chuckling to himself.

“Well, if you have enough to look forward to that it lessens the dread somewhat, that’s good.”

“Mm...” Rishe pursed her lips. “It doesn’t lessen anything, Your Highness.”

“It doesn’t?”

“Why would it? There’s nothing I dread about the ceremony.”

Arnold frowned, and Rishe cocked her head. Before she could probe further, however, he changed the subject.

“Anyway, just don’t push yourself. You act like it’s easy, but there’s a lot to do. You might think it’s not that much work because you’ve been training to be a crown princess from a young age.”

“M-maybe so...” Rishe hedged. Her hesitance was due to knowing there was something to what Arnold was saying. “But aren’t you the one pushing yourself when you’re already busy, Prince Arnold? Oliver tells me that even when you finish your work early, you simply fill the time you’ve gained with other work.”

“He really runs his mouth...”

“You’re even babysitting Prince Dietrich.” She felt particularly bad about that.

“I told you, there’s no reason for you to feel responsible for him.”

“I-I know that! I know that, but...” Rishe hung her head and muttered, “Just as you and Prince Dietrich were raised to be crown prince, I was raised to become crown princess.”

“Hm. I figured.”

“I was freed from that burden when Prince Dietrich broke off our engagement. I live a carefree life as your fiancée now, Prince Arnold. Or at least, that’s my intent. That’s why, when I see Prince Dietrich, I feel like I need to do something about him, I guess.” The emotions inside her were beginning to take shape. “Maybe it’s guilt... As if I’ve abandoned my homeland.”

“...”

That feeling wasn’t limited to this life either. In her past lives, Rishe had never once returned to her homeland. Not even after Dietrich’s failed coup and the rescinding of her exile.

Maybe I was avoiding it unconsciously, but this is my own problem. Her emotions stemmed from the feeling that she’d abandoned her duty. Or maybe it was the same reason she didn’t like thinking about her own birthday: her memories of childhood, when she’d wanted to cry each and every day.

While she considered this, Arnold told her, “You haven’t abandoned anything.”

“...Pardon?”

His tone was matter-of-fact but firm. “From the day you were born to the day you left your country, you made every effort you possibly could, right? That much is obvious just from watching you now.”

“...”

“In the end, Hermity even exiled you—and you *still* care for it. Whatever your feelings for it may be, the one thing you can’t say is that you abandoned it.”

Arnold’s words enveloped her in a comforting warmth. He spoke as bluntly as

always, but that almost made what he was saying feel even warmer.

Glowing, he continued, “And even if you *had* abandoned that country, I personally wouldn’t fault you for it.”

After a second, Rishe laughed. His expression was just so sour, she couldn’t help herself.

“Even if you never return there again, simply leaving your country is in no way abandoning it. As long as you’re not selling your nation’s secrets, I don’t think you have anything to feel guilty for.”

“...Right. Thank you.” Rishe appreciated his consideration. Belatedly, she realized something else. “Prince Arnold, it’s not necessarily to show my gratitude, but I think there’s something I may be able to help you with. Let me clean up here for just a moment. Do you have a little more time after that?”

“Sure. Are we going somewhere?”

Having recovered some of her energy thanks to Arnold, Rishe gave him an impish smile. “I thought you might like to play a little game with me.”

“A game?”

“Yes.” Rishe put a finger to her lips, still wearing her devilish grin. “A spy game.”

After cleaning up the kitchen, Rishe left the detached palace with Arnold, and they walked alongside the palace ramparts. They had since strayed from the paths and were strolling through the trees, the grass rustling at their feet. It was a half-moon that night, its light not quite reliable enough for their purposes, so Rishe and Arnold each held up a lantern.

“Someone once told me that if you want to make sure your defenses are secure, you have to take on the perspective of an intruder.” That someone had been Raul, her troop leader in her fifth life. “The palace is constructed to hold back an invading army, right?”

“That’s right. Palaces are also fortresses, after all.” Arnold was holding his lantern not to illuminate his own footing but Rishe’s. His casual, gentlemanly behavior had once again flustered her.

He’s also walking at a much slower pace than usual.

Rishe did her best to remain unruffled under all his consideration. “Ahem... On the one hand, the palace’s construction obviously prioritizes keeping out more heavily armed enemy combatants. Intelligence operatives, on the other hand, will be lightly equipped for infiltrating whatever gaps they can find. I noticed you were concerned about the route that kitten used to sneak into the palace yesterday.”

Leaving Arnold to illuminate her path, Rishe held her own lantern up. To their left were the palace’s sturdy walls. When she shifted her lantern, the shadows of the trees around them stretched with the movement.

“I thought we could go around the walls with an eye for what a spy might look for. I went around earlier in the day myself.”

“You did?”

“I read a guide to castle fortification once, you see,” Rishe lied with a smile. She’d gained that knowledge as a hunter, but Arnold didn’t press her for details.

Instead, he gave her an amused smile and told her, “You’re always so full of trivia.”

Prince Arnold’s finally getting used to me!

Or maybe he was just leaving her alone to see what she would do. Either way, he was probably aware by now that Rishe wouldn’t divulge the source of her information.

“I’m sure my surface-level knowledge doesn’t mean much, so I would advise confirming anything we notice with Raul later.”

“Right. You ran into him, I take it?”

Rishe pursed her lips. “Yes. He snuck up behind me and gave me quite a

fright.”

Arnold gazed down at her, a smile playing at the corners of his lips. “If he can sneak up on even you, then I guess the guy’s pretty good.”

“Y-you have an awfully inflated opinion of me, Your Highness...” It was Raul who’d taught her how to sense presences and hide her own in the first place. Rishe kept that to herself, telling Arnold, “From what I’ve seen, the imperial palace seems well protected against incursions from spies. When I snuck out into town, I used a part of the wall that lay lower than everywhere else. But that was only because I was sneaking out from inside and was able to leave a route for myself to get back in.”

At the time, Rishe had left a rope tied to a branch close to the ramparts. She’d then used the same rope to get back inside. Even with the skills from her fifth life, it would have been difficult to sneak in from outside otherwise.

“Castle walls are made from earth and stone. The more solid the walls are, the easier it is to climb them with the help of metal tools. These walls have rat guards on the outside, however.”

“Yeah. The walls should have a double structure also. Thick stone to guard against strong blows and then covered in brittle clay.”

“Mm-hmm. It’s the worst kind of construction for a spy...” Rishe’s expression had hardened at some point as she seriously considered how to break into this palace. In her fifth life, Raul had chosen not to even attempt it himself. “But if you pull your attention away from the walls, the palace has more weak points than you might expect.”

Rishe smiled mischievously, and Arnold agreed with her. “You would know, with how you dart around all over the place day after day.”

“Hrk! Y-you’re absolutely right. Take the barracks, for instance. You can shimmy up the drainpipe all the way to the top floor of the palace there.” Rishe illuminated the building to their right as they walked. “Look at that, Your Highness. If you climb to the top of the storage shed in the third training

ground, you can lower yourself onto the walls around the grounds. If you walk along those walls..."

"I see. You could make it to the commander's office on the second floor of the barracks with a little effort."

"Exactly right! I knew you'd notice that!" Rische looked at Arnold, her eyes sparkling with admiration. He'd likely never thought of things the way a thief would in his entire life, but he caught on after only a small suggestion from Rische.

"The palace grounds are always very clean, but the fallen leaves could be doing more work for you. Their crunching is a natural alarm, so just allowing more of them to remain on the ground is a good way to catch intruders."

"From an intruder's perspective, then, what would you do if there *were* leaves on the ground?"

"You'd pick a day when the leaves were wet from recent rain or use the rainfall itself to mask your noise. Morning dew will achieve the same effect."

Rische walked next to Arnold as they talked. It was a peaceful night, with insects chirping and a pleasant breeze. The cool air was much more comfortable than the earlier oppressive heat.

"As for the supposedly sturdy palace walls..."

Arnold scowled at the area they'd finally arrived at. "This is..."

"The trees seem to receive a little less care here compared to everywhere else."

This was the northernmost point of the palace. From the imperial residence in the northwest area, there were walkways on the highest level of the building, stretching out in all four cardinal directions. One of them led to this northern tower.

Rische pointed to a tree behind it. "The branches of that tree are fairly long, aren't they? The trees outside of the palace are the same way."

“So they are.” Arnold sighed when he saw what she was pointing out. “They’re too thin for a human to use, but a cat could easily leap between them.”

“Yes. I imagine the kitten we saw yesterday got in this way.”

Judging from the type of tree, branches of that size might support less than a single kilogram of weight. Even a human child would be too heavy, but the kitten was light enough to traverse them.

“This was the only intrusion point I came up with. But there are spots on the walls around here where the clay is starting to come off—”

“Rishe.” Arnold cut her off, grimacing. “We shouldn’t be here.”

She blinked, wide-eyed. Arnold didn’t usually say things like that. It was a warning, but an atypically vague one for him.

That’s odd. The peculiarity of it only convinced Rishe faster. “Very well. We should take our leave quickly, then?”

“No, we’ll leave slowly, naturally. We don’t want to seem suspicious.”

“Suspicious? Suspicious to...?”

Arnold hesitated, then eventually opened his mouth to name someone. At that very moment, a dreadful chill shot down Rishe’s spine. It was a horribly contradictory feeling, like she was frozen solid but wanted to escape as quickly as she could at the same time. Her fingertips were like ice, but all the blood in her body felt like it was boiling. The presence she sensed was on the walkway between the imperial residence and the tower.

Is someone there?

Arnold clicked his tongue. “Damn it... Of all places, why here?”

No! The feeling overwhelming Rishe was a very specific fear. *Prince Arnold’s going to be killed!* She reflexively reached out toward him.

“Rishe!”

She'd been reaching for his sword, but Arnold took her hand in his and pressed it to the tree behind her.

Rishe gasped, sensing Arnold's anxiety as he pinned her wrist to the tree. *Oh no! I never should have done that! It was pure reflex, but I tried to draw a sword against him...*

She pressed her lips into a thin line. Her conditioning from her lives as a hunter and a knight had backfired. Much as she wanted to apologize to Arnold, she couldn't make any moves without his lead right now.

What incredible malice... He's just watching us from somewhere far away, yet his intensity is palpable...

The half-moon was just behind the figure where he stood on the walkway, but Rishe's instincts were screaming at her not to look up at him.

It's him... That's Prince Arnold's father!

Indeed, it was Galkhein's current emperor, the man Arnold hated more than anyone in the world. His distinct presence was familiar to Rishe. It was exactly what she'd felt in her life as a knight when she'd faced off against the future Emperor Arnold Hein.

"Breathe, Rishe."

"Ngh..."

Arnold's words made Rishe realize she'd been holding her breath. Still pushing Rishe up against the tree, Arnold whispered to her, his back to his father. The flames from the lanterns they'd both dropped swayed around their feet.

"I'm sorry for putting you in this position, but I don't want him suspecting anything."

This is all because I tried to draw Prince Arnold's sword...

If she'd actually done it, it could very well have been taken as a hostile action against the emperor. More than enough reason to have her executed, crown

princess or not—especially now, while her position was merely that of a fiancée. Arnold was protecting her from that possibility.

“I’m going to act like we’re only here because we wanted to avoid prying eyes. Is that all right with you?”

“Y-yes...” Rishe’s voice trembled, which brought a pained look to Arnold’s face.

“Forgive me... I’m going to touch you in a way you won’t want.”

He released Rishe’s wrist and entwined his fingers in hers, cradling her hand like it was the most precious thing in the world. His other hand stroked Rishe’s hair. Then he bent and kissed her forehead.

Rishe let out a strange yelp. It originated from her nerves and the ticklish sensation of his lips against her bangs. Arnold stroked her hair soothingly, kissing her forehead again and again.

“Prince Arnold, I-I...”

His lips smacked gently against her hair. Arnold’s touch was soft, indulgent.

Rishe was overheating. She knew that this was not the time, but her embarrassment was starting to win over her fear. She returned Arnold’s grip on her hand as if clinging to a lifeline. With her other hand, she clutched Arnold’s lapel.

Arnold pulled her head against him like he was trying to calm a fearful child. He kissed the top of her head this time.

“Are you afraid?” he asked softly, arms around her. “Don’t be. It’s all right,” he murmured into her hair.

He’s shielding me...

Arnold was wrapped protectively around Rishe, but she couldn’t just let him baby her. No matter how frightened she was, no matter how much the pressure of that man’s gaze knocked the wind out of her, Rishe wanted to do something for Arnold even now.

So, she reached for him, arms circling the back he'd turned at his father. Then she squeezed, looking every bit the lady hankering for affection from her dear sweetheart. She felt Arnold's surprise as she buried her face in his chest.

Uuugh... Rishe's heart threatened to leap out of her chest. Her face went red up to her ears. She wasn't getting in his way hugging him like this, was she? Even if she was, she had to admit it felt reassuring to cling to his frame, which she always had to remind herself was larger than it appeared.

"...Rishe."

"Eep!"

Arnold brought his lips to her ear. He didn't actually touch it, but his presence there still made her jump. He embraced her once more and, shockingly, turned to face his father. Rishe couldn't see, but she imagined Arnold was examining him in silence.

She tensed, holding her breath again as the air prickled around her. She pressed her lips together as cold sweat dripped down her nape.

The look lasted less than a second, but it felt like an eternity. The pounding of her own heart was unbearably loud to her. Somehow, the first one to drop his malice was Arnold's father.

It's gone...

The curtain fell on their little act all too abruptly. The intense pressure from Arnold's father vanished, as though he'd had enough entertainment for one night. Rishe sensed that the emperor had left the walkway, yet she found herself unable to move.

"Rishe, are you all right?"

She sucked in a breath when Arnold called her name. Her forehead still pressed to his chest, Rishe slowly told him, "I'm...so sorry, Prince Arnold..." Her voice was terribly hoarse. "I reached for your sword on reflex..."

If she hadn't done that, then Arnold wouldn't have had to take those

unwanted measures. Rishe's heart was pounding loudly even now; it was ridiculous. She inhaled deeply, then apologized once more.

"I caused you trouble with my thoughtlessness."

"You've caused me no trouble. It was just a matter of poor timing. I should apologize for not explaining things earlier."

Rishe shook her head, still quivering as she held tight to Arnold. When he stroked her hair to soothe her, she really did feel like a child in his arms. She was gradually regaining control of her frozen limbs, though.

Arnold looked down at her and asked, "What were you going to do after drawing my sword?"

She met his eyes, confused by the question.

"You weren't moving like you were just going to hold it up. That's why I was a moment late stopping you."

A moment late, he says... From where I'm standing, he not only stopped me in a split second, but he prevented me from touching the sword at all.

Arnold's fingers combed through Rishe's bangs.

"I..."

"Mm." Arnold prompted her to continue. His voice was gentler than usual—to calm her down, she was sure. And it worked. His caressing her hair and speaking to her so tenderly allowed Rishe to breathe properly again.

He asked what I was going to do when I reached for his sword.

This time, she felt a different kind of anxiety growing in her. Frowning, Rishe forced the words out from her place in Arnold's arms.

"I wanted to...protect you, Prince Arnold."

Arnold's eyes widened.

"I know, the disrespect to even think I could... Especially not when you're so much stronger than me, Your Highness."

“...Rishe.”

“I should know that, I just...lost control, I suppose.” Rishe pressed her forehead to Arnold’s chest again. She tightened her grip on him and murmured, “Thank goodness nothing happened to you...”

All the strength left her. She was about to fall to the ground, but Arnold held her up, his arms tighter around her than before.

“I’m sorry. My actions only caused you trouble instead.”

“I said it doesn’t matter.” Bent down, Arnold spoke directly into Rishe’s ear. “I could search the whole world and not find anyone other than you who would try to protect me from him.”

“Your Highness...”

“But.” Arnold’s voice was hardly more than a breath. “I’m begging you. Please don’t put yourself in danger for my sake ever again.”

It was unheard of for Arnold to *plead* with anyone. If she could, Rishe wanted to grant his wishes, but this was one promise she didn’t think she could keep. She pressed her lips together, sure he had noticed that she wasn’t agreeing. As proof, he sighed heavily.

After a pause, he said, “You can’t walk, can you? I’ll carry you.”

“Huh? Whoa!”

Arnold picked Rishe up, so casually that it proved he was growing used to having to do this every now and then. Rishe frantically clung to him as her body left the ground.

H-he’s carrying me like a bride again!

It was embarrassing for her to be held this way—especially since it involved a lot of contact between them.

Rishe peered up at Arnold’s beautiful face, so close to her own. “Prince Arnold, please!”

“I’ll put you down right away, so just bear with it. There’s a small gazebo this way.”

They cut around the tower to a garden behind it. Rische was surprised by their sojourn here, and by the aforementioned gazebo. In the center was a finely crafted table and some chairs. Arnold strolled toward them and set Rische down on a bench.

“We’ll kill some time here for now.”

“O-okay... You don’t think we should leave right away?”

“It would be better to stay since he saw us.” Arnold observed Rische with his piercing blue eyes. “After all, we’re supposed to be out here on a tryst.”

Everything that had just happened came crashing back into Rische’s mind. She recalled all the times Arnold kissed her hair, and the sound it made, and she reddened like a tomato.

St-stop it, Rische! Prince Arnold only kissed your hair to protect you! He had no ulterior motives, so you mustn’t dwell on it!

“Um...Prince Arnold?”

Arnold sat down beside her without a word.

Rische took a deep breath and asked, “This tower... Does it have something to do with Her Majesty?”

Arnold narrowed his eyes in response—an alternative to a nod. “His legal wife and all his concubines used to live in this tower.”

The way he said it implied that this was no longer the case. Galkhein’s current emperor had demanded brides from various countries to use as hostages, but according to Theodore, every single one of those numerous women were dead now—with the exception of the current empress.

Arnold leaned back against the bench and folded his arms, muttering, “I didn’t think he still visited this tower.”

He probably hadn't even intended to say the words aloud. This was as rare as it was for him to plead.

"Where does the current empress reside?"

"In the imperial residence. No one lives in this tower right now. It's been practically forgotten."

"So that's why the trees aren't as well tended in this area..."

The emperor should have had no reason to visit a deserted tower, so what was he doing up on that walkway? Rishe nearly locked up again at the recollection of his fearsome presence, but she had to stay strong.

I don't have time to fear the emperor. Prince Arnold doesn't let the man's malice keep him from functioning normally.

Arnold was silent now, lost in thought with his eyes downcast. Rishe had recently noticed that he got like this whenever he was thinking.

Even at a time like this, Prince Arnold is thinking... I must endeavor to do the same. If I don't, I'll never be able to face the emperor or stop Prince Arnold.

She steadied her breath and gripped Arnold's sleeve.

"What is it?"

His voice is always so soft when he speaks to me...

Rishe was certain there was a plot to kill his father lurking somewhere in Arnold's heart. She had to hide the fact that she knew the future and Arnold's goals. While doing so, she also had to figure out exactly what Arnold was thinking.

"I'm sure you have to be up early tomorrow. I'm sorry for keeping you here."

"None of this is your fault, so just smile like you always do, won't you?"

The words lanced Rishe's heart. Arnold really was kind, just like she thought. He should have been capable of finding paths to his goals that didn't involve killing people.

“You’ll be bringing Prince Dietrich along for your work tomorrow, right?”

“There’s no need for you to feel responsible for him.”

“I know. I just can’t help worrying.” Rishe chose her next words carefully. “I sensed something strange right before I left Hermitry—before Prince Dietrich broke off his engagement with me. Maybe that’s why I still worry about him.”

“What’s that?”

She’d never intended to reveal this to Arnold. *But I need to do this.* And if she was going to do it, she had to make full use of her knowledge of the future. *How will Prince Arnold react?* she thought as she steeled herself to speak.

“Prince Dietrich may be plotting a rebellion against his father.”

“...”

Dietrich’s coup took place much later in the future. There was no way Rishe could have known about it at this point. But there *had* been signs.

Knowing Arnold had the same goal, Rishe looked straight into his blue eyes and continued, “That party was strange even before he broke off his engagement with me.”

She thought back to the first day of the fifth month, just over two months ago. Rishe had turned that night over and over again in her mind, finding it strange even in her first life, when she’d heard about Dietrich’s coup.

That party should have been a typical event for mingling between nobles.

Rishe and Dietrich had graduated from the academy at the end of the third month. Afterward, Rishe had begun training more seriously for her role as crown princess, and she hadn’t so much as seen Dietrich until the night of that party.

Dietrich had come to her out of nowhere and told her he was throwing a party, so she’d had to prepare for it rather hastily. She was used to attending events without his escort, but due to the last-minute nature of the party, she hadn’t realized that she’d never been informed when she usually always was.

“I was never told who would be attending the event.”

Arnold narrowed his eyes. “Isn’t that just because that man planned to break things off with you there? As much as it disgusts me to even discuss it...”

“It’s still strange. The king of Hermitia was always kind to me. No matter Prince Dietrich’s intentions, if His Majesty was sponsoring the event, then it makes no sense for me to be left in the dark.”

That vague unease had only made sense to Rishe when she heard about Dietrich’s coup in her first life.

“I believe Prince Dietrich held that party on his own, without informing His Majesty. And maybe it *was* so he could break off his engagement with me, but...” Something didn’t add up. “It would have been unusual for him to denounce me for my supposed crimes without his father present.”

The whole basis for Dietrich’s annulment of their engagement lay in Rishe’s supposed villainy. He could condemn her for her “crimes” all he wanted, but it was his father who had the actual power to judge her for them.

Arnold’s brow was still furrowed in displeasure. “But they were all false accusations, right? The idiot’s plan was to denounce you in a public place before his father could pursue any sort of investigation of your crimes and hope momentum would finish things for him.”

“It wasn’t just His Majesty, though. My parents weren’t in attendance that night either. That’s why I thought it was nothing more than a gathering of the sons and daughters of the nobility. Yet several key vassals and retainers to the throne were present.”

“...”

“My parents should also have attended if he was planning to break things off with me officially. Yet His and Her Majesty, as well as my own parents, weren’t there while every other influential figure in the country *was*.”

As she spoke, the misgivings she’d had in her first life began to waver. *I must*

allude to Prince Dietrich's coup to suss out Prince Arnold's intentions. But the more she thought back to the event, the more wrong it all seemed. It's natural to find it odd, isn't it? After all, Prince Dietrich's coup fails. Obviously, his preparation for the event should be full of holes as well, so...

So why did none of it sit right with her?

“What if Prince Dietrich's true aim was to gather the country's most influential nobles, excluding our fathers?” Up to here, these were things she'd puzzled out in her first life.

“I can't imagine the man's that cunning, personally.”

“D-diplomatically speaking! Prince Dietrich certainly isn't one to scheme and plot... If he was planning something nefarious, I can only imagine those around him put him up to it.”

In truth, it *had* been a few of Dietrich's vassals who had instigated the coup.

It's all still so odd, though... Rishe's misgivings were only becoming more pronounced. Arnold smiled as if seeing right through her.

“Is there any reason for someone to risk so much for your homeland's throne?”

It's exactly as Prince Arnold says... Hermitry had mostly escaped great conflicts in the past. Even in the war a few years ago, they had emerged unscathed simply by virtue of being a minor power not worth invading. *What reason could there be to usurp the throne in a peaceful, postwar era? Not only that, but to head the plan with someone as unsuited to it as Prince Dietrich, and then for the whole plan to fail...*

Rishe frowned at herself for never digging deeper into things than this solely because she knew the plan would fail in the future. In reality, there *was* an attempted coup. Just as Arnold said, Dietrich made a hasty play for the throne for reasons that were completely unknown to her. Yet he *had* made the attempt. If Rishe thought of things from that angle, where did her thoughts lead

her?

“The one who incited Prince Dietrich to action...”

Finally, she arrived at a conclusion that had nothing to do with the future she knew of.

“...wasn’t someone who wanted to obtain something or improve Hermitry. It was an outside party who wanted to throw Hermitry into chaos...?”

The first thing that came to mind was Fabrannia and their counterfeiting scheme. They had counterfeited Galkhein’s currency and tried to make use of Siguel’s Princess Harriet to distribute the false currency in Galkhein. But Arnold and Rishe had theorized that it was an outsider’s plot to weaken Galkhein rather than a ploy originating in Fabrannia.

Why did I never see it before? Rishe gulped. *The strangest person in attendance at that party...* She felt her whole body tensing again. *The most important individual there, whose presence I hadn’t been informed of...*

She turned toward him. “Prince Arnold...”

The crown prince of the major power Galkhein, who had no reason to appear at a party hosted by a minor nation, laughed darkly.

“Were you only there in the first place to investigate that matter?”

Arnold’s eyes crinkled in amusement. “Who knows?”

“Come now, Your Highness!”

“It’s true that I let myself be provoked. An invitation to a random party from a country we don’t even have a diplomatic relationship with is practically a threat.”

Why had Rishe never found it strange before? There was no way Arnold would ever attend such a minor event. And even if he deigned to, Rishe had observed her fiancé enough to see a pattern in his actions.

When we went to buy my ring, it was to get eyes on Prince Kyle. He

accompanied me to the church for work and to give them a warning. Our little trip to Vinrhys wasn't to greet Prince Curtis and Princess Harriet; it was to investigate Galkhein's currency minting...

Arnold's actions always had multiple purposes.

He wasn't at that party simply for diplomatic relations. Ever since, he's been on the trail of foreign entities looking to influence Galkhein...

Whatever was behind Dietrich's planned revolution linked up here with something unexpected.

Whoever is behind his actions in Hermitry is almost certainly connected to the entity scheming against Galkhein. And Prince Arnold has known that since before he met me, when he received the invitation to that party...

Arnold was the only foreign entity attending the party. Needless to say, they'd never even sent an invitation to Galkhein before that. Arnold had been invited to an event Dietrich held without asking his father, with every other key figure in the nation also in attendance. Rishe was becoming convinced that whoever was planning the future coup *had* to have been involved.

Rishe narrowed her eyes and blew out a breath. "I feel like I'll never catch up to you, Prince Arnold..."

"Really?" Arnold reached out and caressed Rishe's hair. "No one else is able to figure out what I'm thinking like you are, you know."

He was as expressionless as ever, but his eyes were somehow soft. His hands were equally gentle as he combed through her hair.

Rishe sulked a bit as she asked, "You're coddling me, aren't you?"

He chuckled. "See? You figured it out right away."

"Honestly..." Rishe protested, though there was a part of her that felt a thrill over the exchange. After all, when they'd run into the emperor, and now as well, Arnold showed her great care. Still, she couldn't bask in his affections forever.

Rishe locked gazes with Arnold as he once again brushed his fingers through her coral-colored locks. “Supposing the individual manipulating Fabrannia also made contact with my homeland of Hermitry...”

Hermitry was a small country. One also had to pass through undeveloped forest and mountains to get there from Galkhein, so there wasn’t much travel between the two nations. The roads were narrow and unsuited to marching armies, which was one of the reasons Galkhein hadn’t bothered to invade Hermitry in the war. But the two nations weren’t separated by much physical distance. As long as you ignored the fact that moving a sizable army between them was difficult, Hermitry was very much a sitting duck if Galkhein ever instigated conflict.

“Would that person have encouraged Prince Dietrich to break off his engagement with me to better manipulate him without His Majesty noticing? That would be a reason for Prince Dietrich to keep it a secret from his father, because if His Majesty was aware of what he planned to do, he would certainly reprimand His Highness...”

“The whole thing was strange from the start.” Arnold’s brow creased, the way it always did when Dietrich came up in conversation. “A one-sided dissolution of an engagement in a public venue isn’t something that should happen in the first place.”

“I’m sure everyone present accepted it, if only because it seemed like something Prince Dietrich was liable to do...”

While Rishe had been surprised by the dissolution of their engagement, she hadn’t found it strange in the least that Dietrich would choose to declare such a thing in the middle of a soirée. That was another reason she’d simply dismissed the strangeness of the occurrence.

Maybe a foreign visitor like Prince Arnold was the only person who noticed how strange Prince Dietrich’s behavior was... Rishe thought with some chagrin. If the “mastermind” was behind that party, then they’re also behind the coup

d'état that occurs a year later.

She sighed. "Were you not in the party hall that night because you were hunting for the mastermind, Your Highness?"

"If they were trying to start something with me, I figured I'd be able to smoke them out better if I was alone."

He's once again putting himself on the front line like it's nothing!

Normally, one who was threatened wasn't supposed to go after the culprit themselves in these situations. Arnold was stronger than anyone else, but Rishe still worried about him.

"Did you achieve anything that night?" she asked him.

His eyes went wide. Rishe was curious about what had surprised him, but his expression softened and he quirked his lips in a smirk. "Yeah. I found something very valuable."

"You did?! What was it?"

Rishe looked up at him, full of expectation, and Arnold returned her gaze, his blue eyes uncharacteristically warm. "I found you."

Now *Rishe's* eyes were bulging. "Ack! Er, that's not what I—"

"Only a few moments later, though, you jumped out a window and fled from me."

"Would you please forget about that already?!"

Rishe had assumed she'd never see Arnold again, so she'd hardly been concerned about appearances. She could never have guessed that he would propose to her soon after and that she'd be by his side ever since.

Arnold chuckled. He must have found the sight of Rishe's face flushing red amusing. Scowling, Rishe focused on her musings.

I've already experienced so many things in this life. I've discovered the truth about incidents I only heard rumors about in previous lives...

Arnold wasn't the cruel man everyone made him out to be, and she'd never known about Coyolles's mines drying up either. The previous royal priestess hadn't passed away when it was publicly announced that she had, and there was a mastermind behind the execution of the supposed villain Harriet. As with all those events, there might be some truth Rishe was unaware of lurking behind Dietrich's coup attempt.

"Could it be that the reason you're taking Prince Dietrich along on your work is to investigate the mastermind, Your Highness?"

Arnold flat-out scowled. "Obviously. Do you think I would ever associate with that man without a political reason to do so?"

"Well, you're kind, Prince Arnold, and you're surprisingly nurturing, so..." Rishe was being completely genuine, yet Arnold's scowl only deepened. The two princes must have been thoroughly incompatible if Arnold disliked Dietrich that much.

"In any case, you don't need to worry about any coups that man is plotting. No matter what sort of mastermind may be behind him, he won't succeed."

Yes. It's exactly as you predict, Prince Arnold... It would end in such a spectacular failure that even Arnold, who didn't know the future like Rishe did, could predict it. As such, a successful coup was likely not the mastermind's actual goal.

"Still, I don't want Hermitry suffering any confusion due to a failed revolt. Even if Prince Dietrich disagrees with how his father does things, a coup d'état shouldn't have been his first plan. I'd like to think even Prince Dietrich would have considered other solutions first..."

"Rishe." She raised her head when Arnold called her name. "You're looking at it all wrong."

Rishe gasped. Arnold's tone had been absolutely frigid. There was an eerie glow to his blue eyes, like the moon reflected on the surface of a midwinter sea.

“The king is the ultimate authority in a nation.” His eyes contained none of the gentle warmth they’d shown her earlier. “His citizens may scream so loud their throats split, and his vassals may give up their lives to give him counsel, but the king can make decisions without taking any of it into account.”

When he said that, there was one person who came to mind. It wasn’t the emperor standing above them in the light of the half-moon. Her thoughts automatically went to Emperor Arnold Hein, whom she’d faced off against in the future she knew.

“If the king stands in your way, you have no recourse other than killing him.”

A shiver went down Rische’s spine. “Prince Arnold...” Rische spoke carefully to keep her voice from trembling. “You mustn’t say such things inside palace grounds.”

“Why not? We’re discussing the crown prince of Hermitia right now. Of course, I suppose some people would chide me for such irreverence.” Arnold narrowed his eyes, smiling darkly. “After all, regicide is the gravest sin there is.”

His self-deriding smile was enchanting—hauntingly beautiful, yet so fragile she found it hard to look at. At the same time, it had an irresistible quality that could draw anyone in. That same magnetism was present in every facet of Arnold’s unfathomable nature. If Rische hadn’t been so tense, she might have been bewitched.

Arnold cast his gaze to the floor, doubtless unaware of his effect on Rische. “I’ll keep my eye on your former fiancé for a little longer. But you don’t need to concern yourself with the trifling matter of his activities.”

“I can’t simply ignore this.” Rische took a breath and said, “May I accompany you on your next outing for work as well? I’ll be sure not to cause you any trouble.”

Arnold furrowed his brow for the umpteenth time that evening and said, “Fine. I did promise to grant as many of your requests as I could.”

“Thank you!”

Rishe gave him a brilliant smile, and Arnold sighed. He broke eye contact when rain began beating down on the roof of the gazebo.

“It’s just a passing shower,” Rishe said. “I believe it will end quickly.”

“It probably will if you say so.”

“Do you need to get back? We’ll have to stay here for a little longer...”

Rishe studied the ceiling. That was when she noticed the four pillars holding up the roof. They were decorated with images of a girl announcing each season. It was a familiar motif to most of the people living in this world.

There are Crusade decorations on the pillars and handrails of this gazebo.

Most countries in the world followed the faith of the Crusade religion. Many royals and nobles were especially devout. But for there to be a resting place with Crusade decorations in *this* palace must have a particular significance.

Could this have been...?

Arnold must have noticed Rishe’s musings. He surveyed the same pillars and said with disinterest, “I thought structures fell apart right away when there weren’t any people looking after them anymore.” His voice was flat. “They do surprisingly well without anyone maintaining them.”

“Oh, Prince Arnold...”

“Though I don’t believe this gazebo was ever used even once.”

Arnold had surely been inside the tower when he was young. He must have known about this gazebo too. Rishe’s heart ached at the thought.

The Crusade text on these pillars celebrates the birth of a beloved child.

The gazebo had most likely been built for Arnold and his mother, the royal priestess of the Crusade faith. Yet Arnold said it had never been used. Maybe that meant it was a traditional construction that had nothing to do with his mother’s feelings.

Prince Arnold didn't even know that birthdays are supposed to be celebrated with the people you love. When she thought about the young Arnold, Rishe was overcome with the urge to cry.

When Prince Arnold stared up at his father earlier, he was suppressing a desire to kill him. The emperor had been far enough away that he must not have sensed it, but it had come across to Rishe loud and clear. That wasn't the issue, however. *The emperor wasn't even trying to hide his own malice. Part of it was flippant, like he was just trying to provoke Prince Arnold and wasn't serious, but...* Rishe wrapped her arms around herself as she thought back to that moment. *It was directed not at me but at Prince Arnold—his own son.*

Arnold's father regarded him with murderous eyes, and Arnold was perfectly aware. Despite that, he'd focused only on protecting Rishe and not himself.

"I hope the twelfth month comes soon," Rishe murmured, resisting the sob that threatened to escape. Doubt crossed Arnold's face. "I'll make sure your birthday celebration is a grand event. You'll be turning twenty, so we'll have to throw a big enough party to make up for two decades of missed celebrations!"

Arnold thought for a moment before saying, "The wedding will be before that."

"O-of course we'll have the wedding first!"

"As long as you haven't forgotten."

She couldn't possibly forget. Arnold only said so because he had no idea she'd been constantly tormenting herself about the inevitable wedding kiss.

"And *your* birthday is before that."

"We can worry about that later." For now, she wanted to consider Arnold's birthday. She clutched at his sleeve and made her fervent appeal: "It's a celebration of your birth, Prince Arnold. I hope you're ready!"

Arnold's eyes went half-lidded, and he murmured, "Is there really a need to celebrate the birth of a person who only lives because of the sacrifice of

countless others?”

The rain nearly drowned out those words, but Rishe was sure they were genuine. Seldom did Arnold’s voice ring so empty. Even when he spoke softly, Rishe could usually hear every word he said.

“I...” She reached out for him, taking his face in her hands and turning him toward her—close enough to kiss him. “I am glad I met you. Even if some sort of fate causes you to kill me.” Arnold swallowed hard. His blue eyes wavered as she told him, “I want to give thanks for your birth into this world and celebrate it.”

Arnold slowly lowered his gaze. He brought his own hands up to cover Rishe’s, removing her right hand from his face. He nuzzled his cheek against her left hand indulgently. The innocent gesture made Rishe’s heart pound in her chest.

“Rishe.”

“Y-yes?”

“Even if it’s just a hypothetical, don’t ever say that I’d kill you.” His tone was almost petulant, and her heart squeezed. She had to acknowledge that it was an awful thing to say. Just as he’d pointed out to her in the past, Rishe might have treated her own life a bit too lightly.

“I-I’m sorry...”

“It’s all right. I understand what you were trying to tell me.”

He likely only meant the *words* she’d said, however. Rishe couldn’t imagine she’d actually changed his mind about himself.

Arnold touched her even more delicately than before, his fingers sliding through her bangs. “I did something terrible to you earlier, didn’t I?”

“Did you?” She couldn’t imagine what he meant, prompting him to give her an exasperated look.

“It may have only been your hair, but you detested being kissed, didn’t you?”

“Bwagh?!” Rishe’s spine went stick-straight at the memory. It was true that she’d thought her heart might stop for various reasons during his kisses. After all, he’d pulled her close, stroked her hair, and kissed her over and over again. She found the smacking of his lips cute, but it made her so mortified she feared she might die. Arnold had even showered her with soothing gestures and soft touches. Just recalling it made her face so hot, she was worried it would burn.

But still, I...! She felt like she had to tell him this, so even as she covered her mouth with both hands, she mumbled the words, “I didn’t...detest it...”

Arnold froze, his eyes widening for a second.

“W-well, I know you only did it to protect me!” Rishe hung her head and hastily added, “And you were so gentle too. It was embarrassing, and it tickled, but I wasn’t scared! So no, I didn’t detest it at all.”

After a short silence, Arnold said, somewhat awkwardly, “I see...”

“Y-you don’t believe me, do you?! I really didn’t!”

“It’s not that I don’t believe you...”

Then why was he sighing?

“Anyway, you can read Crusade as if you were born to be a priestess, huh?”

Urgh... He’s changing the subject! She stared fiercely at him, but she was never going to win against Arnold. She had no choice but to answer his question.

“I only studied it a tiny bit, so I’m not very confident in it. I’m sure I’m nowhere near your level, Your Highness.”

Could she ask him about his past? From his reactions to her thus far, she was hesitant, but he seemed to be confiding in her more lately.

“Who did you learn from, Prince Arnold?”

Arnold watched the rain dripping from the gazebo roof for a moment before responding. “No one. I just studied it from books I found lying around.”

“You taught yourself such a complex language?!” Rishe’s eyes went wide. Even bishops of the Church had to learn Crusade from expert linguists, and it was a painful process.

“Learning wasn’t exactly an unusual thing for me from a young age.”

This goes beyond that, though!

Since his mother was the royal priestess, Arnold was of the goddess’s bloodline. Even if that information was top secret, there were probably countless Crusade holy texts around him and his mother.

“It’s surprising. I didn’t think you’d be interested in learning that sort of thing, Your Highness.”

“Even if there’s knowledge you may never use, there’s no knowledge you’re better off not knowing.”

“Hee hee hee. I couldn’t have said it better myself!” Rishe grinned, happy they shared an opinion for once. Even so, it was almost unbelievable that Arnold had taught himself the language as a child.

Maybe young Prince Arnold had some sort of ambition? A whole language wasn’t something you learned under the assumption that you would never use it. With Arnold’s brains, he might not have struggled as much with it as the average person, but Rishe still thought it was unusual for him to have spent the time on it.

“Come to think of it...” Arnold said, having recalled something. Rishe’s head tilted to the side. “Just once, my mother annotated something I’d written in Crusade.”

Rishe tensed, a little nervous. Until now, she would have never expected him to bring up his mother of his own volition.

“What did she write?” Rishe asked him timidly.

With a half smile, Arnold said, “Who knows.” Sounding truly indifferent, he added, “It was so long ago, I don’t remember.”

Rishe felt like her heart was being wrung out; it must have shown on her face.

Arnold smiled down at her. “Why the long face?”

“Well, because you...”

“It doesn’t matter. Besides, I’ve remembered a lot while examining the things you’ve been trying to show me.”

The things I’ve been trying to show him...?

Rishe wanted to show Arnold the world’s beauty, its delights, its wonders... It was her own wish to do so, not something Arnold desired of her. She almost felt like she’d been forcing it on him, but for him to say something so sweet made her want to continue taking advantage of his kindness.

Arnold was starting to turn his eyes toward beautiful things now, little by little.

“Your Highness, I—”

Just then, Arnold pressed a finger to Rishe’s lips. His signal to be quiet came at the same moment Rishe sensed someone approaching the gazebo.

She tensed up a little, recalling the sight of the emperor earlier that night, but the figure who approached them like a traveler seeking shelter was wearing a knight’s uniform.

“Sir Gutheil.”

When Rishe called his name, Gutheil noticed her with surprise before snapping into a bow, even as the rain pelted him. He bowed smartly, the movements as graceful as an actor’s.

“I sincerely apologize for interrupting you both.”

I-Interrupting?! Rishe realized that they *were* sitting awfully close together on this bench. She flushed with embarrassment again, but there was no point in pulling apart from each other now.

“Please forgive my rudeness. I shall take my leave.” Lantern in hand, Gutheil

made to head back into the rain.

“Ah, wait!” Rishe leaped to her feet and called out to stop him. “Please, won’t you take shelter here? It will stop quickly, I assure you. It’s all right with you, isn’t it, Your Highness?”

“I-It will stop quickly, you say?”

I forgot! That’s the normal response!

It was much more unusual for someone to take Rishe at her word, as Arnold did. Rishe turned back to the prince. Though he was wearing an annoyed expression, he languidly raised a hand to grant Gutheil his permission. “Stay. Were you patrolling?”

“Yes, sir. While I was out, I spotted the flames from two lanterns burning near the tower, so I thought I should investigate.”

He means our lanterns...

The pair had carried them to the tower, but when Arnold had abruptly protected her from the emperor’s gaze, they’d both dropped the lanterns and left them there.

Gutheil pressed his large frame to one side of the gazebo, awkwardly brushing back his wet bangs.

“Rishe. Come here.”

“Y-yes...”

She was still standing, so Arnold called her back to the seat next to him. An awkward silence stretched between them, the falling rain the only sound. Arnold alone was unbothered by it.

No one normally comes near this tower, right? That’s why the wall is in disrepair and the trees aren’t trimmed. Even though they’d dropped their lanterns, the light shouldn’t have reached very far. That would mean Gutheil was already close enough to the tower to notice the lanterns’ tiny flames.

Prince Arnold is worried there's an intelligence operative inside the palace, isn't he? Sir Gutheil's behavior at a time like this is just too suspicious...

There was no way Arnold hadn't arrived at the same conclusions as Rishe.

Visibly uncomfortable, Gutheil faced Arnold and said, "Your Highness, I realize it's rude of me to bring this up now, but..."

What's this about?

"Have you given any thought to my petition for—"

Arnold's frown deepened into a glare. "Is this really the time?"

He knew what Gutheil wanted to bring up, then.

The knight spun toward Rishe and dipped his head. "Please forgive my unseemly behavior, Lady Rishe. I cannot apologize enough."

"Oh, don't mind me. I can leave if—eep!" Rishe jumped when Arnold wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her closer.

"You don't need to trouble yourself."

"B-but..."

"He's the one who brought it up, knowing you were here. So?"

Gutheil knelt at Arnold's feet with no hesitation. "My resolve has only strengthened since the last time I made this request."

Is he about to...?

His voice was clear even with his head lowered. "If you would name me one of your Imperial Guard, I would give my life for this country and serve you until death."

Rishe frowned. *I knew it. Just like in my previous lives, Sir Gutheil will become one of Prince Arnold's direct retainers and support him in the war.*

Arnold's next words, however, took her completely aback: "You must be joking."

Huh?! Rishe's head shot up in disbelief as Arnold rested his elbow on the back of the bench.

"I've told you once already that I don't intend to make you one of my Imperial Guard."

No way...

Gutheil didn't budge. He likely expected Arnold's answer and dared to ask anyway.

Prince Arnold doesn't intend to make Sir Gutheil his retainer? That didn't match the future Rishe knew. Is the future already changing?

Rishe was desperately trying to avoid the war in the future. Little by little, she'd noticed her actions having an effect on things, but could that really extend to this?

No, I don't know! There's a possibility they had this exact same exchange in all six of my other lives as well! Rishe had no way of knowing the truth. She almost gripped her dress, but she stopped herself before Arnold noticed. *I don't know if this is a change or a repetition. Or if it is a change, whether it's a good or bad one.*

Without raising his head, Gutheil said, "May I ask why?" His voice was trembling. "Is it my father? My father, who betrayed this country and the royal family?!"

The knights are a bed of thorns for Sir Gutheil right now. No matter how diligently he works, people are still mistrustful of him. And it's because of something his father did, not his own sin. Rishe had seen it for herself when she'd been among the knights in her disguise. *Prince Arnold's Imperial Guard would be the only place where his abilities were evaluated without prejudice, the only place where he could really belong. But...*

Arnold's eyes were coldly rejecting. "The problem is more fundamental than that."

“More fundamental, sir...?”

Rishe’s shoulders twitched at the tension in the air.

“Give your life for this country? I don’t need anyone who sees such a thing as a virtue.”

Prince Arnold...

“No matter how skilled they may be, do you really think I can trust men who go into battle under the assumption that they’ll die with my strategies? Men like you, who expect death before the fight even begins, and not because they’ve determined it to be the best strategy?”

“I...”

The philosophy behind Arnold’s Imperial Guard was that they fought to survive no matter what it took.

With a grunt, Gutheil clenched his fists and raised his head to gaze at Rishe and Arnold once more. “I apologize for behaving so wretchedly. Please excuse me.” With one last bow, he disappeared into the rain.

“Sir Gutheil, wait!”

Rishe would have stood, but Arnold held her back. “You don’t need to go after him.”

“But I...” She faltered, knowing full well that Arnold wouldn’t change his mind.

“If your arm is torn off, keep swinging your sword. If your leg is smashed, keep moving forward. If you lose both eyes, find a way to cut into your enemy for as long as you have left. That’s what all this is for,” Arnold had said to her once when they’d sparred. *“Training in these circumstances helps us stay alive out there.”*

Prince Arnold doesn’t want soldiers who will sacrifice themselves for their country.

Still, something nagged at Rishe. Her thoughts turned first to something that

had happened in her fifth life. Rische—a hunter then—had been scrutinizing Arnold through a monocular. He'd spotted her and indicated his heart with his thumb, as if to say, *Aim here*.

And what about the Arnold she'd exchanged blows with in the final moments of her sixth life? *His Highness was all alone in that castle the whole time*. He had powerful knights serving him, yet he was there cutting through the front lines all on his own, not coordinating with his allies one bit. Sure, Arnold was strong enough not to *need* help from his other knights, but that wasn't the reason he acted the way he did.

The Prince Arnold in the future... Rische peered up at him through her bangs, almost wanting to cry. *He displays none of that will to stay alive himself*.

The thought horrified Rische. She felt herself reaching out and tugging Arnold's sleeve. "You are so..."

Maybe he could sense the pain in her chest.

"What is it?" He knit his brows and anxiously touched her cheek. He likely had no idea that Rische's heart was bursting with concern for him.

I can't put it into words. Still clutching Arnold's sleeve, Rische shook her head. She dropped her gaze and said, "Prince Arnold, I beg you to reconsider Sir Gutheil's words. Do you not believe it to be a loss for this country for a knight with such abilities and sincerity to be treated coldly by his fellows for a sin that is not his own?"

Arnold took a quiet breath and said soothingly, "I want to fix the fundamental problem. Even if I extricated Gutheil from his circumstances, it would not prevent others from going through the same thing he has."

"What?!" Rische's head snapped up. She was not expecting to hear that.

"I will prioritize creating an environment where people are evaluated fairly based on their efforts. And not just in my Imperial Guard—the knight order as a whole should change to reflect this."

Rishe's heart warmed at the thought.

Arnold smiled down at her wryly. "It's the sort of thing *you* would come up with, usually."

"Th-that's not—I mean, yes, I agree that the whole evaluation system should be restructured, but still!"

Rishe had indeed been thinking the same thing, but she'd assumed it would be something she'd have to convince Arnold of, like she had in the past.

Does that mean the things I've said to him are slowly starting to change the way he thinks? Is Sir Gutheil being refused a place in Prince Arnold's Imperial Guard really a change from my past lives? Rishe felt equal parts happiness and apprehension at the thought.

Next to her, Arnold muttered in irritation, "That said, the knight order is under the emperor's dominion. The only unit I can directly affect is my Imperial Guard."

"Your father."

"It won't happen right away, but just wait." Arnold studied Rishe with a smile. The expression was dark, enchanting, and terrifying. "I'll make it happen."

His bloodlust sent a chill crawling up Rishe's spine. It was almost the same as the indescribable terror she'd felt when his father had spotted them.

"The rain's stopped just as you said it would."

"Prince Arnold..."

"Let's get back. If we're out too late, you won't get any sleep, will you?"

Arnold stood and offered his hand to Rishe. She hesitated for a second before taking it, hoping he hadn't noticed.

The fundamental course of events hasn't changed. Prince Arnold still plans to go through with it. Rishe drew this devastating conclusion, careful not to show her emotions on her face. *He plans to kill his father and usurp the throne.*

Just after sunset that day, a young man walked through Galkhein's capital. He wore a robe with a low hood that covered his face, yet he couldn't help the way his eyes darted about, wary of anyone who might recognize him.

I can't believe I'm being forced to sneak around like this, the young man thought, descending a staircase into an underground bar. *What else can I do, though? I can't have my plans found out.*

His footsteps reverberated against the stone. Arriving at a door, he pulled the hood even lower to hide any trace of his blond hair.

The young man, Dietrich, slowly pushed the door open.

Chapter 5

“THANK YOU, RISHE! If we use this, it will take so much less time to clean up after a show! Preparing will be a lot easier too.”

Sylvia’s eyes shimmered as she stood on the theater stage. With no audience, her voice boomed through the big, empty space. Meanwhile, her troupe was hard at work preparing for the performances that had been delayed by her sudden illness. The entire group was present as they rehearsed and considered how they could improve the delayed show even more. Rishe, who had been invited to the theater, stood atop the stage—where the troupe was having their strategy meeting—and unveiled her concoction to everyone there.

The diva scooped up the alchemically created petals in both hands. When Rishe had explained that they could also be used to represent snow and that the substance would disappear naturally over time, the opera troupe had been thrilled.

“L-Lady Rishe, um, may I ask a question?”

“Go right ahead!”

“Th-thank you. Then, uh, is it possible to color these petals?”

“Yes! The colorant will change the chemical makeup of the substance, however, so you’d need to experiment to get the quantities right. The more pressing issue is that the colorant won’t evaporate with the rest of the substance, so—”

“Lady Rishe, how would you make a lot of this at once?”

“It becomes heavy when you’re mixing it, so you’d want to make sure it isn’t uneven in places. It requires more strength than you’d think!”

Everyone had questions and suggestions, and Rishe answered each one. It was an enjoyable, stimulating conversation for Rishe; the troupe brought up a number of things that she wouldn’t have considered from her perspective as an

alchemist.

The members of the troupe, however, were having a difficult time interacting with her.

“L-Lady Rishe. Er, may I ask another question?”

Though they were interested in the artificial petals, they were having a hard time asking their questions. But it wasn’t due to Rishe...

It is a bit hard to ignore, isn’t it? Rishe scanned the front-row seats, eyes lingering on the man in the middle. He sat there in a relaxed pose, chin resting in his hand. Even just glancing down at him from the stage, Rishe found him breathtakingly beautiful. So much so that just about anyone would believe that he was one of the theater’s star actors.

Of course, he *wasn’t* an actor. *Why is the crown prince sitting in on a production meeting for an opera, anyway?!* Arnold was watching Rishe’s discussion with the opera troupe without the slightest bit of interest in it. *I didn’t think he’d really come with me.*

They’d discussed this arrangement after leaving the gazebo the day before, on their way back to the detached palace after retrieving their fallen lanterns.

“Prince Arnold, I’d like to present Sylvia and her opera troupe with those artificial petals I was developing earlier.”

“...Right.”

“They’ll be restarting their performances soon, and it would be difficult to summon Sylvia alone to the castle and have her pass along all the information herself. But we can’t very well invite the whole troupe here, what with—”

What Rishe hesitated to say was related to Arnold’s father. Since they’d just run into him, it was possible that he was paying close attention to them now. And if Arnold was concerned about a spy infiltrating the palace, his father surely suspected the same thing. It wouldn’t surprise her if they both drew the same conclusions from the information available to them. As such, Rishe felt it was

better for her not to invite too many people to the palace.

Arnold picked up on what she left unsaid right away. *"You want to go to the theater yourself."*

"If you wouldn't mind, Your Highness. I'd like to visit in an unofficial capacity."

"I told you I would grant as many of your requests as I'm able."

Rishe had smiled warmly and thanked him.

"Sooner would be better than later, right? I'll set it up for tomorrow morning. Be ready."

"Hmm?"

What does he mean by "set it up"? she'd wondered.

"Er, I'll be fine. I'll just slip out and come back right away, so there's no need to arrange for any sort of guard..."

"I won't be sending guards with you. You'd stand out with a group of people."

"R-right. Then when you say 'set it up'...?"

"I mean I'll be accompanying you."

Rishe had balked in response.

"We can just take your former fiancé out with us on my afternoon work. Your business won't take longer than one day, right? It's fine."

"W-wait a second! I can't allow you to accompany me when you're so incredibly busy, Your Highness!"

"What are you talking about?" Arnold had held both of their extinguished lanterns in one hand and extended the other to escort Rishe. Without looking at her, he'd said, *"I told you I'd come with you whenever you went into town, didn't I?"*

You certainly did, but still!

She'd never thought Arnold would go so far as to rearrange his work schedule

just to accompany her on some business that he had no interest in whatsoever. Yet Arnold had donned his incognito garments and accompanied Rische, who was similarly disguised, to the theater the next day. To the opera troupe's utter shock, of course.

It's only natural they'd be nervous. Rische snuck a glance at the troupe. There was actually one more reason she wanted to come to this theater aside from the petal concoction. Even so, she wasn't sure she would be able to investigate that matter anymore at this point. Rische sighed.

"Prince Arnold." Having finished her explanation of her alchemical creation for the time being, Rische hopped down from the stage. At this height, she could land soundlessly, but ordinary noblewomen didn't have that skill, so she made sure there was a noise upon impact. "I apologize for taking up your time. I'd like to give them a practical demonstration, so if you could wait just a bit longer."

"It's fine. You don't need to hurry, so just do whatever will satisfy you."

Right then, Oliver arrived. He'd come along so that Arnold could transition immediately to his afternoon work once they left the theater. "I've finished adjusting your schedule, Your Highness. We can rendezvous here."

"Understood."

Rendezvous? Does he mean with Prince Dietrich?

"I have one other matter to discuss with you, if you don't mind. Could we move somewhere more private for a moment?"

Arnold stood, very obviously annoyed.

"See you, Prince Arnold."

When Rische waved at him, Arnold stared at her for a few seconds before wrapping an arm around her back for some reason. He brought his lips up to her ear like he was about to kiss it and whispered, "Rische..."

"Bwagh!" Rische made a strange noise at the ticklish sensation, prompting a low chuckle from Arnold.

Wh-wh-wh-wh-what?!

The words he whispered into her ear were yet another shock: “I’m summoning Gutheil. He’ll be accompanying us in the afternoon, just so you’re aware.”

“Huh?”

Had Arnold not rejected Gutheil? Rishe gulped as Arnold pulled away, smiling fondly at her.

“I’ll be right back.”

“Yes... See you...” Rishe watched Arnold leave the audience seating, feeling discombobulated.

Why? Does Prince Arnold intend to make Sir Gutheil his retainer like in all my past lives? She had no idea why he would have such a sudden change of heart.

An impact to her back interrupted her musings. “I can’t *believe* you, Rishe!”

“Ack! Th-that scared me!”

Sylvia had completely taken Rishe by surprise with a hug from behind.



“Oh my gosh, what *was* that?! Did the crown prince just kiss your ear?! Do you two kiss to say goodbye to each other?!”

“Wha—?! O-of course not! That is *not* what he was doing!”

Suddenly, Rishe became very aware of the fact that not just Oliver and Sylvia but the entire troupe onstage may well have seen the exchange with Arnold.

No, it was because we're in public that he played it off like it was a lovers' exchange, since he didn't want anyone else to hear, right?! Th-that's it, I'm sure of it!

“Hee hee hee. You are *adorable*, you know that? Your face is red as a beet! I can't believe you were so nervous about the kiss at your wedding when you're smooching His Highness like that every day!”

“I-I am not! Really, I'm...!” Rishe tried to protest as Sylvia poked her bright-red cheeks. The embarrassment was becoming so intense, she was afraid her jellied legs would fail her.

The rest of the opera troupe watched with amusement as Sylvia toyed with Rishe. Sylvia kept her voice quiet so they wouldn't hear as she studied Rishe with her bewitching purple eyes.

“You're not kissing him? Really?”

“I-I'm not...”

“You haven't kissed once?”

Rishe started, the scene in the chapel flashing through her mind, and Sylvia's sharp eyes didn't miss her agitation. Rishe hung her head as the diva poked her cheeks once more. “J-just once...”

“I knew it!”

Sylvia embraced her jubilantly, and Rishe covered her face with her hands, completely overwhelmed. Her thoughts were spinning as she hid her reddening cheeks.

I-It was just once, right?! Prince Arnold gave me an antidote mouth-to-mouth once, so that's two... No, it's not! That was saving my life! The more she thought, the more possibilities ran through her mind. *When he gave me the ring, he kissed the back of my hand. Does that count? I've kissed the back of his hand too... And last night, he kissed my hair and ear so many times!*

"Oho?" Sylvia grinned as Rishe's face heated up even more. She raised her hand high in the air. "Chief! Mind if I take a break? Seems like Rishe needs one too!"

"Of course! I apologize for being so inconsiderate, Lady Rishe."

"Don't be silly!"

Rishe and Sylvia sat in the last row of the audience, far from the stage.

"Ah ha ha! Sorry, sorry! You were so cute. I teased you too much, didn't I?"

"L-Let's not talk about me!" Though she was eager to change the subject, she was also genuinely curious, so she said, "I want to hear about *you*, Sylvia. Like with Sir Gutheil." Rishe recalled the conversation she'd been privy to the night before. "Have you made any progress since we last spoke?"

"Hee hee, me? I sure have, thanks to you."

"You have?!"

It had only been a few days since then, so what sort of progress was she making?

Sylvia put her arms on the seat in front of her and rested her head there. She peered at Rishe from beneath her lashes. "Not in that way... Oh, but I should report on that as well, shouldn't I? On our date the day before yesterday, I tried to kiss him."

On their first date?! The day before yesterday would have been the day Sylvia visited the palace. In other words, the day Sylvia reunited with Gutheil and the knight escorted her home thanks to Theodore's meddling. Sylvia didn't appear to deem this real progress, but it was miles away from what Rishe considered

typical.

The diva laughed softly as Rishe gawked at her. “He really is the sincere type. He told me we couldn’t yet.”

“Huh? Then...”

“Hee hee hee. The progress is on my singing. After all, that’s what love is for—for me, anyway.” Sylvia closed her eyes. “I was born to sing. If the goddess hadn’t given me my singing voice, I don’t think I would have survived this long... The reason I love so much is to put it all into my singing.”

“Your love for Sir Gutheil is for your singing too?”

“Yup! That’s why it’s going well. Sir Gutheil’s sincerity is new to me. I think this love will nourish my singing more than any love I’ve experienced before.”

Rishe noticed something then. *It sounds like she’s trying to convince herself of that.*

Sylvia’s singing voice was beautiful. It was soft, but clear and powerful. No matter where you sat in the audience, you could make out the lyrics clearly. But she didn’t speak like that now. Her voice was delicate, ephemeral, like the artificial snow that would melt away. Rishe felt she would miss what Sylvia said if she didn’t listen closely.

“Sylvia.” Rishe leaned forward to rest on the seat before her, just as Sylvia had. She lay her head down and faced the diva, who blinked her wide, purple eyes in surprise. “What kind of love nourishes your singing?”

“Well...”

“Tell me? I want to know.”

Sylvia hesitated for a moment, then began, “It’s not just about your heart pounding and feeling happy. It’s the kind of love where, when you think of the person, your chest aches and you want to cry...”

Rishe smiled and nodded, urging her to continue.

“You don’t want the conversation to end, so you start saying all sorts of stupid stuff just to keep it going. It makes you happy just to be able to talk to them, but it’s also scary. Weird, isn’t it?”

Rishe shook her head. “It’s not weird at all, Sylvia.”

“Thanks.” Sylvia smiled, the expression both relieved and pained. “I was surprised when he stopped me from kissing him since that’s never happened before. I mean, even if he didn’t want to go out with me, what’s the harm in a little kiss?”

“Hmm... I think that sort of thing varies from person to person...”

“Discovering things like that is another reason why love’s so fun. You experience so many firsts.” The soft smile faded from Sylvia’s face. “Have you ever had someone pick you up and tell you you’ll be okay when you were feeling low?”

Rishe blinked at the question.

“I’ve been alone for as long as I can remember, singing like my life depended on it for various opera troupes. Every time I was too sick or hurt to get back up as a kid, I would pray, ‘Please don’t leave me behind here.’”

“Oh, Sylvia...”

“Sir Gutheil picked me up and carried me the other day, right? That marked a real first for me.” Sylvia closed her eyes once more, like she was savoring a precious memory. “Sir Gutheil spoke to me the whole time until we arrived at the doctor. He encouraged me, telling me I’d be fine, that he was there with me...” She pressed her forehead to her arms. “It was the first time in my life I ever truly felt like I wasn’t alone.”

The songstress hid her face, and Rishe slowly sat up.

“I’m a performer, and I’m famous for having countless lovers, right? People assume I’d be with anyone, so they’re quick to whisper words of love to me. And I’ve always been fine with that. But Sir Gutheil... When you arranged for the

two of us to reunite, the very first thing he did was inquire about my health.”

“That really made you happy, didn’t it?”

Sylvia thought for a moment before nodding. “It did.”

Her voice shook as she buried her face against the chair in front of her. “He held his hand out in concern for my condition, not in an eagerness to touch me, and it was so warm... I laughed and told him I was used to being out alone at night, but he wouldn’t budge on taking me all the way to my door.”

She spoke reverently, like each and every memory was a precious treasure she was storing safely in a box.

“What do I do, Rische?” When she raised her head, tears like gemstones spilled from her eyes. “It hurts so much, but the feeling is so important. I’ve never felt a love like this before...”

“Sylvia, you...”

“No. That’s not it at all.” As though she was only talking to herself, she muttered, “This is the first time I’ve ever loved someone in my life...”

After she said that, her face crumpled under the weight of her emotions. Rische wrapped her arms around the songstress as she broke down crying.

“H-he said we couldn’t be together! It’s not that he doesn’t like me, but we can’t...”

Rische could say nothing in response.

“I understand that better than anyone. I’m not the sort of person who could be with a knight, so it’s only natural that we can’t be together.”

“That’s not true and you know it.” Rische spoke soothingly to her, stroking her back. “Sir Gutheil isn’t the sort of person who would reject someone for a reason like that.”

“Of course he isn’t. *I’m* the one who can’t accept being at his side! I was born to sing. All this time I thought I only lived for that, but my heart hurts so much

now that I don't even know if I can do it anymore!" Sylvia trembled like a small child. "Is being in love supposed to be this painful?"

Rishe pressed her lips into a thin line. *Why...?*

She almost felt like she could understand the pain that Sylvia described. It came with the pounding of her heart and a sadness that nearly brought her to tears.

"There's no way... There's just no way!"

Rishe spun around at the groaning of her ex-fiancé that afternoon as they accompanied Arnold during his work. They were visiting a guardroom built into the city wall.

Paging through a document, Rishe called out to the man grumbling in the corner of the room. "Is something the matter, Prince Dietrich?"

"Everything's the matter!" Dietrich shouted, pointing at Rishe with one hand and mussing up his hair with the other. "Lord Arnold is strange, of course, but you're just as strange yourself, Rishe! Ever since meeting up with me first thing in the afternoon, it's been nothing but work, work, and more work! I was hoping he would take more breaks today since you were accompanying us!"

"Hm?"

"Don't look at me like you have no idea what I'm talking about! Do you two ever rest?! Or will you keel over if you aren't working around the clock?!"

"N-no!" Rishe blurted awkwardly as Dietrich panted, shoulders heaving.

"At the sewage plant and the Merchants' Guild and now this guard station too! Not only do you constantly make suggestions, but Lord Arnold carries them out immediately as well! It almost feels as though he's doing *more* work today with you here than he did yesterday!"

I have nothing to say in my defense...

Rishe glanced at Arnold, who was discussing something with the officer in charge of the station a short distance away. They were considering the document organization method Rishe had suggested for the station a moment ago. It was a lengthy process finding records of those who had passed through the station when entering or exiting the capital, so Rishe had suggested a method she'd learned about in a large library she'd visited in one of her past lives.

It has been five hours since we started working this afternoon. Prince Dietrich has reached his limit, I'm sure.

After leaving the theater, Arnold and Rishe had enjoyed lunch in town before meeting up with Gutheil and a haggard-looking Dietrich. Rishe had intended to casually observe Arnold's work as she analyzed Gutheil's behavior. But as she'd observed, she'd inadvertently gotten caught up in the work herself.

"Sorry... It's just that every time I ask a question or make a suggestion, Prince Arnold improves on it *and* implements practical solutions on the spot. It's so much fun!"

"I can tell you're having fun by watching you! That's what's scary!"

"Ha ha ha. Prince Arnold and Lady Rishe are of a similar mind when it comes to work."

"Oh, Oliver!"

Oliver passed by the corner of the office where Rishe and Dietrich were talking. He was smiling, but his cheeks appeared slightly sunken.

"I'm sorry, Oliver. Without thinking, I made an impertinent suggestion and overcomplicated matters."

"No, if anything, I'm grateful. The lengthy document retrieval process was a problem we were planning to solve at some point, so the sooner we're able to test out this new method, the sooner we'll see results. Prince Arnold dislikes taking work home with him, so we always take care of whatever needs doing

on-site, as we are now. I'm used to it, so it's no problem at all."

"I-I can't believe this... He dislikes taking work home with him? What better time is there than later to do work that doesn't need to be done today?!"

As Dietrich trembled, Oliver smiled wryly and told him, "The most efficient way of doing something differs from person to person. If you're able to learn something from seeing the way my lord does things, Prince Dietrich, I couldn't ask for more."

Arnold glanced at them and called for his attendant. "Oliver."

"I'll be right there. Please excuse me." Oliver selected a few documents from the desk and went to Arnold's side.

Dietrich watched him go, sighing. "The master's ridiculous, but the servant's just as abnormal..."

"Prince Dietrich, please refrain from such remarks," Rishe chided her former fiancé, turning her attention to the individual standing by the door.

Just as Prince Arnold said, Sir Gutheil is accompanying us today for some reason.

The tall knight stood on guard by the door, though he did appear a little uncomfortable.

Sir Gutheil told Sylvia that he liked her, right? She thought back to how Sylvia had cried over her love for Gutheil. The knight had told her that they couldn't be together. Did he say that because of his father's crime? Or because his own future is closed off for that reason?

Rishe couldn't help being curious about the night before. There must have been a reason for his "patrol" to take him to an area no one ever visited. *Something about it rubs me the wrong way. Prince Arnold is worried about someone scheming against Galkhein and any spies that may be in their employ. Is Sir Gutheil involved?*

Right then, Rishe arrived at a conclusion. *Could it be...?* She didn't want to let

her thoughts show on her face, so she pretended to go over the documents in her hands. As she did, she caught sight of Dietrich, who was sitting in front of her.

“What is it, Prince Dietrich?”

Dietrich’s deep-emerald eyes, framed by gold lashes, were fixed firmly on Arnold.

“Lord Arnold is effectively faultless as a crown prince. He shows no indication of his own wants and needs, he slaves away unemotionally at his work, and he’s brilliant too. He’s an accomplished swordsman as well, is he not? I hear he inspires incredible morale in his knights, almost like a god of war.”

I can’t believe Prince Dietrich is complimenting someone!

Rishe was floored. She’d never heard him deliver such genuine praise for someone other than his beloved Mary in her life.

“Oh...?”

“But he’s *too* perfect.”

Rishe blinked.

“I’ve always thought that the things I do don’t even scratch the surface of my potential. And why shouldn’t I? Everything I accomplish is magnificent, as surely anyone can see! But even geniuses have their off days. It was painful and hard whenever things didn’t go my way...” Dietrich’s tone was as genuine as it could possibly get. “But I suppose it’s a different sort of suffering to be born entirely too perfect a person, as Lord Arnold was.”

Rishe started. She never expected him to say something like that.

“Though I’m sure my suffering is worse! I, however, am a true future king. Only by experiencing trials and tribulations will I become a king worthy of—”

“May I ask what it is about Prince Arnold that gave you the impression that he’s suffering?”

“Let me finish, would you?! Well, in short...” Dietrich cleared his throat, nervous to have Rishe’s attention on him. “We were not born royalty because we wanted to be.”

Dietrich had cried about how he hadn’t been born crown prince because he wanted to be a few days earlier, but there seemed to be a different intent behind the words now.

“Selfless devotion is expected of royalty, and crown princes in particular. True, those in our position will never suffer any sort of financial discomfort, but in exchange, if we do not give everything we have to our nations, we are not so much as allowed to exist.”

Rishe had no right to say anything in response. She might have lived her life until the age of fifteen for the sake of nothing but becoming crown princess, but her position could never be compared to *true* royalty. She could only imagine how it must feel to inherit an entire country you would have to one day rule over.

“Still, each of us tries to find some small happiness as an individual, like Mary is for me.”

Rishe thought of all the royals she had met in the past. She’d known rulers who enjoyed collecting precious gems and royals who had fun drinking and making merry with their subjects. She knew a prince who delighted in seeing his country develop, a princess who loved to read, and a prince who adored his little sister.

“But, hmm... How to say this? I can’t see any of that sort of humanity in Lord Arnold. No, there is *some* amount, but...it’s strange, isn’t it? He can’t even be bothered to eat when he’s working, and he makes no time to enjoy the scenery when he’s in town. It’s like he has no interest in anything other than performing the duty laid before him. It was terribly frightening seeing it up close.”

“Why, Prince Dietrich...”

What he said next sounded more like his own idle musings than a statement

meant for Rishe. “Arnold Hein lives his life without a single thought spared for any sort of human happiness.”

Rishe’s heart stopped for a moment.

“That’s what it looks like to me, at least.”

“I...”

To Dietrich, it was likely no more than pure curiosity. After all, they were both crown princes. His position afforded him a unique perspective on Arnold’s unemotional nature. But to Rishe, Dietrich’s candid musings seemed an unexpectedly straightforward explanation of Arnold’s villainous pretenses.

“You really tend to get to the heart of things without meaning to sometimes, Prince Dietrich. Come to think of it, you once—”

“All right! Let’s ask him directly, shall we? If his way of life is as miserable as it appears, that is.”

“Huh?” Rishe was speechless as Dietrich righted his posture and puffed out his chest.

“Yes, I think I will! I must reach out even to those who are said to be cold and heartless. That overwhelming sense of righteousness only befits the future ruler of Hermity, after all!”

“Ack! Um, wait, Prince Dietrich!” Rishe grabbed Dietrich’s arm to stop him. Arnold shot them a dubious look from the other side of the room, so Rishe mouthed an apology at him. He was working right now, so they couldn’t bother him.

“What?! Why did you stop me, Rishe?!”

Arnold regarded them with a slight frown, but he swiftly resumed giving directions to Oliver. As she thought, they’d distracted him—which Rishe felt guilty about.

“You can speak with him later. This really isn’t the place to get into it.”

“Hmm. Well, I see your point.” Dietrich agreed with her—quicker than was normal for him—and turned his attention back to Arnold. “The similarities really are astounding.”

“Y-you don’t mean between you and Prince Arnold, do you?”

“I mean between him and *you*, Rishe! You’ve lived for nothing other than becoming crown princess since you were little, haven’t you? Always had this look on your face like that was the whole reason you were alive.”

Rishe was taken aback by his observations yet again.

“You discarded any joy of your own and strove to be the perfect public figure. You never played or demanded sweets as a reward for studying or held so much as a birthday party! I could never understand it! Isn’t it normal to want to play instead of study?!”

“Well...”

“You never made a peep about any of that! It scared me! If you had to hold yourself back so much, and all that awaited you at the end of it was becoming crown princess, I thought...you’d be happier being something else.” There was an uncharacteristic furrow to his brow. “Do you think you can be happy as Arnold Hein’s empress?”

“About that...”

Dietrich was Rishe’s former fiancé and someone she could still call a childhood friend. Ever since they were little, Rishe had always been worried about Dietrich, so this was the first time he’d ever regarded *her* with such worry. The thought tickled Rishe, and she smiled wryly at him.

“I’ve had several people worry about whether I’ll be happy in this marriage, but happiness isn’t something that’s given to you—it’s something you achieve yourself.” She turned to look at the knights standing on either side of the door. “No matter what fate may befall me due to becoming Prince Arnold’s wife, I’m confident that when I’m on my deathbed, I’ll be able to say I lived a happy life.”

She turned back to Dietrich and smiled. “Didn’t I tell you I’d prove to you how wonderful Prince Arnold is as a husband?”

“You certainly did.”

Beaming, Rishe told Dietrich, “I can’t imagine a bride who expects she’ll be unhappy would say something like that, now would she?”

“Huh.” Dietrich lapsed into thought for a while until he finally spoke up again. “Hmm? No, wait a moment, Rishe! It’s true that over the last few days I’ve come to understand well just how exceptional Lord Arnold is as a crown prince! But I haven’t seen a shred of evidence that he is, as you claim him to be, a wonderful husband!”

“Wha...? W-wait...”

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha! What an oversight, Rishe! You know what this means, don’t you? You haven’t yet proven a thing to me! These last few days, all I’ve done is watch him work without rest and quiver in fear of his glowering at a party!”

“Seriously, what did you even come to this country for?!”

Dietrich cleared his throat officiously. “That said, he *did* find the time to bring his fiancée to the opera amid that hellish workload of his. That’s shocking enough, I suppose... When you’ve done all this work in a day, you just want to go home and do nothing afterward, right? Where did he even find the time with how much work he has to do?”

Now that she thought about it, they *had* run into Dietrich at the opera house back when Sylvia had collapsed. Had Oliver told him what they were doing there?

Hmm? Something occurred to Rishe then. *Come to think of it, what was His Highness doing there?*

“Say, uh, Rishe.” Dietrich hung his head, hemming and hawing. “I came to this country...”

“Yes?”

“No, it’s nothing! Say, do you think I should go help, as a fellow crown prince? I bet I could shock Lord Arnold with my illustrious Hermit education!”

“D-don’t shock him *too* much!” Rishe was a bit worried about the princes, but she decided to hang back. She gave Arnold a little wave and a signal with her eyes. When he noticed Dietrich striding toward him, he grimaced.

I’m sorry, Prince Arnold. Please handle him for me, would you?

After apologizing to Arnold in her heart, Rishe turned to the door the two knights were guarding. She scrutinized the towering Gutheil and softly called, “Sir Gutheil?”

“Lady Rishe...I sincerely apologize for last night.”

“Please, think nothing of it. I should apologize myself for interrupting a discussion about your work.”

When they’d rendezvoused with Gutheil and the other knight that afternoon, Arnold had this to say:

“My Imperial Guard are spread thin currently, what with my suspicions about intelligence operatives. I’m only making use of Gutheil temporarily when I’m out working in town since I don’t otherwise have the personnel to spare.”

Of course, these words were only a pretense, and Arnold must have been aware that Rishe had realized that.

Did Prince Arnold figure I’d want to speak with Sir Gutheil about Sylvia’s broken heart? No, that couldn’t possibly be...

Arnold was kind, but he didn’t mix public and private matters. He wasn’t just indulging Rishe; there was some other reason for the way he was making use of his personnel. Rishe wasn’t the type to pester Gutheil about his personal affairs when he was on the clock anyway, no matter how much she wanted to for Sylvia’s sake.

I can’t imagine Sir Gutheil would open up about it in a place like this. And it’s

not as if it's only the two of us present, she thought, eyeing the other knight.

Ironically, Gutheil himself was the one to interrupt her musings. "If I may... how is Lady Sylvia doing?"

Rishe stared at him in surprise for a moment before considering her response. "She was...*acting* well enough."

Gutheil knit his brows, picking up on the obvious implication of Rishe's words.

Before she could stop herself, Rishe continued, "Sir Gutheil, is there anything I could do to help? As long as it's not too presumptuous to ask, of course."

"I appreciate the offer."

Up to this point, it wouldn't have been obvious to anyone listening in that they were talking about romance, but Gutheil made that clear with his next words.

"I love Lady Sylvia."

Rishe was shocked that such words left his mouth with no hesitation. The knight on the other side of the door turned toward Gutheil as well, his scarlet eyes seeming to question if he'd really heard what he thought he'd heard.

Gutheil went right on, "I find her so lovely and sweet. I could never allow anyone to darken her smile, myself included."

"Oh, Sir Gutheil..."

"I told Lady Sylvia about my father's crime immediately. His espionage was a betrayal of Galkhein, and it could have led to the deaths of so many in the war. His sin was so great that not only must I bear that weight as his son, but whomever I might marry and even our children would bear it as well."

Gutheil smiled sadly. He suffered more than anyone for his father's crimes. He knew the pain he'd be inflicting on his chosen partner, the cold treatment they would receive. It gave his words a heavy weight.

"The pain on Lady Sylvia's face when I told her that... I suspect she might be a

war orphan herself.”

“Goodness...”

“I know Lady Sylvia is not the type to reject me for such a reason. But having me by her side may open the wounds in her heart. I may cause her even more suffering in the future. I simply cannot allow myself to cause her any pain.”

Rishe’s mouth tightened. She didn’t know what to say in a situation like this, and she was aware that she would be overstepping, whatever she *did* say.

Still, she told Gutheil, “Sylvia told me ‘You never know which day might be your last.’”

That alone caused Gutheil to grimace. Each tiny change in his expression showed just how much he truly cared for Sylvia.

So Rishe continued, “I think she’s exactly right. One’s future happiness is important, surely, but...” She recalled the way Sylvia had trembled as the tears rolled down her cheeks. “Is happiness you can grant at this very moment not just as important?”

“I...” Gutheil started before falling silent.

“I’m sorry. I know this is just as hard for you.”

“No, not at all...”

Any further meddling would just cause trouble. When someone made a decision about their own life, it was hardly an outsider’s place to interfere. Hence, Rishe moved on to her next objective.

“I think I’ll go get some fresh air atop the wall. Could I ask you to accompany me, Sir Knight?”

“Certainly, my lady.”

Gutheil hung his head, deep in consideration. Rishe said nothing more to him, leaving the room with the other knight.

The guard station was on the inside of the wall. A staircase led up to the top

of the ramparts surrounding the city.

Rishe sighed, enjoying the warm summer breeze as the sun set in the distance. From where she stood, she could relish the view over the streets of Galkhein's capital. She'd come here once with Arnold, but the location was off-limits to the normal citizenry.

"I have a question," she said to the knight accompanying her.

He stood at attention. "Anything for you, Lady Rishe."

"We're alone up here, so you can drop the knight act," she told the red-eyed knight, with more than a little exasperation. "I know it's you, Raul."

"Ha ha!" Raul laughed, his voice snapping back into its normal register. "You're really something! I completely changed my face today and acted like a totally different person, and you could still tell?"

"You were too calm around Prince Arnold for a knight filling a temporary position. You should have acted more afraid of him. Put that together with those red eyes of yours and, well...it was easy enough."

"I see, I see. Both good points. I'll remember that next time!"

Why was he so happy about his disguise being seen through? Slightly fed up with the man, Rishe asked him, "Hypothetically speaking, if you were an enemy of Galkhein and you needed to investigate it for some reason, how would you sneak in?"

"Trade secrets, my dear...is what I would like to say, but I suppose I can't keep my savior in the dark, now can I? At the very least, I can tell you that I wouldn't do what I'm doing now and pretend I was one of Galkhein's knights all along."

From what Rishe knew, Raul was here disguising himself as a knight simply because his interests aligned with Arnold's. The prince wanted him to investigate whether an intelligence operative had infiltrated Galkhein's palace. Raul was likely mingling with the knights with Arnold's permission. The walls of the palace were sturdy and should have prevented the intrusion of anything

heavier than a kitten.

“The realistic plan would be to devote several years to actually joining the knight corps.”

“Not to pretend to be a knight but to enter as one officially?”

“Indeed. After all, Galkhein’s policy is that anyone with some amount of skill can become a knight, regardless of background. This is one of Galkhein’s few vulnerabilities as an otherwise nigh-invincible major power.” Raul stuck his index finger in the air, waving it about playfully as he continued. “Though I’m sure His Majesty is well aware of that little flaw in their defenses. For all Galkhein claims to value skill above all else, the upper echelons of the knight corps are all still nobles, who have a very low chance of being spies from other countries.”

Sir Gutheil’s father broke that rule. That’s why he was punished so harshly—to set an example.

“That’s why infiltrating as a knight isn’t really worth it. The only exception would be joining your Prince Arnold’s Imperial Guard, since even a commoner can do that. So if I were a spy attempting to pose as a knight, I would do whatever I could to become one of your dear husband’s Imperial Guards.”

“...”

“Still, you’d need to know a fair amount about His Highness to use the fact that he’ll let those of any background serve in his Guard. As such, me being a foreign spy intent on infiltrating Galkhein in this scenario, I would *not* choose this method. There are other ways to obtain information from high-ranking officials and knights.”

Up to this point, Raul’s thinking matched Rishe’s knowledge of him from her fifth life.

“And what other methods are those?”

“Hmm? Well...” Raul had been rather forthcoming until now, but he grimaced

at this question. “I shudder at the thought of your husband’s quiet fury were I to discuss such a thing with you.”

Rishe cocked her head. “Has Prince Arnold forbidden you to speak on the matter?”

“No, no, no. It’s nothing like that.”

Rishe just tilted her head further. She did have a vague idea of what he might mean by “other ways.” In her fifth life, there were secrets Raul never spoke of with her. Given how he was acting now, she concluded he was likely alluding to the same methods he’d kept from her in her fifth life.

In that case...

Rishe took a breath and asked him something else she’d been wondering about. “Say, Raul, are there any situations in which you don’t notice a passerby approaching?”

“Hmm. Maybe when there’s a lovely lady nearby I’d really like to get close to? You, for instance.”

“Raul...”

“Ha ha ha, only kidding! It’s not just ladies. If there are a lot of individuals I’m not particularly interested in around me, I might be late in noticing if one of them approaches. I wouldn’t fail to notice completely, though, so maybe that doesn’t answer your question.”

I figured he might say something like that.

She thought back to when Kyle and Michel had been visiting Galkhein. Rishe had gotten help from Theodore in infiltrating the knight cadets’ training disguised as a man. She’d kept it a secret from Arnold, but he’d discovered her immediately anyway. After that, Theodore had snuck up on her in one of the castle hallways. She’d been thinking about something at the time, and people were always passing through the halls, so she hadn’t had her guard up at all. But it wasn’t as if she’d overlooked Theodore’s presence entirely. It was the fact

that he'd grabbed her arm that caught her by surprise.

Raul taught me how to sense other people's presences and conceal my own. I learned enough that I was able to put the knowledge to good use in my sixth life; I should be able to pick up on anyone without that kind of training if they're nearby.

But that meant it was possible to surprise her if someone *did* have that kind of training. Particularly when she had her guard down. On her first night in Galkhein, it had taken her a moment to notice Arnold standing behind her when she was enjoying the view from her balcony.

I only noticed him then because he was giving off a threatening air to see if I'd sense him or not. If he'd kept his presence concealed, he might have been able to get close enough to touch me without my sensing him.

Her two questions for Raul only solidified the theory forming in her mind.

The more I consider the matter, the more evidence I find to back up my hunch. The strange feeling she'd gotten speaking to Dietrich earlier was the clincher.

"Whoops, your guardian is here."

Rishe started when she heard a door open. An individual appeared on the twilit rampart. Rishe turned to face him and called his name. "Prince Arnold..."

His jacket flapped in the breeze. Rishe's coral-colored hair danced in the wind as well. She paid it no mind as she asked him, "You had your suspicions about who the spy might be from the very beginning, didn't you?"

"..."

"No... Rather, it was only because of your suspicions that we interacted with the individual as much as we did."

Arnold squinted into the receding daylight. "You don't need to know."

Rishe's heart ached at the distance those words put between them. Not because of rejection but because Arnold had only said them out of consideration for her.

“Your Highness, I—”

“However.” Arnold lowered his gaze and took a short breath. “I won’t stop you from taking action or making a request that’s in my power to grant.”

Joy and relief bloomed in Rische’s heart. Arnold had told her there were things she didn’t need to know in the past as well, but this situation was clearly different.

Rische made her heartfelt plea: “Please allow me to help you, Prince Arnold. There are things I would like to do to bring this incident to a close.”

“What are you talking about?” Arnold sighed in exasperation. “It will be *me* helping *you* do whatever it is you want to do, won’t it?”

Raul laughed as Rische jumped in surprise. “Ha ha! Incredible! To have Crown Prince Arnold Hein of all people wrapped around your little finger!”

“Ugh... I apologize for my selfishness. Really, I do!”

Raul shrugged under Arnold’s quiet glare as Rische apologized sincerely. When she was finished, she told Raul and Arnold everything she wanted to say.

That night, an individual was summoned to a room in the detached palace. In the room, five chairs were placed in a circle. At the head of the arrangement sat Arnold, with Rische beside him. They glanced at the individual seated in front of them.

“I’m aware how disrespectful it may seem to question royalty, but I simply must ask...” Their guest appeared extremely uncomfortable as he asked them, “Why exactly have you invited someone like me to your detached palace, Your Highnesses?”

Arnold sat, chin in hand, ignoring the knight’s question. Instead, he signaled Rische with his sidelong glance. She nodded and spoke in his place.

“I apologize for the abrupt invitation, Sir Gutheil. We have something very

important to discuss with you, so we thought we'd do it here due to the late hour."

"Yes, I understand you wish to avoid prying eyes. But is there truly some way I can be of assistance to you?"

He must have been confused, but his chivalrous spirit still amply infused his words. Rishe went on, appreciative of Gutheil's consideration.

"What I'm about to tell you may cause you pain, Sir Gutheil."

"What is it? No, no matter what it may be, I wish only to serve you."

Rishe held Gutheil's gaze and told him, "There's a possibility a spy has infiltrated Galkhein."

Gutheil gasped and clenched his fists.

"Prince Arnold realized this sooner than anyone else, so he's been gathering information for some time now. His conclusion is—"

"Do you suspect me of being a spy, Your Highness?" Gutheil's voice was steady, but his face had gone deathly pale. Confusion, panic, and resignation were all plain on his face. "I am aware that I have done nothing to earn your trust, but I swear it on my pride... Even if no one believes it to be so, I have not betrayed my country!"

"Prince Arnold knows you're innocent," Rishe told him after a pause. What she could not say, however, was for him to be at ease. "The person we suspect is—"

A knock came at the door. Raul, who was disguised as the knight standing guard outside, had been informed that there was no need to wait for a response. He opened the door, and their other guest stepped inside.

Gutheil gasped when he saw who it was. She met his gaze and smiled somewhat sadly. Then she met Arnold and Rishe's gazes with clear eyes and named herself.

"Sylvia Hollingworth. I'm delighted that you invited me here tonight."

Chapter 6

GUTHEIL SHOT TO HIS FEET like he was spring-loaded. All eyes—which had a moment ago been on Sylvia—swiveled to him instead. Gutheil stared at the diva, opened his mouth to say something, and then shook his head in great irritation and rounded on Rishe and Arnold instead.

“Your Highness, Lady Rishe—is it at all possible that I might be excused?” Gutheil’s tone was filled with obvious concern for Sylvia. “Anything that you may ask of me, I swear to answer truthfully. But I beg of you, for Lady Sylvia’s sake, please...”

“Sir Gutheil,” Sylvia said clearly. “I requested your presence myself when I was summoned.”

“Lady Sylvia...” Gutheil clenched his fists once more and slowly sat back down.

Raul directed Sylvia to the chair closest to the door, next to Gutheil. Rishe waited for her to sit before turning to Arnold.

“Go ahead and say whatever it is you want to say for now,” Arnold told her. “I’m sure we have plenty of time until he arrives.”

“Right.” She nodded, though it took some courage for her to begin. Yet she knew Sylvia was prepared for what she had to say.

The songstress turned her alluring purple eyes on Rishe, her determination clear. “Please begin, Lady Rishe.”

Her heart stung from Sylvia’s courteous tone, but she had to say her piece. Rishe, at least, spoke as she always had with Sylvia. “I first had my suspicions when you visited the palace, Sylvia.” Her words emerged slowly and deliberately as she thought back to the day. “The night before, you were ill enough to collapse on stage, yet you’d recovered completely by morning.”

“Thanks to your first aid and Sir Gutheil taking me to the doctor. I felt much better after a good night’s sleep.”

“I didn’t think much of it then, since I’m aware that such things can indeed happen... But illness is not often the cause of such a fainting spell. At least not one that it’s possible to recover from so quickly.”

Gutheil was watching Sylvia with concern through this entire exchange. Sylvia, on the other hand, had not looked his way once since addressing him earlier.

“Such things are usually caused not by an illness originating within the body but by something external entering it. A poison or sleeping drug, for instance. Once the substance has been purged by the body, recovery comes fairly quickly. I can attest to that myself.”

Arnold’s eyebrows scrunched together. Rishe had been referencing her poisoning in the Holy Kingdom of Domana. Perhaps the same incident had crossed his mind.

“At that point, I tucked the possibility that you had been drugged in the corner of my mind.”

“A reasonable enough conclusion. I’ve almost been drugged by overly passionate fans or rival performers on occasion.”

“A fan would likely avoid the sort of timing that would lead to the show getting canceled. And a rival would know that if the prima donna collapsed just before or during the show, it would only be called off for the night.” Someone aiming for her role would have enacted their scheme earlier. “And, though I don’t wish to even consider such a thing...they would likely choose a poison with a longer recovery time.”

In truth, the opera planned to resume after only a few days off, with Sylvia still playing the lead. If the culprit was after her role, they had achieved nothing from their crime.

“I was still suspicious, so I observed the members of your troupe when I went to the theater to tell you about my artificial petals. I couldn’t determine at the time whether anyone there had drugged you, but...I learned something else.”

Rishe stared Sylvia in the eye and said, “You can conceal your presence, can’t you, Sylvia?”

Sylvia lowered her head, saying nothing in response.

Instead, Gutheil spoke up. “I apologize for interrupting, but what do you mean by that?”

“You yourself noticed Rishe’s capabilities, did you not?” Arnold said to the knight. “When you approached the gazebo last night, I wasn’t the only one to sense your presence. Rishe did as well, even though we couldn’t possibly have heard your footsteps amid the rainfall.”

Gutheil swallowed, then murmured, “It wasn’t just my imagination, then. I did feel two pairs of eyes on me in the darkness.”

He’s quite skilled as well. It’s hard to pick up on things like that when it’s raining.

Arnold leaned back in his chair, continuing unhurriedly in Rishe’s place, “Even dozing in a carriage, she’ll wake up if I so much as reach for her. So long as you’re not trying to hide from Rishe, she will most likely notice you. Hence her suspicion.”

Rishe had told Arnold everything beforehand. She nodded and explained to Gutheil, “There was a moment at the theater today when I was unaware of Sylvia’s presence. I couldn’t sense her until she embraced me from behind.” Because Sylvia was hiding her presence, Rishe could only assume.

The diva probably hadn’t meant anything by it. She may have even done it unconsciously, out of a simple desire to surprise Rishe. But when combined with the other things Rishe was already considering, even Sylvia’s harmless prank became unavoidably suspicious.

Her head still bowed, Sylvia said, “It’s exactly as you say, Lady Rishe.”

Gutheil spoke up to defend her. “B-but...surely that’s not enough to suspect Lady Sylvia!”

“Sir Gutheil, it’s...” Rishe hesitated to continue in front of the knight.

Seeing right through her hesitation, Sylvia smiled sadly. “Please continue, Lady Rishe...or would you prefer if I said the rest?”

“It’s all right, Sylvia.” Rishe wanted to avoid making the songstress say it herself above all else, so she pressed on. “There are several different ways to obtain intelligence. For instance, infiltrating the target location and obtaining it yourself.”

Raul’s disguises were a great example. In Galkhein, however, only members of the nobility could become high-ranking government officials and knights. Just as Raul had explained up on the town ramparts, it would be difficult to make use of this method in Galkhein.

“There’s also the option of obtaining the intelligence from someone who already has it. Even if you can’t become a noble of Galkhein, you can befriend one. This method—”

“Often employs female operatives,” Arnold finished for her. He was probably being considerate in his roundabout way, not wanting Rishe to have to utter it herself. Raul had avoided discussing the same thing up on the town walls. She recalled the matter being kept from her in her fifth life as well.

Gutheil furrowed his brow and closed his mouth, considering this. Sylvia’s head was bowed, her expression unreadable. But Rishe knew that she’d wanted Gutheil to be here for this part of the conversation.

“Plenty of people have heard the rumors of the songstress Sylvia and her many lovers.” She had laughed those rumors off, saying it was all for the sake of her singing, but what if there was another reason? For instance, what if she used her reputation as a free-spirited beauty to get close to important figures in various countries to obtain intelligence? “You suspected her from the start, right, Prince Arnold? That’s why you made time in your busy schedule to take me to the opera that night.”

As always, the motivations behind Arnold’s actions were surprisingly complex.

The day Rishe and Arnold met, he had been present in Hermitry not for simple diplomatic relations but because he was investigating the possibility of a malicious entity targeting Galkhein. Since he had long suspected espionage, he was naturally wary of the opera troupe coming to Galkhein. He likely had his eye on Sylvia herself at that point.

Rishe thought back to the discussion they'd had immediately after taking their seats at the theater.

"I didn't know Sylvia was the star of tonight's show. It's been so long since I've heard her sing! I'm really looking forward to this."

"You've seen the leading lady perform before?"

Arnold had paused thoughtfully after Rishe mentioned Sylvia's name. Perhaps he was reacting to Rishe's ignorant praise of the very individual he suspected of espionage.

"I heard what happened the next day from Oliver, who was informed by Theodore." Arnold was talking about the day Sylvia had come to thank Rishe. "There aren't many people who would visit a foreign country's palace without even making an appointment. It's particularly strange for a member of a renowned opera troupe to be unaware of such etiquette. It's hard to imagine she had any motivation *other* than using the pretext of her rescue to get close to an important individual in this country."

Gutheil pressed a hand to his forehead and took a deep breath. "There *was* something I found strange when I was escorting Lady Sylvia home under Prince Theodore's orders. I could sense someone observing her from afar."

"Huh?" Sylvia raised her head and peeked up at Gutheil.

Their eyes finally having met, Gutheil said apologetically, "It wasn't an unknown entity but a Galkhein knight watching you. I couldn't decide whether to tell you or not, since I didn't want to scare you, so I merely protected you without speaking up. I still feel terrible about it."

“That’s why you took me all the way back to my room?”

“Of course,” Gutheil said firmly. “At the time, it was my duty to see you home safely without causing you any undue stress.”

Tears welled up in Sylvia’s eyes. She hurriedly hung her head to hide them. “It...it surprised me to hear you say something like that...but I’m sorry.” Sylvia was trying to smile, but it was obvious to anyone that her voice was trembling. “You understand now, don’t you? I’m a spy who was ordered to infiltrate Galkhein! That’s the only reason I—”

“Sylvia.” Rishe called her name to prevent her from saying something she didn’t mean. “I’m sure Sir Gutheil understands that that’s *not* the reason you got close to him.”

“What...?”

Rishe glanced at Gutheil, who nodded, a serious expression on his face. “It’s just as she says, Lady Sylvia. I confided in you about my father on the second day we were able to meet. Do you remember?”

“I haven’t forgotten. Not a single thing about that day.”

“It should have been amply clear to you, then, that the people of this country do not trust me. That I possess no intelligence worth stealing. And still, you had eyes only for me...”

Sylvia quivered, her expression like that of a lost child. Even Rishe, who was “naive in the ways of love” according to Theodore, could easily tell that Sylvia’s feelings were real. It was Sylvia herself who had requested Gutheil be present at this gathering, even though she knew her crimes were likely to come to light. Moreover, that was why Gutheil had asked that he be allowed to leave.

“Please tell us, Sylvia,” Rishe said softly. “You might have been a spy, yes, but that’s not the full story anymore, is it?”

“I beg your pardon...?”

“You’re not working for the entity ordering you to gather intelligence

anymore. You're trying to quit being a spy and run away, aren't you?"

Sylvia gasped.

"Otherwise, I can't understand the reason you collapsed on stage. Although that's with the assumption that your illness was caused by a drug or poison." As long as that assumption was correct, it paved the way for several other conclusions. "It's very dangerous for a spy to try to leave their organization, is it not? I've heard the organization is basically forced to kill them to prevent any of their secrets from getting out. My guess is that you showed some indication of wanting to leave the business, and you were drugged as a warning."

"I-I...!" Sylvia was starting to panic. It was such a stark difference from her stage persona that the sight was almost painful.

"It was also convenient for your organization that you collapsed there. The knights performing security were bound to come to your aid. And they knew that if they scared you, you might change your mind and pursue a relationship with the knight who helped you, which would benefit them."

"..."

"Even better, the knights providing security that day were not just any ordinary knights—they were Prince Arnold's Imperial Guard, there to escort the two of us for our visit."

Their visit to the theater hadn't been concealed at all. The people Sylvia worked for would have been able to find out that they were in attendance.

If she was drugged that day, and the show was canceled, Sylvia would have realized that was a warning.

Arnold's Imperial Guard would have come to her aid. If Rishe hadn't involved herself and given instruction to those on the scene, one of the Imperial Guards would have attended to Sylvia, providing her with a connection to that individual. It was a great opportunity for her employers to obtain information on the crown prince and Galkhein's knight corps.

Prince Arnold anticipated even that. The situation that day had in fact been slightly unusual. It wasn't just Prince Arnold's Imperial Guard providing security at the theater. There were knights from other units there too.

Arnold had treated it as an initial step toward expanding his Imperial Guard. Rishe had taken that to mean that he wanted more fighting power to go up against a powerful foe in the future, but that wasn't the only reason for the extensive forces present at the theater that night.

Prince Arnold predicted that if he made a show of attending the theater, the spy would try to contact him or one of his Imperial Guards. That's why he had additional knights on security. And all of them fit his criteria of "skilled individuals who, for whatever reason, were not given an equal chance"—that is, people who had no significant intelligence.

One of those individuals was none other than Gutheil.

When I finished with my first aid, Prince Arnold arrived with Sir Gutheil—not one of his Imperial Guards. I was shocked that he had his future retainer with him. Now she could understand Arnold's reasoning. He had to make sure whoever escorted Sylvia and became her "savior" was not one of his Imperial Guard. That's why he brought Sir Gutheil, someone who was never given any important work to do as a knight.

All this happened because the theater and the troupe were informed that Rishe and Arnold would be in attendance. *Prince Arnold has never liked bringing attention to himself in public venues. I should have questioned why we didn't attend the show incognito that night. Not only did we attract the attention of every noble in attendance, but he also had to mobilize his Imperial Guard to provide security. It would have been more like him to attend in secret.*

Rishe glanced over at Arnold, only now considering all these things. He seemed as uninterested in these proceedings as always, and just as beautiful.

I still don't understand him nearly well enough.

In the first place, Rishe's hushed admission that she wanted to go to the

opera had been in response to Oliver bringing the subject up in small talk. It was possible he'd let it slip inadvertently since he was investigating the opera troupe with Arnold.

Lamenting her inability to pick up on any of this sooner, Rische continued, "As Sir Gutheil said, Prince Arnold's Imperial Guard were watching you, Sylvia. They were also protecting you."

"They were?"

"From what I've heard, you were approached by people who intended you harm four times over these last few days. In the second incident—yesterday—the knights even engaged the individuals in question."

Sylvia went pale when she heard that, and Gutheil scowled.

This afternoon, when Rische and Dietrich had accompanied Arnold on his work, the knights escorting them had been Gutheil and Raul in disguise. Rische had been told that Arnold didn't have enough personnel due to his espionage investigation, but it wasn't because he had his men spread thin searching a wide area. Arnold and Oliver had already narrowed their suspects down to Sylvia alone, so Arnold's knights were busy observing and guarding her.

I was surprised that he wanted to accompany me to the theater today, but it was because he was worried about dangerous individuals and maybe another spy in Sylvia's troupe.

"Tell me, Sylvia," Rische said softly.

The diva only trembled in response.

"If you didn't seek out Galkhein's secrets, you'd be killed. But you were resisting those orders even before you met me and Sir Gutheil, weren't you?"

Hence Sylvia's poisoning.

"No!" Sylvia frantically forced the words out. "I have no such conviction! That should be obvious from how I shamelessly visited the palace the very next day and attempted to get close to *you*, the future crown princess."

“You’d just been through something frightening and had your performances canceled. You must have been terrified. It doesn’t surprise me that you gave up on escaping and went along with your orders instead.”

“I even lied about falling in love with Sir Gutheil, a knight...”

“It was immediately obvious to you that Sir Gutheil had no strategic purpose you could make use of, wasn’t it? You had no reason to lie about such a thing.”

It wasn’t Gutheil whom Sylvia had opened up to about her feelings. She’d told Rishe about them. If she were lying for her mission, she could have told Rishe she was searching for a new love and asked to be introduced to a different knight. There was no need for her to cry and cling to Rishe about some false love she felt for Gutheil.

Arnold spoke up then. “Rishe. That’s enough.”

“Prince Arnold, I...”

Sylvia and Gutheil tensed at the crown prince’s harsh tone.

“Any more is just a waste of time. Your concern won’t change the facts.”

Rishe took a breath and said to Sylvia and Gutheil, “Prince Arnold made a promise to me. You haven’t actually engaged in any espionage in Galkhein or stolen any intelligence. As far as Galkhein is concerned, you’ve committed no crime.”

Sylvia’s eyes were wide with disbelief. Rishe had posed this request to Arnold, and though Arnold had been somewhat disgusted by Rishe’s naivete, ultimately, he’d relented.

“But, Sylvia,” Rishe said, prompting a flinch from the songstress, “this isn’t the end.”

Sensing the ominous air in the room, Gutheil spoke up on Sylvia’s behalf. “If I may ask, Lady Rishe, what do you mean by that?”

“By attempting to leave her organization, Sylvia has betrayed their trust. I believe it’s likely they’ve made their final decision about her. Prince Arnold?”

Arnold dispassionately explained to Gutheil, “My Imperial Guard reported two skirmishes to me. The individuals in question did not seem to be there to issue a warning or abduct the target—but to kill her.”

“I had no idea...”

Arnold’s expression was as cold as ever. “She’s lost the trust of her organization. Even if she returns with valuable intelligence from this country, they’ll simply take the information and dispose of her.”

“You could put it a little more delicately!” Rische spluttered. She knew Arnold was kind at heart, but that kindness extended only to a few individuals.

Prince Arnold’s Imperial Guard are the very reason Sylvia has been able to stay safe these last few days. But from now on...

The moment Rische opened her mouth, someone else spoke up instead.

“I will protect Lady Sylvia.”

“Sir Gutheil!” Sylvia likely hadn’t meant to call Gutheil’s name. Her hand flew to her mouth, like she couldn’t believe what she’d just said.

From the other side of the table, Arnold scoffed. “You’ll protect her?” His blue eyes narrowed as he challenged the man’s foolhardiness. “You alone?”

Arnold’s voice seemed to chill the air.

“Don’t act like feelings and ideals will win the day. No matter how skilled you may be, do you really think you can protect her from an organization that could strike at any time?”

“...”

“It seems as though your desire to die a meaningless death hasn’t waned in the slightest. You’ll just get yourself and your charge killed immediately.”

The air in the room grew so thick with tension that even Rische found herself going rigid.

But Gutheil, who was bearing the brunt of Arnold’s scorn, said calmly, “I

finally understand what you were trying to tell me last night, Your Highness.”

Arnold frowned ever so slightly.

“As you say, there is a part of me that wishes to protect Lady Sylvia even at the cost of my own life. However, if I lose my life, I will no longer be able to protect her.” Gutheil turned eyes blazing with sincerity on Sylvia. “I want to protect you through anything and everything. I want you to be happy, Lady Sylvia.”

“My...”

“That is why I promise not to throw my life away protecting you. I know you’re kind enough to grieve even for the death of a selfish man like me.” Gutheil made his pledge to Sylvia reverently, like he was swearing a knight’s oath. “I know I’ve hurt you, but could you find it in your heart to permit me to protect you?”

“Ngh! Sir Gutheil, I-I...” Sylvia spoke his name, tears in her voice. But then she shook her head, quashing her desires. “No...no, I won’t!”

Her words were intended to reject him, but there were countless emotions swirling in her voice, threatening to spill out.

“What would I do if something happened to you?!”

“Lady Sylvia, please...”

“I’ll never be able to get away.” Her shoulders shook, but she managed to speak without breaking down in tears. “I was always getting in trouble for not doing a good enough job ever since I was little... Each time I failed at something, I thought they would get rid of me for good...”

Rishe remembered what the songstress had confessed to her about being scared that she would be abandoned every time she was ill or hurt as a child. She was probably talking about the spy organization and not the opera troupe. “How awful...”

“I couldn’t possibly be with you!” Sylvia sobbed, head still bowed.

Rishe recalled the words she'd said through her tears.

"I understand that better than anyone. I'm not the sort of person who could be with a knight, so it's only natural that we can't be together."

"I'm the one who can't accept being at his side!!"

Rishe's heart ached for Sylvia until the voice of one who'd been silent this whole time cut through the tension-choked air.

"There is no need to despair, Lady Songstress."

Raul, disguised as a knight, had spoken up with a smile. Sylvia gaped at him as he stood by the door.

"After all, the people who do the legwork for an organization like this are valuable assets. No matter how skilled an operative may be, their public face—their identity—cannot be so easily revealed."

"Um...?"

Raul told Sylvia the same thing he'd told Rishe and Arnold up on the ramparts.

"Only a few key figures of your organization should know your identity, Lady Sylvia. It's a necessary precaution to preserve your value as an asset. If it got out that the famous diva was a spy obtaining intelligence from key figures all over the world, they would never be able to make use of your talents again."

"That may be true, but...who are you?"

Raul smiled in lieu of an answer. He then turned to Arnold and said, "Well, Your Highness. If you would allow me to make my report, the organization using Lady Sylvia's talents is of a mercenary nature." With that devilish curl to his lips, Raul reported this as if it were new information. "They serve no one master, instead lending their abilities to whoever makes the highest offer in their travels. Such organizations are relatively small in number and keep their operatives' identities particularly concealed."

"You mean to say that no matter how well known the public face of the operative is, their private identity as a spy is known only to a very small

number, correct, Sir Knight?” Rishe asked to hammer the point home, and Raul nodded.

Arnold spoke up disinterestedly, making no attempt to engage with Raul. “When disposing of a low-ranking operative, they’ll likely throw every available pawn they have at the problem. If those pawns are all dealt with, there will be no one left who knows the operative’s public face.”

“In short, Sylvia.” Rishe summed up what Raul and Arnold were trying to say: “We believe that if we catch all the people who are after your life, you’ll no longer be in any danger. You’ll be able to live freely.”

Sylvia gaped at Rishe. “What do you...?”

“Just as the knight said, the spies’ public identities are a valuable secret. Only the organization employing you should know that the diva Sylvia is a spy.”

Raul was very knowledgeable about organizations like these. Rishe felt confident trusting any conclusion he’d drawn about them.

“According to our investigation, the organization employing you is like a band of mercenaries. They don’t answer to anyone outside the group, and they would be very careful not to let any information about their members leave the group’s bounds. You should know at least a little about that yourself. Isn’t that right, Sylvia?”

“I-I suppose...”

“We believe they’ll put everything they have on the line to silence you. Every single member of the organization will try to kill you—even if it’s the last thing they do.”

Rishe and the rest had done a little scheming of their own to make that outcome even likelier. After all, though this situation was terrifying, it could be an opportunity for Sylvia as well.

“As such, Sir Gutheil, there’s no need for you to protect Sylvia all by yourself.”

“Pardon, Lady Rishe?”

“Prince Arnold has given me his word that he’ll help too.” Rishe sat up straight and said plainly, “We will now carry out our plan to protect Sylvia so that she may live a happy life in the future.”

“Wha...?”

Rishe rose from her chair, took out a piece of paper she’d secretly prepared beforehand, and spread it over the large table between them all.

“The plan is rather simple, really.” The paper listed the general outline of the scheme she’d concocted when speaking to Arnold and Raul that evening. “You won’t be able to protect Sylvia or run from the organization forever, so the best thing to do is to round them all up at once and eliminate the danger in one fell swoop.”

“But, Lady Rishe, it can’t be that simple...!”

“This plan will only work with your cooperation, Sylvia. And the help of your opera troupe as well,” Rishe said, pointing to a word in the middle of the piece of paper. “You’ll be the bait in this operation.” She looked Sylvia in the eye and said, “The songstress on the stage and the armed operatives hunting her... This plan only works if we can paint that picture.”

Sylvia gulped, but her expression relayed that she finally found a speck of light in the darkness.

“What do you think? Will you help us out?” Rishe went around to Sylvia’s side of the table, smiling at her. “It’ll take a lot of courage, but it won’t work without you.”

“Of...of course!” Sylvia stood and wrapped her arms around Rishe. “I’ll do anything I can! I’ll be the bait or whatever else you ask of me!”

“Thank you. I know this will work with you helping us, Sylvia.”

“I’m sorry...” Sylvia’s voice was trembling. “I’m so sorry, Rishe!”

I should be the one apologizing, Sylvia, Rishe thought, returning Sylvia’s hug. *You always blamed yourself, didn’t you? For spying and for keeping it a secret*

from me and Sir Gutheil. Telling you I want to save you would've made you feel too guilty to agree. That's why I told you you'll be the bait in our plan. Rishe patted Sylvia's back like she was comforting a small child. *I'm sorry... Please let me get away with lying in order to save you.*

She glanced at Arnold, who leveled a brooding gaze at her with his chin in his hand. This time, he would be her accomplice. Truly relieved that he was a logical person, she turned to Gutheil next.

"Sir Gutheil, this plan will be dangerous for Sylvia. I would like for you to protect her more than anyone else."

"I would ask the same. I swear I will protect you, Lady Sylvia."

"My, Sir Gutheil..." After calling her beloved's name, Sylvia clung tightly to Rishe once more. It almost seemed as if she was rejecting him, but Rishe could tell that she was only hiding how bashful she felt.

She chuckled, her heart warmed by the sight. "You're so cute, Sylvia."

"Ugh, Rishe!" Sylvia sulked, the polite tone she'd been using earlier now gone.

Rishe was happy she was treating her as a friend today, and so she squeezed the songstress, who protested, "That tickles!" with a laugh. She was relieved Sylvia had gotten back a bit of her pep.

"Listen, Sylvia. We'll have to ask the opera troupe for their cooperation as well."

"They don't know anything about my secret..."

"I thought that might be the case."

Rishe had had her eye on the members of Sylvia's troupe when she visited the theater, and Arnold had been observing them as well. Rishe had been surprised when Arnold said he'd accompany her to the theater, but he had already known that Sylvia was the spy at that point. He'd wanted to see with his own eyes if Sylvia made a move or if anyone in her troupe appeared to be involved as well. Rishe hadn't found anything suspicious about the rest of the troupe, and she'd

been relieved to find that Arnold had felt the same way.

“There’s no need to tell them anything. It’s just that the plan I’m about to share with you will involve them too.” Rishe pulled away from Sylvia, who regarded her curiously, and told her, “As the knight over there said, if we can catch all the people who know your identity, you’ll be able to live a safe life from now on. We’ll have to do a little work to make that happen, though.”

Though hesitant, Sylvia nodded.

“We’ll keep the Imperial Guard on you for a bit longer. But if the situation goes on too long, it’ll become a battle of attrition, which isn’t a good situation to be in.”

“I can’t keep relying on you all like this.”

“Don’t worry! The plan is simple, and we’ll be drawing the enemies to us.”

“You mean to give the enemy the perfect opportunity to attack,” Gutheil surmised.

“Exactly. We must prevent them from realizing that we’re luring them to us and give them a perfect moment to attack—at which point, we’ll round them all up at once.”

It wouldn’t be as simple as Rishe made it sound, of course. The enemy would no doubt be on guard for this type of trap. Gutheil seemed worried about that very thing.

“It will have to be quite the plan to actually lure them out, won’t it?”

“Yes. That’s why we need the help of the troupe.”

Sylvia and Gutheil gave her identical dubious stares.

“Isn’t that right, Prince Arnold?”

On the other side of the table, Arnold sighed in response to Rishe’s smile. “We’ll tighten our security until we must strip it away at the right moment. If they have no other chance to strike, they’ll be sure to act then.”

“B-but, Your Highness, won’t the enemy be wary of the knights’ sudden absence? If they didn’t have some reason they couldn’t remain near her...”

“Oh!”

Sylvia and Gutheil came to the realization together.

“That’s right. The one moment the diva’s tight security must wane. The only time the knights would not be able to be at her side.”

“You mean...during a performance?” Sylvia murmured.

Rishe beamed. “I do indeed. What’s more, everything around her will be dark, the only light on the performer onstage.”

“Y-you can’t bring weapons into the theater...”

“It’ll be more convincing if there’s a simple inspection at the door instead of forgoing one altogether. We’ll want to give the impression that it’s done on paper but is really just a formality in practice. Either way, spies will have the skill to sneak their weapons inside.”

Rishe had Sylvia sit back down before she returned to her own chair. Next to her, Arnold was scowling as usual.

“The small team of Prince Arnold, Sir Gutheil, and myself will protect Sylvia and apprehend the intelligence agents. Once again, thank you for agreeing to my plan, Your Highness!”

Arnold sighed and eyed Rishe indifferently.

I’m so glad His Highness went along with my selfishness...but it should benefit his investigation to apprehend all the spies as well.

What Arnold was ultimately after was the entity trying to do harm to Galkhein. He was of the belief that this entity was involved in both his invitation to the party where Dietrich broke off his engagement with Rishe and Fabrannia’s counterfeiting scheme. Sylvia’s organization was likely involved with this entity as well.

Rishe met his gaze, and he offered a disgruntled reply. “Do as you like.”

It was a bit strange to think that he trusted her so much, but it made Rishe happy nonetheless.

She faced the table once more and told everyone assembled, “The performance will be five days from today, on the twenty-ninth of the seventh month at seven in the evening.”

Gutheil and Sylvia watched her nervously.

“Now, let’s commence preparations for the operation!”

After their strategy meeting, Gutheil escorted Sylvia back to her lodgings. Arnold’s Imperial Guard continued to covertly watch over her as well. Even Raul’s hunters were on the job, so her defenses were impeccable.

Feeling relieved, Rishe walked through the halls of the palace with Arnold.

“You know...” As the summer insects chirped around them and Rishe’s dress flapped in the breeze, she said, “Sir Gutheil’s mindset has really changed a lot.”

“His current mindset is only obvious. I would never trust a knight with lofty ideals and no desires,” Arnold said flatly. “People with strong desires are the most likely to survive in battle and thus make the best soldiers.”

If strong fighters have strong desires, then... Rishe studied him and wondered, *Where are yours, since you say you don’t desire anything?*

She kept the question to herself, however.

“Ah, right. Allow me to thank you again, Prince Arnold.”

“For what?”

“For believing that Sylvia wanted to quit her spying.”

Arnold’s expression was as cold as ever. “I believe nothing. I just put together the information available and determined it was a likely possibility.”

“All the same.”

If Sylvia had been an enemy of Galkhein, Arnold would’ve had to eliminate her, yet he was going along with Rishe’s selfish desire to save her instead. Rishe’s plan wasn’t without its dangers, though.

“I was only able to create such a plan because of your help, Prince Arnold. I plan to fight as well, but I know that you’ll never lose to anyone with your skills,” she said, her eyes positively sparkling.

Arnold loosed a quiet breath. “Are you sure you don’t put too much trust in me?”

“Hmm? What reason would I possibly have to doubt your skill?”

The prince only frowned in response.

“But you have faith in me as well, don’t you, Your Highness?” The thought brought a grin to Rishe’s face.

Arnold likely hadn’t anticipated Rishe and Sylvia growing close. In the two months or so that Rishe had been in Galkhein, she’d come to know many of the country’s secrets—even a few that would spell the end of Galkhein if leaked to another country. Regardless, when Sylvia collapsed at the theater, Arnold had allowed Rishe to go to her aid immediately. He’d also said nothing to her about her striking up a friendship with the songstress.

He may have even kept his suspicions about Sylvia from Rishe to avoid hurting her. In addition to considering her feelings, he’d trusted her not to reveal any national secrets to Sylvia. Arnold had merely watched over the two of them without interfering. The thought warmed Rishe’s heart.

“Oh, but...” Rishe stopped, remembering something. “I’m sorry, Prince Arnold. I did open up about one secret to Sylvia.”

“You did?” Arnold stopped as well, turning back to cast a disbelieving glance at Rishe. “What did you tell her?”

“Ugh... Well, er...” A lamp affixed to a pillar in the hall illuminated Rishe’s hot

cheeks. "I told her that you and I..."

"Yes?"

Her face was flushed with embarrassment, but she had to apologize for betraying his confidence. Even as the shame overwhelmed her, Rishe confessed her crime. "That we kissed...just once..."

She could only assume that Arnold was staring at her in exasperation. She didn't know for sure because her eyes were squeezed shut, not brave enough to meet his gaze. After several seconds of silence, when her shame became nearly unbearable, Arnold finally spoke up.

"I..." However, as soon as he started, he immediately fell silent. He didn't seem to be angry. Was the awkward air between them just in Rishe's imagination?

Does he feel bad about it?

Rishe raised her head and blinked. Their kiss in the chapel had taken her completely by surprise. She'd been shocked and confused, having no idea why Arnold would do such a thing. She had also felt that he seemed oddly practiced at the act, which had weighed on her mind afterward as well.

Had there been some deeper meaning behind even that event?

"Hee hee hee."

"What's so funny?" Arnold asked awkwardly when Rishe covered her mouth to stifle the giggle. It was rare for him to be bothered by something like this.

"I just found your expression kind of cute, Prince Arnold," Rishe said with a grin.

Arnold simply scowled, as though she were utterly incomprehensible. It probably bothered him, but Rishe smiled all the same.

"...Come on. Let's go."

"Ah! Wait, Prince Arnold!"

Arnold strode off, and Rishe hurried to return to her place at his side. They were headed from the detached palace to a room in the main palace that was reserved for important guests.

“Was it all right to leave this to Oliver?”

“This is the sort of thing he’s good at. And the time it’s taking is expected.”

There had been five chairs in the room they’d used for their strategy meeting. The people present were Arnold, Rishe, Gutheil, Sylvia, and Raul. But the final chair hadn’t been for the disguised Raul to use.

I feel bad for requesting this when Prince Arnold is already so exhausted, Rishe thought as they arrived at the main palace. Some Imperial Guards stood by the door to the room they’d be entering.

“Greetings, Your Highness. Lady Rishe.”

“What’s the situation inside?”

“No one has left. I imagine they’re still talking.”

The prince huffed in annoyance. Rishe smiled wryly, tugging on Arnold’s sleeve. “Shall we?”

Arnold gave a nod to one of the knights, who opened the door. At which point...

“That is precisely why! If now is not the time for justice’s loyal servant—Hermity’s crown prince—to act, then when is?!”

An overenthusiastic voice boomed into the hallway. On the receiving end was Arnold’s attendant, Oliver.

“Ha ha ha. You have just as much energy as always even at this late hour, Prince Dietrich.”

Rishe narrowed her eyes at her childhood friend and former fiancé. “Please do not tell me you’re causing trouble for Oliver, Prince Dietrich.”

“Rishe?! What are you doing here?! Lord Arnold as well...” Dietrich stood from

his plush chair. His hand shot to his forehead, and he shook his head in exasperation. “I see. You wish to borrow my strength as well.”

“Oliver, we can get the story from you. Get rid of this man already.”

“Wait, wait, wait! You can’t just do this without me!” Dietrich frantically appealed to Arnold, who did not spare him so much as a glance.

Instead, he asked his attendant, “So?”

“Yes, my lord.” Oliver gathered up several documents and tapped their edges on the table with a smile. “As you suspected, Prince Dietrich is also here regarding the espionage organization.”

“Ugh!” Dietrich covered his face with his hands, sobbing dramatically.

Rishe found the sight downright bizarre. She gently asked Dietrich, “What happened with Oliver?”

“Nothing happened! This man simply started paying me compliments with a bright smile on his face, and I thought, ‘Why, he certainly has just the discerning eye I would expect from the attendant of Galkhein’s crown prince!’—and then all of a sudden I was confessing everything! Just what exactly happened?!”

As Dietrich sobbed and wailed, Arnold peered down his nose at the man like he truly couldn’t care less.

“Urgh, this wasn’t supposed to happen! I was planning to reveal the weighty secret in a cooler way...”

“Oh, that’s quite unnecessary. Please don’t worry about such a thing.”

“I had my suspicions from the start. Pompous act or no, we were obviously going to question you.”

Dietrich deflated, sniffing, after Rishe and Arnold’s one-two punch. With a sardonic grin, Oliver comforted the foreign prince.

“Now, now, you two. We just had a very fruitful conversation. After all, the prince’s actual circumstances *did* differ a bit from our external suppositions.”

“O-Oliver! You really are a good guy!”

“Hey. Keep your hands off my attendant,” Arnold barked.

Rishe sighed as she watched Dietrich cling to Oliver.

At the guard station today, Dietrich had been about to reveal something to Rishe. He had likely wanted to discuss this but had rethought the moment to get the “cooler reveal” he desired.

Prince Arnold always suspected he might be involved.

It wasn’t just the party where Dietrich had called off his and Rishe’s engagement. Before summoning Sylvia to the detached palace, Rishe and Arnold had had a conversation about Dietrich as well.

“The spy organization is obviously involved in your ex-fiancé’s trip here as well,” Arnold had said up on the ramparts that evening. *“He made it seem like he was here out of concern for your engagement to me, but it’s no coincidence that he was at the theater that night.”*

“It does seem likely, doesn’t it?”

Dietrich’s illogical actions were an everyday occurrence for Rishe, who had witnessed a whole childhood’s worth of them. To Arnold, however, his presence at the theater was just the cherry on top of the suspicions he already held since the party in Hermitry—which meant Dietrich was another matter requiring investigation.

It was impossible for Arnold to think Dietrich might only be there to see the opera.

“But, Prince Arnold...”

After that exchange, they’d opted to leave Dietrich’s interrogation to Oliver. After all, just as Arnold said, it was something he excelled at.

“Why the delay in schedule, Oliver?” Rishe asked him.

“Ah. Well, you see, it was the intelligence organization I wished to ask about,

but I thought I might get the prince to confide in me with a bit of reminiscing on the past first. He had much more to say than I expected.”

“Goodness... You certainly went above and beyond, then...”

This, too, Arnold had anticipated. It was possible that he’d had Oliver engage in such interrogations in the past as well.

“In listening to his reminiscences, however, I got a good idea of the prince’s thought processes. Also, I must say, I imagine Prince Dietrich’s coup will fail.”

“Ah! Hold on a second, Oliver! I told you that was a secret, didn’t I?!”

“Prince Dietrich, we’re all aware of your planned coup, so could you hush for a moment?”

“What?!”

Dietrich was shocked by Rishe’s words, but she didn’t feel like going into the details for him. And Arnold was focused entirely on his conversation with Oliver.

“I don’t care about the details. You got what we need from him, yes?”

“An operative from the organization contacted Prince Dietrich a little over a year ago, in the third month last year. Does that ring any bells, Lady Rishe?”

“A month later, Lady Mary entered the academy as a scholarship student.”

“That would be Prince Dietrich’s *current* fiancée.”

Dietrich’s face went white at the mention of Mary’s name. “Wait! Mary has nothing to do with those villains!”

“We’re aware of that. Lady Mary was likely only used for this one incident. Considering her family’s financial troubles, it’s hard to imagine she’s been employed as a spy for a long time. If she were a member of the organization, she would be adequately compensated for her work, at the very least.”

Rishe highly doubted she was after information from Dietrich. It was obvious even to foreign powers that Dietrich was not heavily involved in his country’s political affairs.

Oliver nodded. “I agree with Lady Rishe’s assessment. It’s likely that the organization was after Prince Arnold from the start, not any intelligence from Prince Dietrich.”

“It’s possible they facilitated Lady Mary’s enrollment into the academy and encouraged her to seek a marriage with a royal or noble she would meet there. Of course, all the sons of prominent families would already have been engaged. The organization didn’t have to specify an individual—and there was only one option likely to act so boldly as to break an engagement.”

All eyes in the room landed on Dietrich, who was pleased as punch by the attention.

“I assume Lady Mary approached Prince Dietrich and then used the methods suggested by the organization to falsify my ‘crimes’ against her,” Rishe said. “Prince Dietrich fell for it and resolved himself to condemn me. He is a rather straightforward thinker, so it’s likely the organization would have foreseen all of this.”

“...”

“Please don’t make such a face, Prince Arnold! Despite it all, he really is a very upright person. His one-track mind and tendency to get the wrong idea about things *are* flaws, though.”

Again, Dietrich appeared rather pleased with himself. Arnold clicked his tongue, deciding to simply allow the conversation to progress.

“Assuming the organization’s goal was not intelligence from Prince Dietrich, or his breaking off our engagement, but Prince Arnold’s traveling to Hermitry...”

It was a rather roundabout plan. Still, with organizations like this, plans that took several years to come to fruition were a regular occurrence. Since this one only took a little over a year, it could even be said to be a faster-moving plot.

“Augh... Damn that organization! Making use of me is bad enough, but Lady Mary too?! She has an even purer heart than I! But we will not give in to their

machinations! Yes, at first, Mary may have had such an objective. But the love we foster between us now is true—”

“A suspicious entity attended a party in the third month last year calling himself an official from Halil Rasha.”

“Hey, Oliver! Weren’t you going to listen to what I had to say?!”

Prince Dietrich seems oddly attached to Oliver...

Rishe saw why Arnold had been so confident in his attendant’s abilities.

Oliver briskly continued, “The individual approached Prince Dietrich and suggested holding a coup d’état sometime in the near future to him. Isn’t that right, Your Highness?”

Dietrich nodded reluctantly.

The desert nation of Halil Rasha... King Zahad’s country. If the spy named himself an official of Halil Rasha, however, the country is likely uninvolved.

No self-respecting schemer would reveal their true allegiance so readily. Halil Rasha was a great nation. It was currently friendly with Galkhein, but in the future, it would become one of the few countries able to fight back in Arnold’s war. If the organization’s goal was to weaken Galkhein, they may have told this lie to cause the relationship between Galkhein and Halil Rasha to deteriorate, should their plot come to light.

“For them to go so far to bring Prince Arnold to Hermitry...”

Rishe recalled the bandit attack on their way back to Galkhein. Their carriage had been attacked and Arnold’s knights wounded, the attackers’ weapons coated in a numbing poison. At the time, Rishe had concocted an antidote to the drug.

The reason he had his knights withdraw and fought with the assailants himself was because he already suspected something more behind that attack.

Arnold had a tendency toward self-sacrifice. That bad habit was probably the main reason why he had fought the attackers off himself. But he was likely also

concerned that the bandits were really intelligence operatives who had undergone special training. Even that bandit attack was a possibility Arnold had already foreseen.

“To move between Hermitry and Galkhein, you have to travel down a small, rarely used road. As a result, you’re forced to travel with a small party, and His Highness’s Imperial Guard is already a limited force within Galkhein.”

That small road was one of the reasons Hermitry hadn’t been invaded by Galkhein in the war, since it made moving an army difficult. Despite being Galkhein’s neighbor, Hermitry had been able to escape invasion for that reason—that and the fact that Galkhein stood to gain little from conquering the small nation.

Perhaps that was why the mastermind had called Arnold to Hermitry. They wanted to use the favorable circumstances that forest road afforded them to attack Arnold and harm him and Galkhein.

“Those bandits had a paralysis agent coated on their weapons. No matter how strong Prince Arnold may be, against poisons and drugs...” Rishe shuddered at the idea.

Arnold, however, didn’t seem the slightest bit concerned. “It makes no difference. What is poison going to do on a weapon that can’t even graze me?”

“I’m aware that a mere bandit could never get the better of you, Your Highness, but even so...!” Rishe still wished he would rely on those around him more. The anxiety she felt seemed like a contradiction, since she *did* have faith in Arnold’s skills.

Oliver then asked, “It was also this so-called Halil Rasha official who advised you to break off your engagement with Lady Rishe, was it not, Prince Dietrich?”

“Um... N-no, I wasn’t compelled to the decision! I did what I did out of a sense of justice and for the sake of my beloved Mary!”

“Shut up. Stop talking.”

“Eep!”

Arnold spat the words out before accepting a document from Oliver and skimming its contents. Rishe tiptoed to try to see it as well and, noticing this, Arnold lowered his hand. She thanked him, and they read through the document together.

Dietrich started pacing around them restlessly.

“Say, Lord Arnold—”

“Shut up. Don’t talk to me.”

“Hrk! R-Rishe, then!”

When Dietrich went to Rishe for help, Arnold looked at him like there was nothing that could possibly annoy him more.

“If you’re going to bother Rishe instead, then I’ll listen.”

“Oh! You will?!” Dietrich’s face lit up, after which he hung his head before saying hesitantly, “I-I heard from Oliver, you see. You’re planning to use the songstress Sylvia as bait to capture the evil organization that bamboozled me, are you not?”

They had agreed beforehand not to tell Dietrich of Sylvia’s involvement with the spy organization. What Oliver had told him was likely along the lines of “Sylvia is a willing collaborator in our plan to apprehend the spies.”

“I-It’s just, you know... A crown prince must be daring and cool, right?! He must stand in the spotlight and shine more than a normal civilian! He’s a crown prince, after all!”

“What are you trying to say?”

“In other words, um...” After a great show of hesitation, Dietrich finally said, “Rather than a frail songstress, it should be a mighty figure such as myself who fills the dangerous role of the bait in your plan!”

Oliver gaped at Dietrich. Arnold eyed him, expressionless as ever.

Regret flashed across Dietrich's face, but he continued, "It's a frightening task to be the bait, is it not? It's cruel to ask such a thing of a mere songstress. Me, on the other hand—well, I'm always steeled for such a thing! I am a proud crown prince!"

"..."

"You know, I *did* think it was a bit strange! I was supposed to meet with someone yesterday, but they never arrived at the rendezvous spot. I was even waiting with a cloak on, looking rather cool and mysterious if I may say so myself! Ever since, I've gotten the faint sense that maybe I was being deceived... N-no, I mean, I foresaw all this from the very beginning! Yes, I always suspected a mysterious entity might have their sights set on Galkhein, which is why I came all the way here to warn you! A-all this to say...if you have need of me, I would gladly take on the role of the bait myself..."

Dietrich was very obviously trembling with fear, yet he made this declaration all the same.

"Wow, Prince Dietrich," Rishe said, shocked by his courage. "Unfortunately, you have no value as bait."

"Wha—?!"

His legs almost gave out from under him at Rishe's unflinching assessment.

"It was likely no more than a grunt of the organization who contacted you, Your Highness. You have no information the organization would kill you to protect."

"That's all my life is worth?!" Dietrich seemed to be taking it rather poorly, but if anything, this was good news for him.

The same can't be said for Sylvia, though. As someone who's worked for the organization since childhood, even if she's a low-ranking member, she simply knows too much...

That was why they were after her life. And as her friend, Rishe wanted to

protect her no matter what.

“Not to worry,” Oliver interjected. “As a matter of fact, your life is absolutely in danger as well.”

“Huh?!”

“Oliver...?”

“That’s right. The organization’s instructions for Prince Dietrich went something like this: ‘The evil empire of Galkhein must be stopped as soon as possible. As the prince of the crown princess’s homeland, we would like you to contact Galkhein’s royal family.’ The meeting place on the prince’s first day in the country was specified as the theater.”

“Y-you’ve got it all wrong! I doubted their words, of course I did! I thought, ‘Is Galkhein truly as bad as they say?’ Thus I, the crown prince, came all the way here to see it for myself!”

As Dietrich flailed, Rishe shot him a glare full of reproach. She hadn’t forgotten the disparaging words Dietrich had flung at Arnold that night. Dietrich only flailed harder under her piercing glare.

“Regardless of what your true intentions may have been, just as the organization planned, you not only met with us but also accompanied Prince Arnold on his work for several days afterward.”

“Huh...? Wait, wait? Do you mean to say you didn’t allow me to come observe your work out of the kindness of your heart?”

“In the organization’s eyes, it may have seemed like you were making good progress communicating with Prince Arnold. However, just a short time ago, a carriage of Prince Arnold’s Imperial Guard headed for the hotel where you were staying. Isn’t that right?”

Dietrich’s jaw dropped. “What do you mean?”

“In other words, I imagine the organization concluded you attempted to do some spying on Prince Arnold and failed magnificently, only for the Imperial

Guard to cart you off for your apparent crimes.”

“Whaaat?!”

“Will you be quiet? Quit making so much noise,” Arnold snapped. No matter how much Dietrich despaired, the situation was unlikely to change at this point.

“The organization will assume you’ve confessed everything, Prince Dietrich. They must operate as though their existence is known to Galkhein.” While Rishe hadn’t given the shocked Dietrich the full story, his situation should have been clear enough to him by now.

Sylvia’s spied on important figures all around the world, but Prince Dietrich and Lady Mary were only involved in the organization’s schemes against Galkhein and Prince Arnold.

Even if Sylvia were captured by Galkhein, she would only confess to the same sort of spying she’d done on other nations. The information Dietrich had was different.

Prince Dietrich’s confession might lead to the discovery of the mastermind behind the organization... Of course, Prince Arnold already suspected such a mastermind quite some time ago.

Arnold was always a step ahead.

Now that Prince Dietrich has been “apprehended,” they’ll want to avoid Galkhein questioning Sylvia at all costs. If they don’t silence her, they’ll lose the trust they’ve earned with the mastermind, and their own lives will be in danger.

The organization no longer had any choice but to silence Sylvia.

I’m sure they’ll use every pawn available to them to try to kill Sylvia...with the one chance they’ll get when she’s performing on stage.

It really was a plan that would put her in considerable danger. Hence Rishe’s other little scheme.

They’ve probably realized that Sylvia has said something to Galkhein at this point, but they should still feel like they have to kill her as soon as they possibly

can. After all, it's the only sure way to prevent her from saying more.

When Rishe fell into thought, Dietrich went on babbling. "B-but if the organization considers me a traitor, then that's all the more reason why I should serve as the bait in your trap, isn't it?! S-s-s-s-so! So you should... That is to say..." Dietrich was quavering, clearly trying to scrounge up all of his courage. That was obvious enough to Rishe, who giggled and tugged on Arnold's sleeve.

"Say, Prince Arnold."

Arnold frowned at her.

"Despite how he seems, Prince Dietrich really does care about doing the right thing."

"Despite what?! Talk like that and I'll take it back! I'm good at finding reasons not to do things, you know!"

Rishe smiled awkwardly at Dietrich's bold assertion. "So you say, but I get the feeling that you weren't lying when you said part of the reason you were here was because you were worried about me."

He hadn't come just because someone had compelled him to.

"What does that matter?" Arnold asked, giving Dietrich his signature disinterested gaze. "No matter his intentions, it doesn't change the fact that this man is the fool who exiled you from your own country without a single thought to the consequences. He can say nothing to defend himself, nor will he be given the opportunity."

"Gah!"

"Additionally, his will has no bearing on what he does here. Since he's come to this country and shown his face before us, it's our right to make use of him to whatever extent we wish."

"M-make use of me?" Dietrich blinked.

"You *will* play a part in our plan," Arnold told him. "You'll be the pretext for my Imperial Guard being present at the theater."

“Huh?!”

Dietrich gawked at Rishe in confusion. In response, she smiled cheerily at him.

Chapter 7

EVENTUALLY, the twenty-ninth day of the seventh month arrived. It was the day of the operation they would carry out with the help of Sylvia's troupe, and the theater was full of knights on security detail. It was also the day the postponed show would resume, and the audience was packed.

Sylvia sat in a dressing room behind the stage, radiating nerves.

Rishe was right there beside her, holding her hand to give her courage. "You don't need to worry, Sylvia."

"Thanks, Rishe... How many years has it been since I was nervous about just standing on stage? Hee hee hee. Times like these, you have to get into costume right away!" Though Sylvia's tone was light, her face was pale.

She's acting calm, but I'm sure she's terrified.

To bolster their plan, Rishe took advantage of the fact that the troupe didn't publicize the contents of each show. Once the curtains rose on today's show, a great number of performers would dance around Sylvia to obscure her from view. In the dim light of the theater, the music would stop, and the dancers would leave. Then a light would shine on the songstress, now alone onstage. After that, she would perform a solo until the end of the show. It was a short program, but they wouldn't have to wait long to act.

The assailants would strike the moment the initial performers left the stage and the light illuminated the lone songstress. After all, the intelligence agents were just like the audience: They didn't know the contents of the show either. Since they would have no idea when they'd get another chance, they'd make their move as soon as Sylvia was alone.

As the bait, Sylvia was understandably nervous.

"Don't worry, Sylvia. Sir Gutheil will be there to protect you," Rishe reassured her.

Sylvia's smile was tinged with sorrow. "Thank you, Rishe."

"What's wrong?"

"If this plan goes well and I'm really able to live freely after this, I'm going to leave Sir Gutheil."

Rishe gasped. "But why? Sir Gutheil said he would protect you with full knowledge of your background, didn't he?"

"All the more reason why." Sylvia smiled wanly and squeezed Rishe's hand. Her fingers were ice-cold. "I was terrified when I heard his father was executed for espionage."

Gutheil had said the same thing. He thought she'd looked pained when he told her about his father. Since he hadn't yet known her circumstances, he'd assumed it was because she was a war orphan, but there was a different reason.

"Sir Gutheil has suffered all this time because of his father's crimes... Having a woman like me by his side will only give him deeper scars."

"But—"

"I wanted Sir Gutheil to come that night precisely because I suspected my crimes would come to light...because I didn't have the courage to tell him myself." Sylvia let go of Rishe's hand and gave her a hug instead. "Thank you for revealing my secret when I couldn't myself, Rishe."

"Oh, Sylvia..."

"I'll say goodbye to him after today." Melancholy plain on her face, Sylvia shook her head. "I caused you and Sir Gutheil endless trouble, but...just watch. I'll do my best to be useful for *something* by the end."

Rishe had no reply.

"Now, I've got to get changed!"

When Sylvia put on a cheerful mask again, Rishe grabbed Sylvia's hand. "I'm

afraid that won't do."

"Huh?"

She stared straight into Sylvia's eyes and told her, "After all, you're..."

That night at seven, Galkhein's premier theater had a full house. A rumor had spread through the audience that security was tighter than usual because Hermity's crown prince was attending the show as part of a diplomatic visit. Still, everyone was relieved they'd been able to get in without a significant delay since the inspection at the door was cursory.

"I wonder what the show will be like tonight."

"I can't wait to hear Sylvia sing! I was surprised when she collapsed the other day. I'm so glad she's feeling better now."

"That's the bell for the start of the show! The curtain's rising..."

The lights in the theater dimmed, and the audience chatter faded with them. In the silence, the deep-red curtains slowly lifted.

On the stage stood a great number of female performers wearing pink dresses. Their outlines were faint in the low light. When the musicians began to play, the women all started dancing at once. Their many-layered chiffon dresses fluttered about as they moved. The audience was captivated by the otherworldly music and the way the dancers glided weightlessly around the stage.

The beauty of the dance was further enhanced by a rain of petals that fell from above. The white petals resembled snow as well. Under the faint lighting, they almost seemed to glow.

When the petals fell to the stage, the dancing women kicked them back into the air, and they swirled around as yet another part of the dance. The audience watched the mesmerizing performance with bated breath, entranced by the delicate beauty brought out by the petals.

Eventually, the music faded and the dancers slowed to a stop. They exited the stage, the petals drifting upward one last time with their departure.

The only figure on the stage now was the songstress, who had been hidden among the dancers. She knelt in the center of the stage, a transparent veil covering her head. She wore a crimson dress and black gloves, her hands clasped as if in prayer.

The audience gulped, waiting to hear the beautiful song that was sure to start any moment now. A large flame was ignited in the device lighting the stage. And the moment the light hit the songstress, she reached for the sword at her hip. The crowd's eyes went wide at the unexpected combination of an opera singer and a sword.

The next moment, there was a great *whoosh* from one corner of the audience. An arrow flew toward the stage. The audience didn't even have time to register that someone had shot at her. The songstress swiftly drew her sword and sliced it diagonally downward in one fluid movement.

"Wha...?"

There was a short *clang*. The songstress lowered her head calmly after batting the arrow out of the air. Her slash had caused the flower petals to dance up into the air once more.

"What...was that?!" a member of the audience cried, unable to contain his confusion. The other spectators nearby glared at him, and he hastily shut his mouth.

As the countless petals continued to rain around her, the diva gave a rapid swing of her sword. At that moment, the veil covering her head flew up, and those in the front row caught a glimpse of what was beneath it.

"Coral hair?!"

It was not Sylvia on the stage, but none of the audience members realized that. They merely gaped as the "songstress" swatted her veil aside with one

hand.

“What is this?”

The girl hiding her coral-colored hair pointed her sword straight at the crowd. Her movements were graceful yet bold, and another audience member murmured, “That’s no songstress... That’s a goddess of war!”

Of course, the “songstress” had no idea what the audience member had said. The coral-haired girl in her place—Rishe—was focused intently on her declaration of war to the enemy and nothing else.

I won’t let Sylvia get hurt. Playing her part as the fake songstress, Rishe honed her focus to a sharp point.

Everything’s gone according to plan so far. The moment the enemy thought Sylvia was alone onstage, they aimed straight for me.

Her costume was heavy, but some of the design features made it easier to move in. The frilly skirt had several slits in it so that it didn’t catch on her legs. Her face was covered by the veil, but it didn’t hinder her vision at all. But it was just as difficult as she thought it would be to scan the dark audience from the bright stage. Instead, she focused her hearing and concentrated on the bloodlust of her attackers. Even with the packed audience, she picked up on the distinct *fwish* of an arrow cutting through the air and someone’s intent to kill.

To the right!

Rishe swung her sword as she made the judgment. She missed the arrowhead but struck the shaft. The arrow slid across the stage, scattering artificial petals as it went.



It's just like Prince Arnold taught me. "Use the whole blade as a surface to hit the shaft, knocking the arrow out of the air."

Rishe was reaping the fruits of the special training Arnold had been giving her over the last several days. She took a deep breath and kept her entire body taut, ready to move at any moment. If she let her guard down for even a second, a spy's arrow was sure to find her heart. Rishe, who had been a spy herself—though she'd merely called herself a hunter at the time—could tell exactly how skilled her adversaries were.

I'm glad I was able to switch with Sylvia. If I'd really let her be the bait, she would definitely have been hurt.

No matter how tight their security was, it would be difficult to protect her completely. Rishe was acutely aware of that fact, which was why she'd made her proposal to Arnold and Raul.

"I will play the part of the bait, not Sylvia."

When she informed them thus in a room in the detached palace, Arnold scowled ferociously.

"I intend to inform Sylvia that she will play the part herself. If I don't, I doubt she'll cooperate with us. We need help from her and the rest of the troupe for our plan to succeed."

"Rishe." Arnold had a look on his face that could sour fresh milk. After staring at her for a few moments, however, he sighed and said, "Understood. Do as you like."

"Thank you, Prince Arnold!"

"Wait, wait, wait! Hold on a second, you two!" blurted Raul, no longer in his disguise. "Why are you talking as if what you're saying makes perfect sense? Why would you take Sylvia's place? There's no need for you to put yourself in that kind of danger!"

“Why? Well, because there’s no better way.”

“Don’t gimme that!” Raul’s shoulders slumped in resignation. He then whirled on Arnold. “And you, Your Highness! Are you just going to let her walk all over you? What would you do if something happened to your darling little wife while doing something so dangerous?”

“I keep telling you, I’m not Prince Arnold’s wife yet!”

Raul shot her a look that told her she’d missed the point. It was rare for him to display his emotions so plainly.

Arnold frowned, lowering his blue eyes. “I’m aware that it’s dangerous.” His voice was heavy with exasperation. “I’m also aware that she will not budge on this matter. When she decides to protect someone, she’ll see it through no matter what.” The prince fixed his gaze on Rishe and let his face go slack. “I’ve figured that out at this point.”

Rishe’s heart throbbed over the trust he had in her. Just as Raul said, he was letting her get away with whatever she wanted. Arnold would never have accepted this plan if anyone else had suggested it. Rishe was so happy to have understood that.



Now, Rishe stood on the stage as the songstress, swinging her sword with precision.

I swear I'll protect her.

She smacked aside another arrow, and the audience's muttering grew louder.

"What kind of show is this?! Arrows are flying at Sylvia, and she's defending herself with a sword! Then the petals whirl up..."

"Yes, it's beautiful!"

The audience exchanged hushed impressions of the show, their voices barely audible over the orchestral accompaniment. Rishe didn't hear them, hyperfocused on where the next attack would come from.

Every arrow flying at me allows the Imperial Guard to find one of the archers. I must get them to shoot as many arrows as I can!

Working off her lessons from Arnold, Rishe smacked down the arrows flying at her with audible swings of her blade. With each strike, there was a cheer from the audience. She grasped her dress and swung it about, whipping up flower petals around her.

They would have known there would be an inspection at the door, so their weaponry must be extremely limited. Spies like this most often use long-range weapons. That means they'll keep shooting at me until they run out of arrows!

Rishe's primary role was to smoke out the archers hiding in the audience. She would draw the arrows to her as Sylvia's standin and strike them all down. An archer's greatest weakness was that they were limited in the number of times they could attack.

And when they run out of arrows, the next thing they'll do is...

Just as expected, an assailant climbed up onto the stage. The man, clad in a black cloak, drew a dagger he'd been concealing. The audience gasped in shock and delight, thinking it all a part of the performance.

The man aimed a slash at Rishe, which she dropped low to dodge. At that moment, when she was most vulnerable, an arrow whizzed toward her.

“Ngh!”

The arrow had been aimed at her thigh, but she spun her blade to deflect the arrowhead. She held her breath for a moment but fought the instinct—she couldn’t afford interruptions to the rhythm of her breath.

Still, that momentary lapse was the opportunity the assailant atop the stage needed. He emerged, dagger out, while Rishe was busy knocking away the arrow.

“Tch!”

That instant, a figure leaped in between Rishe and her attacker from the wing of the stage. His leg swung in a roundhouse kick to the side of the assailant’s head.

“Gah!” With a short scream, the attacker flew straight off the stage.

A black cloak flashed before Rishe’s eyes. The man wearing it looked disgusted, as if it repulsed him to have touched the enemy even with the heel of his shoe.

“Prince Arnold!” Rishe called his name in surprise, as his interference was a divergence from their plan.

Arnold spun to Rishe and took a short breath before asking her, “Are you hurt?”

“No, but...weren’t you supposed to join me a bit later?”

Arnold’s feat had been so impressive that the audience cheered and applauded. But his eyes, blue as the sea, spared them not a single glance.

“You’ve done enough.”

Rishe realized the *whoosh* of the arrows had stopped. She spotted the Imperial Guard apprehending several audience members. But the malice here

and there in the theater hadn't disappeared completely.

They're coming.

Now that they were out of arrows, the attackers were headed for the stage. Rishe gripped her sword, her guard up. Arnold, meanwhile, kept his eyes downcast. He reached for the sword at his waist and gripped its hilt. Slowly, he slid the blade out from the sheath.

Rishe gasped at the beauty of the motion. His posture was perfect, his center of gravity immutable. He would be able to block an attack from any position without the slightest difficulty. At the same time, he wasn't expending any excess energy. If anything, he seemed at ease, his intense calm almost seductive.

The black sword gleamed as it glided from its sheath, the movement smooth and clean. Light danced on Arnold's lashes and cast long shadows on his cheeks. This simple act of drawing a sword had the audience captivated. Those who believed that this was yet another part of the show were enthralled into silence.

As the sword came free, it sang a high and clear note like a bell. Arnold blinked slowly as the petals at his feet shot into the air.

He's beautiful...

Though Rishe was captivated by the sight as well, it didn't hold her attention for long. After all, Rishe had to concentrate on the ten cloaked figures who had just stormed the stage. She raised her sword, focusing on the enemies' movements.

Someone's leading them! They're not letting their guard down. They're well aware of Prince Arnold's strength!

The fact that they understood Arnold's strength was an indication of their own abilities.

Arnold took a step forward. All Rishe could see now was his back. When the

cloaked men climbed up onto the stage, Rische made to stand beside Arnold. At that exact moment, Arnold drew a straight line in the air with one sweeping motion of his sword hand. The first five assailants crumpled to the floor in an instant.

Wha—?!

It wasn't just the audience members who struggled to discern what had just happened. Rische had been watching from his side, but the speed had been too much to register. The action had practically been soundless. The tornado of petals on the stage was the only evidence that Arnold had swung his sword.

I can't believe his technique!

Rische was speechless watching him. Now that she thought about it, this was her first time as Arnold's ally seeing him cross blades with an enemy.

The remaining attackers changed their formation when they saw how easily their cohorts were defeated. Arnold didn't raise an eyebrow at the swiftness of their tactical change. He repelled the enemies' first hit.

Their movements were different from the first group. Their strategy was for one to attack and another to hit him somewhere else while he was focused on the first strike. Meaningless, of course. Arnold managed to protect Rische, who stood behind his back, fending off each and every blow without issue. He parried a strike with one hand, sending the enemy flying behind him. A moment later, a large attacker rushed at him.

Unconcerned, Arnold took the blow, his center of gravity lowered. There was a dull *clang* as the enemy's blade struck his—but just when Rische thought he'd parried the strike, Arnold stepped forward into the enemy's flank. He twisted his shoulder and then kicked the attacker in the gut.

"Guh!" With a grunt, the enemy sank to the stage almost anticlimactically.

In just a few seconds, all ten adversaries had hit the ground.

He took out ten men in the blink of an eye!

In a mere handful of moves, Arnold had disrupted their entire strategy. He'd dealt with every single adversary and had hardly budged from his starting position.

"What the...?! What did that performer just do?!"

"Shh! The show's not over yet! Be quiet and watch!"

The audience was thrilled. They had no idea they were watching a real battle. This was not the last of their enemies, however.

New adversaries sprang up from everywhere in the audience and rushed the stage. Arnold's men hadn't restricted entrance to the theater at all in a ploy to smoke out each and every operative. There were likely still plenty of enemies in attendance.

Foes attacked from both sides, but Arnold only responded to the one on the right. He hadn't ignored the enemy on the left because he was incapable of guarding against both—he had done it because Rishe's sword was already flashing out to parry the enemy's blow.

Don't take it head-on, just...!

She used the angle of the blade to deflect the enemy's blow. She couldn't beat a man in a contest of strength, so she'd trained long and hard in a previous life to use her enemy's power against him. Rishe whirled like she was dancing, putting spin on the enemy's sword. Due to the structure of the human hand, her enemy could no longer grip his sword properly, so it was flung far from his grasp.

"Wha—?!"

As he balked, Rishe struck a shallow blow to her opponent's abdomen.

Both Rishe's and Arnold's swords were coated in a drug Rishe had mixed up herself. It was the same paralyzing agent that had been on the blades of the bandits who attacked them on their way back from Hermitry.

Rishe sucked in a breath after confirming that the man was down. At the

same time, Arnold shot her a glance.

Prince Arnold's skilled enough not to require my aid. I'm sure he wishes to tell me to fall back. But I...

She wanted to fight at Arnold's side.

"Rishe." Arnold called her name as if he could sense her thoughts, quietly enough that only she could hear him. Still facing their enemies, he told her, "You're free to do as you please."

Rishe gasped, and it took a moment to register. "Yes!" she cried, tightening her grip on her sword.

She was on Arnold's left. She hadn't chosen the spot without thinking; this was the side where Arnold had the scar on his neck, his one and only weakness.

Arnold must have guessed why Rishe did what she did. Surprise registered on his face before he granted her a small smile. She took it to mean he entrusted that side to her.

Prince Arnold isn't just indulging me and trying to protect me. Strength filled Rishe at the idea that she could stand at his side. He believes in me when he needs to and entrusts his weak side to me.

She savored the idea, shivering with delight.

Although the Imperial Guard were apprehending the archers in the audience, the majority of the assailants were still rushing the stage to silence "Sylvia." Rishe stepped forward boldly, drawing them to her. She had to convince the enemy this was their only chance to take her down. If even one person who knew of Sylvia's work as a spy managed to get away from this theater, Sylvia would never know peace.

Sir Gutheil should be keeping the real Sylvia safe. And there are enough Imperial Guard in the theater due to Prince Dietrich's supposed attendance that it's possible a single enemy won't escape...

Arnold had personally trained each and every one of his Imperial Guards.

They were normally a kind and quiet bunch, but they became different people in battle. Even more reassuring to Rishe was having Arnold himself at her side.

She evaded her enemies' blades, her dress swirling around her. She ducked low, her veil flapping up, and Arnold's sword swung over her head. The struck foe fell, and Arnold pulled his sword back once more.

Low to the ground now, Rishe spun to sweep the legs out from under an assailant trying to take Arnold's flank. All she had to do was nick her adversaries with her blade and the poison would take effect. Swiftly completing the series of movements, Rishe was about to stand when Arnold reached out to her, pulling her to her feet.

She sprang up, adjusting her dress, and they let go of each other's hands. Enemies came at them from both sides, and they each cut one down. Rishe switched positions with Arnold before their adversaries even had time to scream. They whirled around, back-to-back.

It's like I'm dancing with him.

The orchestra was still playing. Rishe thought back to the night she'd first danced with Arnold. Their backs had pressed up against one another then as well.

Entrusting her back to him, Rishe murmured, "There are enemies remaining in the seats. Two of them. Likely archers."

"They're aiming for us. Use the men onstage as a shield."



They matched each other's timing, cutting down the next attack in tandem. As Rishe stepped forward, dress swishing, she held her sword up high.

Prince Arnold isn't just perfect as a swordsman. He helped her do whatever she wanted as if it took no effort. Rishe was able to fight freely because he cut down every adversary who might block her line of sight. He's the type of commander who raises the morale of his soldiers and draws out their full potential. How reassuring must it have been for the knights fighting alongside Prince Arnold on the battlefield?

Rishe felt that power herself right now. Arnold had overwhelming strength, but he always respected her as well. He could sense what she planned to do and worked to facilitate it. It made her feel like she could do anything.

"A girl learning swordplay is one thing." Her mother's words from when she was a child ran through her mind. "But for you to be stronger than His Highness the prince is nothing but a disgrace. You will cease these amusements and focus only on your studies from now on."

With those words, Rishe's mother had forced her to quit her sword practice, which she enjoyed more than anything.

"You will be the crown princess, so you must support your husband at all times. You will stand behind him and never before him, and come to his aid whenever he wishes."

Instead of doing what she wished, Rishe lived to become the crown princess of Hermity one day. That was the only option she was given. She spent her birthdays all alone, working only for the sake of being a good crown princess.

But Arnold, who wished to have her as his empress, promised her another way to live.

"I won't stop you from taking action or making a request that's in my power to grant."

Rishe studied the side of his face as they slashed their swords simultaneously.

“If we’re supposed to celebrate, then we’ll celebrate however much you want. What do you wish to do?”

He asked me so tenderly what I wanted for my birthday.

There were tons of things Arnold had given her even without the excuse of her birthday. Her use of the detached palace, her herb garden, the maids she’d wanted to hire. She treasured the ring he’d given her and kept it at her side every possible moment.

She’d thought there was nothing else she could want. But while she hadn’t been able to think of anything up until now, a small request was budding inside her heart.

If I can truly receive yet another thing from Prince Arnold, then...

Petals danced atop the stage as swords clashed. A fallen enemy trembled at her feet as the bloodlust in the theater finally receded.

I can think about that later. There are only a few enemies left. Those archers in the audience are making me nervous.

When Rishe swept her gaze across the crowd, someone abruptly stood in the royal box seats.

Prince Dietrich?

Dietrich’s only role was to serve as a reasonable explanation for the large number of Imperial Guards on-site. Arnold hadn’t given him any other instructions; all he needed to do was sit there. Yet Rishe’s childhood friend was shouting to them now.

“Look out! The audience! There’s two archers left!”

No! If he brings attention to them like that, they’ll attack him instead!

Just as she feared, something glinted in the audience. It was the archers turning to the side, their bows catching the light. They aimed squarely for Dietrich in the royal box. The prince was frightened; he must have noticed.

Why?! Prince Dietrich, you need to hide or you'll be in danger!

"What is he doing?" Arnold muttered, annoyed. But even while the Imperial Guard tried to pin him down, Dietrich was twisting and shouting at them.

"One of the archers has two arrows!"

Right then, an arrow zoomed through the air. Having heard Dietrich, both Rishe and Arnold stepped forward at the exact same moment. The two arrows shot from the same bow flew in an irregular pattern. In the middle of their arc, they cleanly split, one each going for Arnold and Rishe.

If we know two are coming from the start, we can handle it!

The pair struck down the arrows without hesitating. Rishe glanced back up, but the archers had disappeared. She quickly found them in the corners of the audience, knocked out. One arrow was jabbed into the railing of the royal box. Arrows also stuck out of the archer's shoulder and leg. Rishe spotted a figure wielding a bow on the fourth level of the seats and breathed out a sigh of relief.

Thank you, Prince Dietrich. And you too, Raul.

This took care of all the bloodlust Rishe sensed in the audience. She *did*, however, hear Dietrich protesting after the Imperial Guard tackled him.

Three more adversaries clambered up to the stage, and it wasn't just Rishe and Arnold who knew they were the last. They faced Rishe and Arnold with clear resolve, looking ready to die if it meant fulfilling their duty. Rishe's hair stood on end at the desperation in their eyes.

These three will try to kill us no matter what it takes. They have firmer wills than anyone else we've faced here so far. But...!

Rishe tightened her grip on her sword and searched for openings in their stances. She understood what Arnold had been talking about all too easily.

I can tell right away that they'll be easier to take down than anyone else we've fought today.

Their foes weren't considering their own survival at all. Rishe was shocked to

see how much their attacks changed when they put their lives on the line. They had momentum but no care in any of their movements. Even as they exchanged fearsome blows, her adversary was simply too open.

Rishe stepped forward and nicked one with a tiny cut to the cheek. That was enough. She darted backward, avoiding the enemy's counterattack. Another enemy Arnold had hit in the same way collapsed on top of that one. Their remaining foe charged forward, aiming at their target, the "songstress." Arnold's sword flashed out to meet him.

Their enemies collapsed without so much as a scream. The music crescendoed, and the audience held their breath. Arnold inhaled sharply and shook the few drops of red from his sword. He then sheathed it at his hip once more.

White petals drifted softly around them like snow. And after a brief silence...

"That was *amazing*!"

Every member of the audience rose to their feet, applauding in a standing ovation.

"What a unique show! There was no dialogue or singing...I can't believe swordsmanship alone was so incredible to watch!"

"I didn't even want to blink! The time just flew by!"

"Who was that actor? I don't think I've ever seen such a beautiful man!"

Arnold knit his brows in deep annoyance. Rishe sheathed her sword as well and tugged at Arnold's sleeve from beside him.

"Seems like the audience thought it was all part of the show, Prince Arnold."

"After all that? You've got to be kidding me."

"If you go into something thinking you're about to see a show, everything looks like a performance. I thought the audience would be alarmed, so I planned to explain things when it was all over, but..."

Not a single audience member seemed frightened by what had just transpired. They stood tall, clapping enthusiastically.

“It seems we’ll be able to get through this if we just pretend it was a show. So let’s perform until the end, shall we?”

“Perform?”

“Yes. If we perform something that signifies the end of the show, we’ll be able to leave the stage without attracting suspicion.”

Once the lights went out again, the knights would collect all the collapsed enemy combatants. After all, it was normal in a play for the “downed combatants” to disappear into the wings of the stage when the lights were dimmed.

“As for the climax of a play...the hero and heroine exchanging an embrace and vowing eternal love to one another...isn’t really an option.”

Their surest bet was likely holding hands and giving the audience a bow, but before Rishe could make the suggestion, Arnold sighed. “Very well.”

“Huh?”

Arnold grabbed Rishe’s hips with both hands. The next thing she knew, she was in the air. Realizing Arnold had lifted her up, Rishe flushed pink.

“Y-Your Highness!” she squeaked, but if she moved too much, it would upset their balance. Her hands reached out on reflex, and the only place to put them was around Arnold’s shoulders.

The crowd applauded fiercely at the sight. Rishe was glad that they could play the whole thing off as a performance, but this situation was entirely too embarrassing.

Arnold gazed up at her and smiled, evidently enjoying her panic. “I can hardly believe you’re the same person who was calmly taking down foes just a second ago.”

“Ugh!” Rishe was truly glad she had the veil to cover her bright-red face.

He lowered Rishe back down onto the stage and kissed the back of her hand. Another buzz went through the crowd, but Arnold never changed his expression, simply holding out his hand to Rishe.

“Let’s go. That should be enough, shouldn’t it?”

“Urgh...!” She was frustrated, but she couldn’t bring herself to argue.

Rishe took Arnold’s hand to escort her off the stage at last, and the applause welled up again. The white petals on the stage floor were in a frenzy, like a storm of flowers. Even after the lights fell, the applause didn’t die down for some time, which made Rishe feel rather awkward.

I’m glad it all worked out, though. And it’s all thanks to Prince Arnold.

So she thought as she descended the stairs in the dark theater wing. As she went, she watched Arnold, who was guiding her so that she didn’t trip. When they reached the bottom of the stairs, she heard a voice she wasn’t expecting call her name.

“Rishe!”

“Sylvia?! What are you doing here?”

According to their plan, she wasn’t supposed to be in the theater. Right before Sylvia had changed into her costume, Rishe had informed her of a fake change to their plans.

“I’ll do my best to be useful for something by the end. Now, I’ve got to get changed!”

“I’m afraid that won’t do, Sylvia.”

“Huh?”

“After all, you’re going to flee the theater with Sir Gutheil right now.”

Rishe had explained the fake plan to the surprised Sylvia.

“It wouldn’t do for an enemy spy to be among the knights, would it? So instead of the grand plan we’ve involved all the knights in, you’re going to run

far away."

"But then...who will be the bait?"

"There won't be anyone standing on the stage. After all, we could only have a woman who's fought in battle before serve as bait."

Sylvia hadn't appeared convinced, but she'd eventually agreed. Rishe hadn't told her *she'd* be the bait because she knew it would make Sylvia object to the plan. And unless they made the spies believe that Sylvia was here in the theater, their trap wouldn't work.

She'd gone so far as to lie, so it made no sense that Sylvia was here now.

"Sir Gutheil, what about our plan to transport Sylvia to the palace in secret?!"

"I apologize, Lady Rishe. I..." As Gutheil faltered, Arnold spoke up from behind Rishe.

"I ordered them to stay."

"You did?!"

Arnold explained indifferently, "It was safer for them to remain here instead of leaving the theater on their own."

"Th-that's true, but still!"

Even disguised, it would have been strange for anyone to leave the theater before the show even started. Arnold must have taken that into consideration.

"I understand that, but...well, you could have at least told me, couldn't you?"

"You'd just be worried about her if you knew the target was still in the theater."

He was absolutely right, so Rishe couldn't even argue anymore. Besides, this was her first time knocking arrows out of the air. It was possible that things wouldn't have gone so well if her concentration had been even a bit lacking. Arnold had kept his own secret from Rishe right up until the last minute to keep *her* safe.

“I’ve still got a lot to learn. I have to get stronger if I’m going to be worthy of your trust, Your Highness...”

“That has nothing to do with it.” Arnold sighed and lifted the veil covering Rishe’s face, locking eyes with her. “I was worried about you. That’s all.”

Rishe felt her cheeks heating up again, so she shook her head, covering her face once more with the veil.

But Rishe wasn’t the only one upset that she’d been deceived.

“I’m furious, Rishe!”

“Oh, Sylvia...”

Sylvia sounded like she’d been crying until just a moment ago. Her beautiful lashes were wet with tears, her eyes red and puffy.

“All of a sudden, the plan changes last minute, and you and Sir Gutheil have *different* plans! We hid underneath the theater, but something seemed strange, and Sir Gutheil wouldn’t let me out to see what it was!”

“I-I’m sorry, Sylvia... That must have been a real fright.”

“The *scariest* moment was when I realized you might be serving as the bait yourself!”

Apparently, Gutheil hadn’t told her; Sylvia had just drawn that conclusion herself. Gutheil had no idea what to do, but he was clearly worried about Sylvia, who was clinging to Rishe.

“I’m so sorry, Lady Sylvia, Lady Rishe. If only I’d concealed the truth more convincingly or explained the situation in a way that granted Lady Sylvia more peace of mind...”

“Sir Gutheil was kind enough to comfort me the whole time I was crying, and saying I wanted to go where Rishe was, and beating my fists against his chest, just so you know!”

“I-I assure you it didn’t hurt at all, so it was no trouble, really!”

Arnold broke off from the group and started giving directions to Oliver. At the same time, his knights were bringing in more and more of the enemy combatants. There were a lot of them, but they had all been paralyzed, so the knights were in no rush to bind them more thoroughly.

“I’m really sorry I lied to you, Sylvia. I didn’t want you to be in any danger.”

“Well, how do you think I felt?! I didn’t want you to be in danger either, Rishe!” Sylvia clung tightly to Rishe, sobbing. “I’m sorry... You went through all this for me. I really am sorry...”

Rishe shook her head, returning Sylvia’s hug. “If I was able to help out a friend, that’s more than enough for me.”

Sylvia’s breath caught. When she was able to speak again, she said, “Thank goodness you’re safe, Rishe.” She loosened her grip and added, “I’m sorry for getting angry with you too, Sir Gutheil. I know you did everything just to protect me.”

“The sound judgment was Prince Arnold’s, not mine. Besides, your safety is also all I could ask for.”

Gutheil smiled, and Sylvia flushed so hard that her face turned as red as her hair. When he saw that, he regarded her like she was the most precious thing in the world. Then he strode straight up to the prince.

“Your Highness.”

Arnold broke off from his conversation with Oliver. He signaled his attendant, and Oliver bowed in acknowledgment, leaving the backstage area. Then he loosed a sigh, clearly dreading what was coming.

Gutheil told him, “I will not forget the instruction you gave me during this incident for the rest of my life. You must not give your life to protect something but fight to survive until the end for the sake of the one you’re protecting. As soon as I realized how important that is, I felt keenly how difficult it is as well.”

He knelt in front of Arnold.

“I am aware that I have much yet to learn and that it will take me a long time to truly become worthy. In addition, I feel it is my duty to become a knight only to protect the person I care for most instead of a grand thing like the entire nation.” After bowing his head deeply, he looked up at Arnold. “In order to do that, would it be possible for you to make me your retainer?”

Rishe gulped. In the future she knew, Gutheil was a loyal retainer of Arnold’s. He commanded armies in multiple locations, contributing greatly to Arnold’s invasion of the world. Gutheil’s command had caused multiple nations to fall.

If Sir Gutheil becomes Prince Arnold’s knight, it’ll be one step closer to the future I know.

Just a few days ago, the idea had terrified her. Now, however, she was waiting with bated breath, praying that Arnold would say yes. She desperately wished that Gutheil’s dream would come true and he would be recognized for his talents as one of Arnold’s knights.

Arnold frowned and eyed Gutheil with aggravation. “Stand.”

Gutheil made no show of moving even at Arnold’s cold, cruel tone. “I will bow my head to you as many times as it takes. Until you acknowledge me, I—”

“Just stand up.” Arnold sighed again, a sour expression on his face. “That bow is a sign that you’re offering your neck to the one you’re swearing loyalty to. It’s full of openings, and you won’t be able to recover from it if surprised.”

“Is that so...?”

“If you heard me, then cut it out. I tell all my Imperial Guards the same thing.” Arnold’s clear blue eyes bore into Gutheil. “If you’re going to call yourself my knight, then you won’t be taking that pose anymore.”

The knight leaped to his feet and bowed deeply in front of Arnold. “Thank you! Thank you!”

“How wonderful, Sir Gutheil!” Sylvia exclaimed, wrapping her arms around him.

Gutheil flinched but still caught her.

The diva was elated by the good news, crying for a different reason now. “Congratulations! This is the first step to fulfilling your dream, isn’t it?”

“Lady Sylvia, I...”

“From now on, people will know you for your own fantastic deeds, not your father’s crimes.”

Gutheil’s eyes went wide, as though the thought hadn’t even occurred to him. “I’m...thrilled to even imagine it!”

He smiled awkwardly, and Sylvia embraced him once more. “It makes me happier to just think about how happy it makes *you*.”

Oh, I’m so glad... Rishe let go of the breath she’d been holding. She didn’t think Sylvia would talk about leaving Gutheil anymore. She wasn’t *sure*, but the way Sylvia was clinging to Gutheil, she found it all too easy to picture them together in the future. *It’s all because Sir Gutheil changed and Prince Arnold recognized that change.*

Rishe was so delighted, she went over to Arnold and pinched his sleeve.

“What is it?”

She giggled, unable to keep it in, and Arnold cocked a brow.

Just like in the future I know, Sir Gutheil was able to become one of Prince Arnold’s knights. But I’m sure that things are changing little by little, and we’ll be able to avoid that future.

Rishe believed that from the bottom of her heart. She wasn’t telling Arnold, however, which just caused him to sigh in resignation for the umpteenth time. He softly grabbed the hand tugging at his sleeve like he was comforting a fussy child.

“Eep...”

As he entwined her fingers with his own, her heart throbbed at the sickly-

sweet gesture.

“I need to oversee the cleanup. Go get changed and wait for me.”

Part of me does want to tell him what I want right away now that I’ve thought of something, but not now. She’d have to tell him later. Just as Arnold had said, their plan wasn’t over yet. There were a lot more spies lying around backstage now, and the theater was still noisy. Oliver had left earlier, and he probably needed assistance with something as well.

“I’ll give you a hand, Prince Arnold.”

Rishe smiled and removed the veil from her head before setting about helping Arnold.

“That stupid superhuman couple, honestly...” Raul muttered to himself from a corner of the bustling theater. “What a ridiculous plan. I mean, do a crown prince and a future crown princess usually get involved to save one lousy spy trying to weasel out of her organization?”

He discreetly put away his bow, pulled down the hood of his cloak, and rested his elbow on the fourth-floor railing, his chin in his hand. One of his men stationed outside of the theater had reported that no operatives had fled the building, but he figured they’d need to keep an eye on things for a little longer.

“Welp, it’ll be easier to gather the information Prince Arnold wants now. Just how much of this has he figured out, pretending to go along with his wife’s selfishness all the while?”

Raul surveyed the now-empty stage. “Eh, I guess he wouldn’t have given me the orders he did if he weren’t capable of that much.”

Patting himself on the back for a job well done, Raul yawned and slipped out of the theater unnoticed.

Epilogue

ON THE ROOF of the royal theater was a small garden. The secret spot wasn't visible from the ground, and only the royalty and the nobility could make use of it.

Under the light of the moon, which would be full tomorrow night, it was more than bright enough without any lamps. Rishe rested alone in the garden on a wooden bench, the summer breeze ruffling her coral hair. It was nice and comfortable, considering the strenuous exercise she'd just undergone.

She only escaped dozing off because someone else had just arrived in the garden.

"Hello, Prince Arnold."

"It's done."

Arnold walked toward her from the door to the roof. He caressed Rishe's cheek, seeing how sleepy she looked. "You're really not hurt?"

"Really, Your Highness..." Rishe said with a bit of a pout. "You asked me every time you ran into me during the cleanup, didn't you?"

He'd touched her cheeks, inspected her hands, and checked her for injuries already.

Arnold took a quiet breath. "Want to rest here some more?"

"Mm."

The cleanup had been just as hard as they'd figured it would be. It had taken time to get the audience to leave, round up all the intelligence agents, and arrange for their transport. Rishe had been helping out as well, so she hadn't been able to sit down for a breather. She had eventually run out of things to do and was tasked only with waiting for Arnold to finish, but she didn't even have a place to change out of the dress she'd borrowed. As a result, she was still

wearing the costume as she gazed up at the stars.

“Won’t you sit too?” she asked him.

Looking like he had no choice but to comply, Arnold sat down beside her. She beamed cheerfully at him, and he sighed. “I heard that man made quite a fuss at you over something or another.”

“You mean Prince Dietrich?” Rishe cocked her head and thought back to the exchange from earlier.

During the cleanup, Rishe headed for the royal box and thanked Dietrich for assisting with their plan and for warning them about the dual arrows.

“You’re darn right! Why, my heroism is worth a commendation at least, I would think! You two would have been in great peril were it not for my swift and noble action! I put my very life on the line to save you! That’s me, the courageous crown prince! Ha ha ha ha!”

At first he was his typical self, but eventually Dietrich cleared his throat and adopted a more serious tone.

“As for proving Lord Arnold’s superiority as a husband, well...I have come to realize that the man seems to respect and value you. More or less.”

“Why, Prince Dietrich...”

“However! If he really valued you, then he wouldn’t put you in so much danger! Isn’t that a more normal way to see things?! You really should rethink this marriage, Rishe.”

“No,” Rishe said with a smile. “I’m very happy that Prince Arnold respects my wishes. I can always feel him protecting me from danger. It makes me feel like I need to get stronger in return.”

Dietrich seemed to chew on his words for a moment. “Very well.”

“Huh?”

“It seems to me as though Lord Arnold Hein has abandoned the very idea of human happiness, but he at least has the guts to try to make you happy! Rejoice, Rishe, for that is the judgment I have rendered unto him myself!”

I can't believe Prince Dietrich is taking back something he said before and acknowledging another person...

Rishe would never have been able to imagine something like that before he broke off their engagement. Had coming to Galkhein and seeing another man in a position like his changed his attitude? Or maybe this was the result of Mary's hard work?

At this rate, maybe he won't even attempt his coup in this life, she thought with a chuckle. Either way, the individual who had instigated the coup had come to light now. The entity who had set his sights on Galkhein and Arnold wasn't likely to make use of Hermity anymore. This would be Rishe's first life where Dietrich didn't try to start a revolution. In the past, Rishe had always felt some guilt for abandoning her homeland, but that weight had finally been lifted from her shoulders.

“Thank you.”

Dietrich had no way of knowing what Rishe was thanking him for, but that was fine with her.

“Of course, there's absolutely no need for me to have permission from a complete stranger like you to marry whom I wish to marry.”

“Agh! That tongue of yours really has gotten sharper lately, hasn't it?!”

Rishe giggled, and Dietrich made a complicated expression.

“The day I broke off our engagement, you told me I was an unnecessary element in your life.”

She *had* said that, but Rishe thought she would take this opportunity to revise that statement. “Don't worry, I'm just as unnecessary to your life, Prince Dietrich.”

“What?”

“Do you remember what adults were always saying to us when we were young? That I had to be responsible so I could support you?”

Dietrich lowered his head. Evidently, the phrase was familiar.

“That’s not true, is it? After all, you really can do it if you try, Prince Dietrich... You’ll be perfectly fine without me.”

His eyes bugged out at that.

Rishe was finally starting to feel like she’d put her last six lives behind her and could be free from them now.

Not just my life as a merchant, or an apothecary, an alchemist, a maid, a hunter, or a knight... The life I lived as a duke’s daughter in my homeland is just as irreplaceable to me as all the other lives I’ve lived.

She was at last starting to feel like she’d let go of some of the regrets she’d been hanging on to ever since that original life as a duke’s daughter.

And while Rishe was feeling perfectly refreshed, Dietrich’s face crumpled, and he sobbed, “Th-that’s not what I wanted to hear!”

“Um, are you crying?”

“I’m the crown prince, you know! Someone so important would never cry before others! Anyway...” He sniffled hard, then pointed at Rishe and demanded, “Is Lord Arnold Hein a necessary element in your life?!”

Rishe blinked. “Prince Dietrich. It’s rude to point.”

“Gaaah! That’s not important right now!”

Rishe laughed at the recollection, and Arnold regarded her dubiously.

“It’s nothing. Prince Dietrich and I just gave each other a little encouragement for our respective lives from now on.”

Rishe smiled and looked up at Arnold.

“...Oh.”

In the distance, the church bell rang out just once. That church also functioned as a clock tower, so the bell rang at set intervals to announce the time. And the hour it had just rung out was twelve o’clock—midnight.

“It’s your birthday,” Arnold said, and Rishe nodded.

The date had changed. Today, the thirtieth day of the seventh month, was the day Rishe had been born. It was her sixteenth birthday. Rishe had experienced this occasion seven times now.

Arnold, who couldn’t possibly know that, said, “I’ve never celebrated someone’s birthday before.”

“Your Highness...”

“Tell me what you want of me.” Arnold’s fingers playfully traced the earring Rishe wore. “Did you decide what you wish to do?”

Rishe nodded once more. Arnold’s curiosity was piqued.

“I...” Rishe gazed into Arnold’s brilliant blue eyes and said, “There’s something I’ve always wanted, ever since I was small.”

Rishe spoke slower than usual, and Arnold waited for her to finish. Appreciative of his patience, she took her time voicing the feelings in her heart.

“I’ve always wanted to live a free life. Not as a duke’s daughter or a crown princess, but just as a human being, valuing myself rather than what’s expected of me...and you respect that desire of mine above all else, Prince Arnold.”

Rishe felt that way from the bottom of her heart.

“You’re not trying to control me or lock me away. You’ve worried about me and shown concern so many times, but you always trust me in the end. You allow me to be free to pursue my own desires, and you lend a hand when I’m not able to do everything I want by myself...”

Arnold had promised to grant her any request that he could, but it wasn't out of a simple desire to be sincere to the oath he'd sworn when he'd proposed to her. Moreover, he didn't just give superficially to Rishe. He considered her feelings and always thought of how best to grant her requests.

"I'm very happy right now that I can be your bride."

Arnold's eyes widened.

"As your bride, I want our wedding to be perfect. I don't want to shame you, and I want to hold my head up high as the crown princess."

"No matter what anyone says, you're my bride. There's no changing that fact."

"Still, I want it to be perfect." Rishe needed courage to finish telling Arnold what it was she wanted. "So, Prince Arnold..." She grasped the hand fiddling with her earring and squeezed it. "Can we please practice the kiss we'll exchange at the ceremony?"

"...What?"

Rishe thought her voice might tremble from nervousness. "As your birthday gift to me..." Her embarrassment blended with genuine desire. Rishe gazed up at Arnold and pleaded, "Would you kiss me?"

She thought this might have been the first time she'd ever seen Arnold so genuinely surprised.

"...Rishe."

Before he could say more, she frantically blurted, "I know, it's a terribly improper request, I'm so sorry!" She grabbed the sleeve of his jacket and squeezed it tight. "I'm just not confident at all that I'll be able to do it well. I realize it's an imposition, but...please."

"That's not...what I..." Arnold's frown deepened as he choked out the words. He touched Rishe's shoulders with a pitying look and said, "What are you asking for? You're trembling so much."

Rishe was hyperaware that her body had frozen due to a bad case of nerves, but that was no reason for Arnold to feel so concerned. “This isn’t because I’m dreading or afraid of the idea,” she told him, thinking it a bit strange herself.

When their engagement was fresh, she’d made him swear not to lay even a finger on her since she was so nervous about him. Eventually, she started letting him touch her through gloves. At some point, she’d almost forgotten the promise altogether.

Of course, having Arnold touch her so intimately made her nerves go from bad to worse. Her face was burning—but she’d never *hated* that feeling. She hadn’t felt any disgust or fear during their first kiss in the chapel either.

All she experienced was a pesky ache in the center of her chest.

“I’m sorry!” Rishe hung her head, reflecting on her actions. “I should have known you wouldn’t want to do that. I-I’m always so selfish!”

Arnold must have had some reason for what he’d done that day. Still, she couldn’t just ask him for a kiss. Rishe shot up from the bench, coming back to her senses—and Arnold grabbed her hand.

With a heavy sigh, he said, “I said it wasn’t a bother.”

“Huh?”

Rishe raised her head and found Arnold standing in front of her with his eyes closed in irritation. He opened them and then brushed Rishe’s hair, his fingers tucking a lock behind her ear.

Oh my... Rishe was suddenly nervous, knowing what was about to come next. She didn’t want Arnold seeing her face so red, but she had no choice when he lifted her chin.

His face is like the most beautiful piece of art in the world.

The prince’s blue eyes and long lashes captivated anyone who saw them. They had such dangerous power, yet he always looked straight at Rishe. She didn’t know what to do about it. To make matters worse, his thumb was tracing

her lip now, as though measuring precisely where his lips would go.

Rishe let a little puff of air out, tickled by his touch.

“Close your eyes.”

“B-but...” Her heart threatened to somersault out of her chest every time she so much as opened her mouth. “I can’t look?”

Arnold’s eyes shone in the light of the nearly full moon. Rishe could see herself in their azure, oceanic depths. He half closed them and coaxed her, “You want to practice for the wedding, right?”

“Ugh...”

He spoke like he was trying to coax a stubborn child. It was true that they would close their eyes for the ceremony. Even these small aspects of the kiss had a tradition to be followed. But since they had the opportunity to practice, she kind of wanted to know everything she could. Arnold must have guessed what she was thinking.

“Come on. Close them.”

He pressed little kisses against Rishe’s eyelids, which snapped closed when his lips brushed against her lashes. She let out a cute grunt in response.

“Good.”

Arnold really did spoil Rishe more than anyone in the world, praising her just for closing her eyes. Regardless, she wasn’t sure if he really would go along with all her selfish requests.

What’ll I do if he says the kiss on the eyelids is it? she thought, timidly opening her eyes again. She was met with a devastatingly earnest gaze.

Prince Arnold really will grant my request... He will!

Now certain of it, Rishe began to feel lightheaded. She grasped at Arnold’s shirt, close to the collar. She had requested this, yet she was already almost down for the count.

“You don’t have to force yourself,” he told her.

Her eyelids flew wide, and she shook her head. “Don’t stop.”

She wanted Arnold to kiss her no matter what. Peering at him through her lashes, she begged, “Please, Your Highness...”

“...”

Arnold tilted her neck back a bit more. This time, her eyelids fell closed on their own. He wrapped his other arm around her waist, and his face neared hers.

Their lips met.

His touch was tender and, as always, full of concern for her. The moment she registered it, there was that familiar pang in her chest again. Not only that, but her pulse quickened as a fierce warmth spread through her, threatening to bring her to tears.

The kiss lasted only a few seconds. When they pulled away, their eyes locked. Arnold looked to be in pain somehow.

“Are you satisfied?”

“Not yet...”

Rishe’s head was a little fuzzy, and she felt a bit weak in the knees. Even the feeling from when their lips met felt like it might fade away if she didn’t hang on to it.

“I couldn’t remember it all after just one kiss.”

“...”

She didn’t want to forget it. If this was her only opportunity to learn, then she wanted to know more. She tugged gently on Arnold’s shirt, and his brow furrowed.

“If it’s not too much to ask, could we—mgh!”

This time, the kiss was a little more forceful, almost a bite—which felt

familiar. It took her by surprise; Rishe thought she was probably remembering the poison wound she'd received on her neck. Arnold had sucked on it to remove the toxin.

"Mmn..."

A kiss was a meeting of the lips and nothing more. Yet the arm around her waist flexed, pulling her closer. Her heart beat faster and louder, making even more of a racket than when she'd fought onstage. She squirmed, flustered by the idea of Arnold hearing it—but Arnold kept her firmly in place as they kissed, with no intention of setting her free.

"Hnng...!"

It was just their lips meeting, but Rishe had somehow lost the ability to breathe. She scrunched her face up, and Arnold finally pulled away from her. Then he pressed his forehead to hers and said, his voice husky, "Sorry."

Somehow managing to breathe again, Rishe shook her head. Their bangs tangled together as she gripped Arnold's shirt.

"More," she begged, and Arnold huffed in response.

Their next kiss was soft, as if in apology for the previous one's hastiness. This one was modest, little more than a peck. Their lips separated with a tiny smack. The sound was adorable on its own, but it contributed to Rishe's embarrassment and restlessness. She wanted to learn more, but it had ended so fast that her lips tingled at the loss.

Were there really this many ways to kiss? They were all so different, she didn't feel like she was getting good practice in at all. Only vague feelings compelling her now, she implored him once more, tears in her eyes.

"One more time..."

Arnold's brows came together and he tugged Rishe even closer to him, until she was snug in his arms. He patted her on the back soothingly.

"I'll kiss you as many times as you like later, so just breathe for now."

“O-okay...”

Rishe buried her face in Arnold’s chest, hiding her scarlet cheeks and focusing on breathing. She took shallow breaths, one after the other, but she didn’t feel herself growing calmer at all. If she sat down right now, she worried she’d never be able to stand again.

She realized it had been a good idea to practice. If she acted like this at the wedding, she’d disgrace herself as crown princess. Even as Rishe thought this, Arnold held her with great care. He kissed her forehead through her bangs. Rishe’s heart thrummed, and she felt tears welling in her eyes again. At the same time, the gentle touch gave her a strange sense of calm at last.

I feel like my brain is melting...

She was starting to feel like she wanted Arnold to hold her forever. But if they did that, she wouldn’t be able to get more practice.

Suddenly, she remembered the words Dietrich had said to her earlier that day.

“Is Lord Arnold Hein a necessary element in your life?!”

Rishe had scolded Dietrich for his bad manners, then smiled and replied, “Yes, he is.” She then told the shocked prince the full truth: *“After all, I wish to spend the rest of my life at his side.”*

Rishe had become aware of that feeling for the first time, and it was only growing stronger the more time she spent in his arms.

“Rishe.” Arnold’s voice was soft but hoarse as well. Rishe’s shoulders twitched, so he asked her worriedly, “Are you afraid?”

It was the same thing he’d asked her when she’d run into his father the other day.

Rishe shook her head. “Your voice...”

“My voice?”

“I really...like it.” She had fistfuls of Arnold’s shirt in her hands as she pressed her forehead to him. With her face hidden, she confessed, “It feels almost painful when you say my name, so it’s a bit of a problem...”

Rishe meant it. Yet Arnold brushed the hair away from her ear and pressed his lips to it, murmuring breathily, “Rishe.”

“Ack!”

Now this was just mean. Evidence of his guilt escaped from his nose in a small puff of air.

“Heh.”

He laughed!

She could tell he was only mildly teasing her, but she still wanted to protest. The next time he called her name, it was with reverence, like she was the most precious thing in the world to him.

“Rishe...”

Tears threatened to spill from Rishe’s eyes at the sound.

“Eep!”

Her eyelids flew wide open as his lips brushed her ear again. He’d just told her to breathe, so what was he doing raining kisses down on her? Arnold kissed her bangs, then captured her left hand. He’d probably picked up on the way she was clinging a little too tightly to his shirt. He wove his fingers through hers as if to scold her for it.

Then he kissed the base of her ring finger, just below the ring he’d gifted her.

He’s kissing me all over the place... I feel like I’ve become some sort of confectionery...

Maybe he was trying to calm her down, but she couldn’t possibly catch her breath with all this happening.

He tilted her head back again, and Rishe hastened to wipe her wet eyelashes.

“I-I’m sorry. I can’t believe I’m doing this when I was the one who asked...”

Arnold took hold of her hand before she could rub her eyes. With both her hands seized firmly in his, he looked her in the eye and whispered, “It’s cute. You don’t need to hide it.”

Rishe was astonished. The unexpected words made her ears burn—but Arnold was, of course, unflappable as ever.

“Then again...” His eyes and voice, however, were kinder than usual. “I can’t think of a single time you ever *weren’t* cute.”

“Hnnngh!”

She had no idea how to respond. She *really* wanted to hide her face now, but with neither hand free, all she could do was bury her face in Arnold’s neck.

Arnold let go of Rishe’s right hand and stroked her hair instead. “Rishe.”

“Ugh! Stop teasing me!”

“You can’t blame me, can you?”

She had just told him it was a problem for her when he called her name, yet he showed absolutely no remorse for his behavior. If anything, he was just rubbing salt in her wounds, saying things like, “I want to see your face.”

“Eep!”

She had to give up when he said that right in her ear. If he was making a request of her, she had to fulfill it. She relaxed and pulled away from Arnold, who tilted her head back up at him. Concerned fingers brushed her flaming cheeks.

“Is this painful?”

It’s painful, but not because of the kissing, she wanted to tell him, but she couldn’t, instead letting out only a breath. Why does it make me want to cry when he says my name? Heat pricked the corners of her eyes. *I want him to say it even more...*

She had heard about wavering feelings like this from Sylvia. When the diva met Gutheil, she'd felt a slew of contradictory emotions. It was the first time she'd ever felt like that in her life.

Rishe inhaled a shaky breath. Arnold rubbed her back, regarding her with soft eyes. Rishe's lashes were still wet, so he gently wiped her tears away.

"All I do is make you cry."

Her heart ached at the words. She could only think of one such instance herself, however.

"I'm not crying right now," she said petulantly.

Exasperation crossed Arnold's face. "Liar."

"Ngh..."

Arnold's thumb brushed Rishe's lips as if to chide her for trying to put up a brave front. He pressed down right in the middle. He was teasing her again!

"Rishe."

"Ugh..."

At his featherlight touch, pain sprouted in her heart once more.

"If it frightens you, we don't have to kiss at the wedding. I'll change whatever part of the ceremony needs changing, no matter who objects."

She really *did* feel like a frightened little kid the way he was talking about her.

"I don't want any part of my vows as your wife missing." She beseeched him once more, "Please kiss me...my husband..."

Arnold frowned and cupped Rishe's cheek. With the other hand, he entwined their fingers. "Okay."

Her chest still hurt, but she also felt an urge to get even closer to him welling up inside her.

I feel like I'm going to cry when he says my name, but I want him to say it

more. It's painful being with him, but I don't want to leave.

Celebrating a birthday meant celebrating the fact that you'd been born. Rishe had died again and again, her life scattering in the wind, but she felt like a new beat was pulsing in her heart now.

I'm...

Putting a name to the sensation she was feeling for the first time in her life, Rishe closed her wet eyes.

I'm in love with Prince Arnold...

At that instant, they shared another soft kiss.

To be continued...



Bonus Story:

A Hands-on Examination Is the Only Way

SHORTLY AFTER THE performance-fight at the theater, Rishe assisted with the aftermath, still in her songstress costume. Every time her mind wandered, she found herself thinking about the gift she planned to ask Arnold for. But if she kept thinking about it, she would be unable to focus on anything else, so she tried to stay busy helping out.

Rishe mainly found herself performing first aid on the spies and preparing them for transport, but she did occasionally bump into Arnold as he bustled about with his own tasks. Each time she did, he would stop her and ask her about her condition.

This was another moment that they ran into one another in a deserted hallway behind the stage.

“Rishe.”

“Ack!”

Rishe jumped when Arnold grabbed her wrist. She’d tried to simply give him a nod and slip past him. He must have found her awkwardness suspicious, so he curled his fingers around hers, preventing her from making an escape.

“You’re not pushing yourself, are you?”

Waaagh...

His touch was so gentle. Rishe found herself strangely preoccupied by it. She gulped. His hold on her was loose, but she didn’t think she’d be able to escape his grasp nonetheless.

To make matters worse, he pushed her against the wall, pinning her there.

“O-of course I’m not! I’m full of energy! You can see that, can’t you?!” Rishe

managed, but Arnold didn't seem to agree.

"Hmm."

He pressed the back of her hand to the wall, not letting her run away this time. With his other hand, he took hold of her chin and asked in a low voice, "Then why are you so nervous every time you run into me?"

"Th-that's just—"

Rishe glanced up at Arnold on impulse and regretted it immediately. Even in this dimly lit hallway, Arnold's countenance was dazzling. Normally, this was where Rishe would find herself getting lost in the sea of his eyes, but today she found herself staring at his lips.

What I'm about to ask him is...

The moment her thoughts turned to kisses again, her cheeks flushed and tears sprang to her eyes. She was reminded just how insane the thing she planned to ask him was. She'd planned to concentrate on the cleanup work, building up her courage—but each time she ran into Arnold, her emotions were thrown into disarray.

I-I can't say it! At the very least, I'm not going to be able to say it now!

She wormed her way out of Arnold's grip and averted her eyes. Arnold lowered his voice even more.

"You're not hurt, are you?"

"I'm not!"

"You seem to have changed gloves at some point."

That was because her hands were the most likely part of her to get dirty during their work, so she'd switched out the gloves she was borrowing for her own pair. There was no deeper reason. She tried to explain that, but it sounded like a poor excuse even to her ears. Her past recklessness was impeding her credibility here. Arnold did trust her, but when it came to matters of her own health, he was particularly strict.

“If you insist...” She did feel bad for causing him worry. Rishe closed her eyes and braced herself for the inevitable embarrassment. “Feel free...”

“Feel free to what?” Arnold asked with a frown.

“I figured this would be the only way to get you to believe me if my words couldn’t convince you,” Rishe explained. She leaned back against the wall and peeked at Arnold. “Please inspect my body in whichever way will satisfy you, until you’re convinced...”

“ ...”

His hold on her tightened. Her fingers twitched, and he quickly let his grip go slack.

“You are just...”

“Hm?”

Arnold started to say something but then stopped, resting his forehead on Rishe’s shoulder and sighing instead. He seemed awfully tired.

Now that she thought about it, Arnold was more or less serving as the supreme commander of this operation, so he would obviously be more worn out than anyone else.

“W-would you rather not?”

“ ...”

“Just so you know, you can’t take these gloves off without undoing these ribbons here...”

“ ...”

They were long gloves, so the ribbons keeping them on were tied at her upper arms. Still looking sullen, Arnold reached out for the spot Rishe had specified. His fingers brushed the ribbon and untied it in one fluid motion.

Wow...

He hooked his fingers into the end of the glove and slowly slid it down Rishe's arm.

Wh-what is this?!

Rishe felt restless as the cloth glided down her skin. They were just gloves, but Rishe shuddered at the sensation of someone else removing a piece of her clothing.

"Nngh..."

"Hey. Don't run away."

"Well, it tickles!"

Rishe wanted to beg him not to be so gentle with her, but he didn't hear her silent plea. The scowling Arnold peeled off Rishe's glove and inspected her bare arm. Her shoulder, her squishy upper arm, the soft skin on the inside of her elbow. Her forearm, wrist, palm, and fingertips. He observed each area carefully to make sure she wasn't wounded.

She regretted the suggestion she'd made at last. *Is it just me or is this situation really embarrassing?!*

His complete silence flustered her all the more. He'd removed her second glove now and was checking her other arm. He turned her around and checked the backs of her arms too. Eventually, he spun her to face him again.

"Is that enough?"

"No." Arnold narrowed his eyes. "I can inspect you in whichever way will satisfy me until I'm convinced, right?"

"Ah!"

Arnold grabbed one of her wrists and pinned her to the wall again. Even if one of her arms was free, Rishe couldn't exactly put up a fight against him.

He stroked her cheek. Her shoulders lurched from the chill of his fingertips. Arnold had definitely noticed how hot she was. His fingers traced her flushed

cheeks as if to illustrate that fact.

“I-I’m not hurt there,” she asserted, hunching over to escape his ticklish touch.

Yet Arnold just said, “I know.”

“Urgh!”

Then why hasn’t he stopped yet?!

Next, he touched her ear, which tickled even more. Arnold ran his fingers across her skin, slowly confirming she was free of injuries. Then his rough fingers reached somewhere Rische hadn’t been expecting.

“Hwah!”

His fingers brushed the left side of her neck. It was where she’d been hit by a poison arrow in the past, and where Arnold had kissed. There shouldn’t have even been a scar anymore, yet Arnold seemed to know exactly where the injury had been.

“Agh, stop it, Your Highness!”

Rische almost wanted to cry from the sensation of his rough fingers brushing against her skin.

“I’m sorry for worrying you! I promise I’ll tell you what it is I’m hiding later, so please!”

“...”

“I-I really can’t take any more tickling right now!” Rische protested, half crying.

Arnold whispered, “You really haven’t pushed yourself at all?”

All Rische could do was frantically shake her head.

Arnold sighed and finally released her hand. Then he brought his lips up to her ear again and whispered, “I think we’ll make these regular inspections. You shouldn’t have told me I could do whatever I wanted.”

“Nnngh...!”

Just as she suspected, she’d said something she shouldn’t have. This was another one of his “punishments.” But what sort of face would he make when he found out she planned to ask him for an even more inappropriate gift after this?

Can I really ask him to practice kissing me?

She had no idea. She almost decided not to, but quickly banished the thought.

I have to. After all, it’s...what I want.

“Rishe?”

Arnold looked down at her inquiringly, so she told him she’d explain later. Then, when she informed him that she could not tie the ribbons of her gloves herself, he sighed and helped her put them back on.

Afterword

TOUKO AMEKAWA HERE. It was a long wait, but I'm so happy I could finally bring you *7th Time Loop* Volume 5!

This time, it's a story about people from another one of Rishe's important lives: her life as a duke's daughter. And Rishe finally has a big moment of growth this time too!

Arnold, meanwhile, reaches a five out of ten on his "open affection for Rishe" scale in the epilogue of this volume. He's in the last stretch of the first lap, but I believe he'll keep gaining. I hope you'll watch over him as he continues the race!

Thank you so much for the illustrations, Wan☆Hachipisu-sensei. The color and monochromatic images are both gorgeous, and the last illustration in particular shot me right through the heart. I still haven't recovered. I'll treasure it for the rest of my life!

To my editor, thank you for taking me by the reins. You've brought out the best in my work.

And everyone who read this volume! Thanks to your support, this series is becoming an anime! Can you believe it?! I'm so happy, and it still doesn't feel real at all, but it's thanks to all of you! I really can't thank you enough! Rishe and friends will move freely on-screen and talk! It's an incredibly wonderful anime, so I can't wait until you're all able to see it.

Please wait for the next piece of good news!

I hope we'll be able to meet again in Volume 6 of *7th Time Loop*! Thank you so much.



Thank you for reading!

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