

NOVEL  
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BECAUSE  
MY SISTER IS A TRAGIC HEROINE,  
BUT SOMEHOW I BECAME ENTANGLED WITH A  
RIGHTEOUS PRINCE

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## AFTERWORD



# I Abandoned My Engagement

BECAUSE MY SISTER IS A **TRAGIC HEROINE**,  
BUT SOMEHOW I BECAME ENTANGLED WITH A  
**RIGHTEOUS PRINCE**



WRITTEN BY  
**Koki Fuyutsuki**

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**Hazuki Futaba**



*Seven Seas Entertainment*

I Abandoned My Engagement Because My Sister is a Tragic Heroine, but  
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Illustrations by Haduki Futaba

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## Prologue

IT'S VERY HUMAN TO BELIEVE you are the main character of your own story. And whether that story is a comedy or a tragedy...well, that depends on you.

My half sister had a particularly strong case of Main Character Syndrome. She was convinced that she was a tragic heroine and acted the part every chance she got to avoid scrutiny. She would burst into tears and cry, "Nobody cares about meeee!" which, when paired with her beautiful girlish looks, masterfully garnered sympathy from those around her.

"Ohh, my *sweet* big sister, what a bee-yoo-tiful barrette you have in your hair. I think it would suit me better. May I have it?"

"No, Jill. I only just bought it, and I like it very much."

"Noooo, how *cruel* of you. Why must you always be so *mean* to meeee?"

This exchange happened yesterday, and she cried her eyes out before I could even finish saying no.

My stepmother heard her crying and said, "Jill, is something wrong? Oh, there you go *again*, making poor Jill cry! You *wretched* child."

"Oh, *please* don't scold Leia, Mother! It's all *my* fault. I was selfish and asked Leia if she would show me her barrette."

"What a *sweet* girl you are, Jill! Can't say the same for *Leia*."

It was a vicious, unending cycle. My eyes filled with frustration whenever I had to listen to my sister and stepmother blathering away.

With things being the way they were, my sister and I couldn't help but grow distant. In fact, I was scared to have anything to do with Jill. In the past, I would push back every time she was selfish with me, but her superb acting talents meant that everyone ignored my side of the story... So I'd resigned myself to my fate.

All I needed was for somebody to understand. I was so sure that one day somebody would understand my plight, but I learned firsthand just how naive that fantasy was.

The melting of the snow signaled the end of winter. On this spring day, with winter's chill still lingering in the air, Philip, the son and heir of Duke Gilbert, invited me to his house and said, "Leia, I think you know why I'm breaking off our engagement. I'm *aghast* that you've been abusing your poor little sister right under my nose."

I was utterly dumbfounded—I had no idea what I had done wrong. All the unfounded accusations only made my head ache.

He seemed to be under the impression that I was abusing Jill. That much was easy to decipher from the look of utter disgust on his face.

"Jill was in *tears* when she came to me. She said that you brag every day about how you serve the kingdom as a saint. That you *mock* her and call her useless for failing to become a saint herself. She said that the daily abuse affected her so much that the mere *sight of your face* gives her heart palpitations!"

Philip proceeded to outline all the ways I had supposedly abused Jill. I was a saint—that part was true—and Jill had failed the saint exam, due to a lack of natural ability. But I never once mocked Jill for it. I could swear that before God.

I did remember that she asked me what my work as a saint entailed, and I remembered giving an answer. In Jill's mind, my response was likely warped into boasting about my own achievements. Jill was a genius at twisting the truth and presenting it in such a way that it sounded believable. It was so bad that if I didn't keep my wits about me, I would even start to believe that I was truly at fault.

That was why Philip had so readily believed the lie that I was abusive. I heaved several silent sighs of frustration. *What a mess I've gotten myself into again.*

“I have *never* abused Jill. And I’ll swear this before God if I—”

“There you go, *flaunting* your sainthood again! You seem awfully proud of your own abilities, but if you think your superior talents will let you get away with anything, you’re *sorely mistaken*! If you truly consider yourself a saint, why don’t you try acting like one?!”

Anything I said was shot down on the grounds that I was boasting about my sainthood. Despite all his accusations, I did *not* believe that my sainthood let me get away with anything, and I never once bragged about being a saint either. But Philip had received Jill’s story as gospel—he had already written me off as the enemy.

“All right, let me approach this from a different angle. Please listen to me. Won’t you believe Leia Westoria is a humble human being? It’s unfair to take Jill’s story at face value.”

“Now you accuse Jill of *lying*?! Tears streamed down her cheeks while she pleaded her case to me; her voice was so frail it could disappear on the wind! Aren’t you her *sister*?! How could you be so *cruel* to your own flesh and blood?! I simply cannot *fathom* it!! Ohh, ohh...!”

I’d wagered that at least some trust for me remained in Philip’s heart, but sadly, my plea was in vain. Philip wouldn’t even hear my side of the story. Instead, he sobbed and begged me to pity poor Jill.

*Could it be that my little sister’s Main Character Syndrome is contagious?*

Seeing the tears on Philip’s face made me believe that had to be true. Even in circumstances such as these, Philip couldn’t abandon the premise that Jill was the tragic heroine of this story. My voice didn’t even reach him. The sad truth was that, the more I tried to refute Jill’s story, the more certain Philip became that I was evil incarnate.

As for Philip, he was lured into this narrative by the romance of being the hero protecting Jill, the heroine. Seeing his besotted state made me realize any attempts to win his trust would be pointless.

“Fine. If you won’t believe me, that’s your right. Well, I must go now and put up some magic barriers.”

Maybe I should’ve played the fragile victim like Jill, but I just couldn’t bring myself to do that. All I could do was implore people to realize Jill was wrong.

In the end, I became the villain of the story. If Philip had a shred of trust in me left, we could’ve patched things up. But as long as the premise that I was the bad guy held fast in his heart, we would fail to reach an understanding no matter what I said.

Besides, I had work to do. I had to fulfill my duties as a saint—the very profession that Jill used to accuse me of abusing her with. My task today was to erect magic barriers in the forest to the east of the royal capital to keep the monsters out. It was a direct request from the royal family of Elshaid, so I couldn’t dilly-dally.

“H-hey, now! I just ended our engagement! Isn’t it a bit too soon to take on new work, you capricious *wretch*!”

At this point in the exchange, Philip finally lost his composure.

*It’s too soon to take on new work? You’re one to talk, Philip*, I thought. *You wouldn’t even listen to me.*

I felt that *he* was the capricious one, for not even hearing his fiancée’s side of the story. And I wanted to say so, but I knew it would accomplish nothing. Above all else, continuing to be there was painful, and I wanted to leave as quickly as I could.

As far as I was concerned, I was better off single.

My father would probably scold me for ruining my engagement to a duke, but I assumed Philip would approach Jill next. I could practically see it happening already. That way, our house would still marry into a duke’s family, so it shouldn’t disadvantage my father in any way.

Besides, Jill had already ensnared Philip’s heart. I had no proof, but my long

years as her sister left no doubt in my heart that it was so.

I entered the carriage parked outside Philip's manor and headed for the forest to the east of the royal capital. As I rode in the carriage, I ruminated over what Philip had said. *They really had some nerve, claiming I was flaunting my status as a saint...*

I knew that Jill was insecure over my being a saint. Three women of the kingdom were selected as saints to protect Elshaid from harm, and each saint was assigned a church.

The main religion practiced in the east was the Aejis Faith—it was the national religion of Elshaid. Every kingdom that practiced the Aejis Faith employed saints, of which there were always three. The reason there were only three saints was because three was considered a holy number in Aejis...but therein lay the cause of the discord between Jill and me.

Two years ago, an Elshaid saint retired, so the church held examinations to select a new saint. Jill and I took the exams together. We both passed with flying colors and made it into the final seven.

House Westoria had produced a long line of renowned mages, and Jill and I were born with magic ability far above normal—naturally, we held an advantage in exams that prioritized magic. So we both made it to the final round of exams, yet Jill rejoiced as if she had already become a saint. I remember how delirious with excitement she was that she would finally achieve her dream of being a saint...ignoring the fact that only one of the seven remaining candidates would be chosen.

In the end, I was the one chosen to be a saint. I would never forget the look on her face that day. When she stared at me, her eyes were filled with an antagonistic contempt I'd never seen before. That was likely the first time those negative feelings grew so big inside of her.

"It's just not *fair!*" she cried, blaming me for her loss.

From then on, she alleged to everyone that would listen that I was flaunting my position as a saint. No matter how hard I asked her to stop, she refused to hear it. Little did I know that this incident would escalate into what had just happened...

When the carriage arrived at the forest, I let another little sigh escape me. “My heart feels so heavy...” But I had to put up my barriers, so I chased that thought out of my head, and I got out of the carriage to see what condition the forest was in.

“Ah, I see. According to these traces, the barriers were destroyed quite a while ago. I’ll need to do a full-scale barrier incantation.”

When I surveyed the forest, I found the barriers to be in a sorrier state than anticipated—monsters could just waltz in as they pleased. I needed to take care of this as quickly as possible.

I knelt, looked up at the heavens, and prayed. My prayer let me borrow God’s powers, which I converted into light magic to activate my five steles into a summoning circle. That summoning circle would serve as an area marker to erect a protective barrier that would cover the entire forest.

“Are you Saint Leia?”

“Mmf?!” I twirled around, surprised by the voice suddenly behind me.

“Are you the insolent saint who has been abusing her little sister?”

And there before me stood Eric Elshaid—the Kingdom of Elshaid’s crown prince. He had beautiful silvery hair and deep blue eyes that I could lose myself in. Having those eyes turned on me made my heart skip a beat.

*Why is the crown prince talking to me?*

And he was talking just like Philip, accusing me of abusing my little sister. What in the world was happening?



## Chapter 1: The Tragic Heroine and the Righteous Crown Prince

“**W**HAT? WHY AREN’T you speaking?” Prince Eric demanded, gazing harshly at me.

Though I was nervous, I was quite offended that he would be so rude to a stranger. Crown prince or no, it was a less than pleasant first impression.

“Prince Eric, it is an honor to meet you. I am Leia Westoria. This abuse of which you speak, it never happened. Not a mite.”

I paid my respects to the prince while continuing to work on the barriers. I had just managed to unleash enough magic energy into the summoning circle to erect a barrier around the entire forest, so I wasn’t about to cancel the spell—not even for the crown prince.

And naturally, I took the opportunity to deny the claim that I had abused my little sister. Because it was untrue.

“Hmm. Well, my friend Philip said that you abused your sister quite severely, causing her great psychological trauma.”

“Yes, I heard the same story from Lord Philip myself, Your Highness, but those claims are groundless. I can only assume Jill has a persecution complex.”

“Yes, but abusers are rarely aware of their actions, so you may only *think* you’re innocent.”

Eric’s claim was technically not wrong, and I wouldn’t blame a third party for siding with Philip. But the prince did not know Jill.

Jill had a very active imagination, so she surely believed I was abusing her. In other words, no matter how hard I denied her claims, they would still be real to her. That’s why Philip found it so easy to believe and sympathize with her.

At this rate, the lie that I had abused Jill would become truth by consensus—

no matter how hard I tried to clear up the misunderstanding, they would likely perceive that as a common ploy of an abuser, hence the mess I was in. It was incredibly difficult to correct someone's perceptions when they've deluded themselves—this was something I knew all too well.

"Say what you will, but I have never said anything to denigrate Jill. I've heard that you are a righteous and equitable man, Prince Eric, so I'm shocked to see you jump to such quick conclusions over a matter you know nothing about, based on the testimony of *one* person. I guess rumors can't be trusted, can they?"

"Ohh..."

*Uh-oh. I just snapped at the prince without thinking!*

I immediately regretted opening my mouth. I supposed I was still quite stressed from my fiancé breaking off our engagement. Jill had put me in a foul mood, for more reasons than one. And on top of that, a prince I'd never met had to call me an "insolent saint who's been abusing her little sister." It was only inevitable that I would snap at someone.

Even saints can only put up with so much stress, and I was especially fragile today, given that my engagement had just been broken off. Besides, I didn't care if he was the crown prince, I couldn't just sit there quietly and take his mistreatment. Even if he wouldn't believe me, I wanted to at least defend myself. Still, that didn't change the fact that I said the wrong thing. Now I was in a real fix: I just picked a fight with the crown prince.

It was likely that rumors of the saint who abused her little sister had spread all the way to the royal family. Against my will, a future where I was no longer a saint flashed before my eyes.

"I see. You are correct, I know nothing about the matter. But Philip came to me with actual *tears* in his eyes and told me how cruel you had been to your little sister. I suppose seeing my friend cry like that allowed my emotions to get the better of me..."

Prince Eric thoughtfully folded his arms and nodded. His one-sided attitude had made me snap at him, but at least he was willing to hear me out. But I was still surprised to hear that Philip had bought into the tragic heroine narrative so readily that he had even cried in front of Prince Eric.

*To think that Prince Eric could be so swayed by a rumor alone... My little sister is a force to be reckoned with.*

“All right, let’s start over. I’ll get to know you first. You’re right, it wasn’t fair of me to believe Philip’s testimony. I will apologize for that.”

“Umm...Your Highness?”

After giving a light apology, the prince sat on a nearby boulder and stared hard at me.

*Is he going to just keep observing me like that?*

A part of me found him fascinatingly earnest, but I was a little frustrated—and I had a reason for that. A very good reason. He was sitting in the path of danger.

“Your Highness! Get down!”

I threw a knife at the monster about to attack Prince Eric from behind. My magic knife ended the monster’s life instantly upon contact. Even while erecting these barriers, I still had enough magic for simple spells. Then again, endurance was a bare minimum for a saint—if I couldn’t accomplish a simple feat like this, I wouldn’t be one in the first place.

We were in a forest near monster territory. This was the sort of place where barriers were usually erected. As such, it was not the sort of place where a crown prince should set foot. Prince Eric’s actions could only be described as reckless.

It was entirely plausible that a monster would attack us while I was in the middle of erecting my barriers, but Eric’s bodyguards were nowhere in sight, and I had no idea why. Wasn’t that what bodyguards were for?

“Prince Eric, I must advise you to leave this place. If you’re hurt, it will be my

responsibility. So please, lea—huh?!"

Just then, Eric unsheathed his sword and charged at me with ridiculous speed. His nimble approach, like a silent gust of wind, was inhuman.

"Don't worry, I'm strong. I usually keep a bodyguard with me, but I am able to defend myself," he murmured in my ear.

I turned around to see a giant monster impaled on his sword. I had heard that Elshaid's crown prince was incredibly gifted in both his studies and in athletics, but his swordsmanship was shockingly first rate too.

*Wow, he detected the monster's presence behind him almost exactly the same time I did.*

As a saint, I was conditioned to notice monsters swiftly, but Eric's reaction time wasn't that different. He couldn't have achieved such sharp reflexes with a half-baked training regimen.

"I have many enemies. This may sound odd, coming from the crown prince, but this kingdom is rotten to the core. Ever since I started fighting the corruption festering in Elshaid, I have had to fend off would-be assassins."

"Assassins are targeting you? You? Crown prince Eric?"

"Yeah, and we captured a dozen of them today alone. Naturally, they'll all be executed after an interrogation. It's to be expected when you target the life of the future king. But punishing people for their unforgivable acts has led to some rather pesky consequences."

Eric confessed that his sense of justice had put his life in danger in such an offhanded manner, he may as well have been describing the life of a stranger. I figured that went to show just how tough the experience had made him. He couldn't even trust his own bodyguards...

"I have no complaints regarding you as a saint. You've shown your skill well enough. Don't mind me, just keep putting up those barriers."

He sat on the boulder again, crossed his legs, and continued to stare at me. I

hadn't been observed while erecting barriers since my training days, so it made me a little nervous. Meeting the crown prince in such a peculiar way was baffling, but I shook off my confusion and focused on the barrier before me so I could at least finish my job.

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I faintly heard the ringing of the evening bells from the city.

"My task for the day is done, so I'll be taking my leave now, Your Highness."

"Wow, that's a saint for you! You work fast. I guess I'll head back to the palace too. See you later."

I bowed to Prince Eric, then I got in my carriage and headed back.

*He said "see you later" like he was going to come here again tomorrow... Things really have taken a strange turn. Since Eric had watched me work the whole time, I was much more tired than usual. All in all, today really was a series of troublesome events. I wonder if my father already got word of my broken engagement.*

I was exhausted enough as it was; the thought of receiving a lecture when I got home made my head pound. It truly was a pity that I couldn't cure my headache with magic.

"Welcome home, my sweet sister! I hope you had another lovely day, doing the Lord's work."

I entered my house with a mounting sense of dread, but Jill greeted me with a warm smile. Everyone who knew her said she had the smile of an angel, but I regret to inform you that, to me, it looked like the grin of a devil.

"Jill, you told Lord Philip that I was abusing you, didn't you?"

"B-but why would I ever say *anything* bad about you to Lord Philip? Oh! Oh! Y-you're *too* cruel! Oh, Leaaaa, you're just so meeeeann!"

Jill's eyes instantly welled up at the mention of that cock and bull story she told Philip. *Ahh, there she goes again. Crying shall commence in three...two...*

The speed at which she turned on the tears was extraordinary, really. In a way, I was impressed. And the swiftness with which she turned on the waterworks correlated positively to the degree of trouble it caused me.

But the real trouble always came after, because whenever Jill cried, *she* would always make an appearance.

*"Leia! You yelled at poor Jill again, didn't you?! Why can't you be nice to your baby sister?! Just look at how scared she is!"* My stepmother, Catherine, stormed down the stairs.

My birth mother died when I was little, and Catherine was my father's second wife. She was Jill's mother, and she harbored a grudge against me for some reason. Meanwhile, she loved her precious baby Jill to death, so whenever Jill cried, she was quick to blame me. When I was chosen to be a saint and Jill failed, she stormed into the church and threw a fit. I also got an earful from her, making the day I became a saint a more troublesome than happy memory.

All in all, my relationship with Catherine was even rockier than my relationship with Jill.

What upset me the most about Philip breaking our engagement was that I might have to continue living here now. Nothing felt worse than living in a home where two of the people who lived there hated you.

*"Oh, Mother, please forgive poor Leia. Lord Philip broke off their engagement, and she's awfully distressed about it."* Jill had a smug look of victory on her face as she came to my defense. It was vexing, the cunning way she omitted the fact that *she* was the reason Philip broke off the engagement in the first place.

*But I know how Jill's mind works. I know she's genuinely convinced herself she had nothing to do with my broken engagement.*

I was angry...but I had resigned myself to my fate. I knew all too well just how

powerful her self-delusion was.

“I don’t blame Lord Philip for falling out of love with a cold, *heartless* girl like you. If only he had chosen *Jill* from the very start, we could have been spared this *trauma*.”

“If only he had chosen Jill from the very start? So I take it that Lord Philip has already—”

“Yes, of course! Lord Philip was *gracious* enough to ask if he could marry our sweet Jill and protect her from all the *harm* that comes her way. He added that he doesn’t want to have a thing to do with you and your *rotten* personality anymore.”

As Catherine detailed Jill’s engagement to Philip, it was clear that he had feelings for her. After all, this was the guy who ran to Prince Eric in tears, pleading for justice. He wouldn’t have done that for a girl he didn’t care for—even Philip wasn’t that weird.

But proposing to a girl the same day he broke an engagement with her sister? I don’t think he could be any more unprincipled than that. *And Philip called me capricious? He’s one to talk! That guy moved on way too fast.*

Various feelings roiled inside me, but before I could put any of them into words, my stepmother’s scolding began.

“I *hope* you’ve learned your lesson, Leia. I don’t care how talented you are as a saint, if you’re rotten as a human being, you’ll never be happy. A heartless girl like you is destined to marry a *scumbag*.”

It was the sort of free-floating hostility that would make anybody lose their temper. But if I fought back, I could already hear my words being twisted and exaggerated against me later. It would result in nothing but added stress.

So all I could do was ignore her. I had long since given up on getting her to understand me. And to make things worse, I still had the same lecture from my father to look forward to later. After all these years, I had no doubt that my

father's words wouldn't hurt me, but that confidence didn't make it any easier. The whole thing just made me feel so hollow.

"For crying out loud, what are you two bickering about in the doorway..."

"Speak of the devil..." I murmured under my breath as my father emerged from his study. He wore his usual mask of ineffectual frustration, but his eyes betrayed his true feelings: He wanted to resolve this conflict as soon as possible, even if it meant making me the bad guy.

"Oh, oh, Father, I'm so s-sorry. Leia and I were having a *little* spat," Jill sniveled.

"*Darling*, Leia has been cruel to Jill *again*. Do talk some sense into her!"

"Oh dear. Again, Leia?" Forced to follow the same script for who knew how many times now, my father looked at me as if I were a tumor. He probably didn't care who was telling the truth—whether I truly was a villain or Jill was blowing everything out of proportion. To be blunt, my father's indifference was the main cause of our strained relationship. If he would only blame my stepmother and sister just a little...if he would only hear my side of the story... things wouldn't have gotten as bad as they were.

But my father wouldn't speak up, nor would he listen. He liked to play it safe and steer clear of hassle. At least outside of the home he acted as a proper count and maintained his lands, so it couldn't be said he totally ignored the world around him—that was his one saving grace.

"Oh, if only *Leia* didn't live here, our family would be so much more peaceful."

"But, Mother, that would be so unfortunate for poor Leia! Then again...if I were an only child, I would be so much happier... Oh, no, I *shouldn't* say it. I *mustn't* indulge in such wicked thoughts!"

"You are such a *sweet girl*, Jill."

Jill was shamelessly voicing her inner monologue; it would've been nice if she'd at least made an effort to hide her true colors. That pair truly did believe

they would be better off without me, so it was a shame they couldn't get rid of me by marrying me off to Philip. But then again, if my leaving would make their lives so much better, it was baffling why they'd sabotaged it.

"Anyway, Leia. I'll see you in my study—"

"M-Master! Master Westoria! Oh dear, oh dear, oh dear!" our servant Bob yelled.

The abnormal fluster in his voice drew everyone's eyes toward him—we knew there must be some emergency.

"What's the racket all about?" my father demanded.

"Th-the crown prince! Prince Eric! He's come to call!!!"

My parents let out a muted gasp.

"*Prince Eric*, you say? Ooh, he's my *dream* man. Ever since I was a little girl, I wished to live with Prince Eric in the palace."

Our household erupted into a frenzy of activity. Jill wiped her eyes and quickly smoothed her hair. I guessed she had a thing for Prince Eric. The way she raved about him with stars in her eyes barely an hour after accepting Philip's proposal —talk about turning on a dime. She could teach a class.

Still, we had no idea why His Highness would grace our humble home with his presence. I could only assume I'd offended him back at the forest and he came to complain. Either way, this was still going to be a big hassle. I just wanted to go to my room and lie down, but that would have to wait. All I could do was sigh again... Seemed like I was doing a lot of that today.

"W-well, well! My goodness, our house has been blessed by royalty's presence! If only we had known sooner, we could have given you a proper welcome."

"No need to concern yourself; it was my fault for barging in unannounced. Count Westoria, let's get straight to the purpose of my visit. I have a very important favor to ask."

The prince's sudden announcement made my head tilt in confusion. *The prince wants a favor? What could it be? Hmm... I can't think of anything.*

What could my father do for him? Loan out his lands for some royal project? That was the only thing that came to mind.

"A favor of us, Your Highness? Please, ask anything and we shall comply. I will do everything in my power to fulfill any request of Your Highness."

Even though my father had no idea what this request might be, his answer was automatic. It was only natural for him to say he would do everything in his power to help: He was speaking to the future king, after all. If my father had a chance to get on his good side, he would.

"I truly appreciate your commendable attitude. Well, here is my request: I wish to employ your daughter, Saint Leia Westoria for some time as my bodyguard. As such, she shall need to reside in the palace."

Another muffled gasp from my parents.

*Wh-what is he saying? "Come work at the palace" was the last thing I imagined...*

At the prince's unexpected proclamation, my happy home descended into chaos. Naturally, I was just as surprised as everyone. I was so stunned that my mouth gaped.

Despite the tumult in my mind, I felt the chill of Jill's terrifying gaze upon me. She stood there, trembling and clenching her fists with the most bitter expression. I didn't know what exactly she was bitter about, though I imagined it had something to do with the prince ignoring her and asking me to serve him at the palace.

"Oh, yes, I see... You'd like Leia to be Your Highness's bodyguard, yes... I feel that might present some logistic issues—she is quite busy erecting barriers every day."

My father answered the prince's proposal with an incredibly sensible answer.

He was right. My current work requests came from the crown, and while Prince Eric did indeed belong to the royal family, I couldn't simply turn my entire schedule upside down at his behest.

That aside, the prince sure was an oddball for wanting me to be his bodyguard when I was suspected of abusing my little sister. I couldn't understand why he would want to have someone like me close by.

"Quite right, Count Westoria. But this is not a selfish whim of mine—it's a direct request from His Majesty the King. And you needn't worry. We already sent a request for a saint through the church. I have the agreement here."

"I'll have a look at it... Hmm...yes, this is indeed a direct request from His Majesty..."

If the king himself sent a request to the church, it must be a very important assignment. And there was precedent for it: A saint's job was to maintain the kingdom's prosperity, and protecting the prince was part of that.

But a saint's job was to maintain the kingdom's prosperity in a general sense. In fact, asking a saint to be a personal bodyguard for a prince was the rarest of requests.

"Um, Your Highness, I understand that this is a direct request, but I have other duties which I must attend to."

"I know you're busy, but you don't need to worry about that either. I will adjust my responsibilities to accommodate your own."

"Accommodate how?"

"Just as I did today: I will shadow you as you carry out your tasks so we can be together at all times."

What in the world was Prince Eric even suggesting? Looking back on our exchange just now, I told Prince Eric I was busy with my own saintly duties, and he didn't even bat an eye when he said he would shadow me.

*It doesn't make sense to me. It's hard to believe that he would turn his whole*

*life upside down just so he could be near me at all times.*

Even though he said he wanted to keep me not just close but as his bodyguard specifically, it didn't make sense that he would tag along while I saw to my duties, even if I were acting as a bodyguard. My mind started to swim as the conversation took an even more incomprehensible turn.

"Sh-shadow her, you say? Your Highness will shadow...Leia at her job?"

"Indeed. I want to determine whether or not Leia is suitable to be a saint of Elshaid, so I'm taking the opportunity to observe her at work. This is all included in the order from His Majesty."

I was finally starting to understand. Apparently, he was going to observe me like he did today, except with permission. It all seemed very dignified. While I doubted it was normal for a person to observe their own bodyguard while being protected, for someone like Prince Eric, whose sense of justice was stronger than the average person, the idea wasn't all that bizarre. The time we'd spent together so far was brief, but I did get the impression he was a bit of an enigma.

*I never thought I'd hear the phrase, "I'm going to always be by your side" outside of a romantic context. I guess I'm just not cut out to be a romantic heroine.*

In fact, I was the polar opposite of Jill. I didn't seek out romance, and I wanted to avoid abnormal situations like this if at all possible.

"Well, if His Majesty has granted permission, then it is not my place to question. Ah, yes. I see. Understood. Well, we will happily leave Leia in your care at the palace."

"B-but, Father!"

Yet another muted gasp.

A voice rang out, a shriek louder than any I had heard from this person. Just before our father could give his final approval to Prince Eric's request, she had cried out to interrupt him.

"Jill, whatever is wrong? You know, I don't usually hear you raise your voice like that. And in front of His Highness, even! Do be more careful."

My father looked genuinely baffled by Jill's abnormally loud voice as he rebuked her. And Jill, with a sour look on her face, gasped in horror—then immediately smiled peacefully. She was always quick to change her mood, but what has she been so upset about since I came home?

"B-but, *Father*, if Leia moves into the Palace, I will miss her *terribly*."

It was so unexpected that I almost blurted out, "You'll never miss me, and we all know it!" I was just so taken aback by her claim that she would miss me, I couldn't figure out her true goal.

"Hmm? But, Jill, didn't you just say minutes ago that you would be much happier if Leia were gone?"

"*What?!* Oh, but I'd never say such a thing! Leia is such a kind, *sweet* big sister to me—I want her to stay by my side forever and always!"

*My ears must be defective. Jill would never say anything like that in earnest.*

How could a girl who accused me of abusing her day in and day out turn around and say she wants me to *stay by her side* of all things? It was a clear contradiction. But to an outsider who only saw her at this moment, and not how she was every day, she surely seemed like a sweet girl whose love for her big sister was unwavering. Oh, what a uniquely exasperating predicament.

"So you're Jill Westoria. Philip Gilbert is a friend of mine, you know. Now, according to him, Leia has been abusing you. He said *you* were the one who told him so. Is that true?"

That's right. Prince Eric had heard Jill's side of the story through Philip. It was only natural that he was able to see how her words and actions contradicted each other.

"Y-you think *I* spoke ill of my *sweet big sister* to Lord Philip? B-but I would *never* do such a thing! What I *said* to Lord Philip was that Leia was so incredibly

*talented* that I felt like an utter failure... I was merely *lamenting* to him because I felt depressed..."

With tears in her eyes, Jill told Prince Eric the truth as she saw it. She was good at putting on a pretty face and getting people to believe her side of the story, but that wasn't her only talent. By turning on the waterworks, she avoided deeper questioning and furthered her own agenda.

Regardless of the truth, the look on her face had the power to make you believe you were mistaken all along. I figured Eric would let up on her now.

"All right, if what you're saying is true, that means Philip is either a painful embarrassment of a man who deluded himself into thinking your sister was abusing you, or the story you told him was intentionally misleading... Now then, which is it?"

Eric betrayed my expectations and calmly pressed Jill further, without flinching. Jill's story was full of contradictions, yet it was still unusual for anybody to keep digging for the truth like this.

"Wh-what are you *saying*, Prince Eric? *Why* are you being so mean to meeeee?" she sniveled, tears streaming down her face as she blatantly refused to answer the prince's question.

Whenever Jill's hypocrisy was pointed out, she simply turned on the waterworks, I ended up looking like the villain, and Catherine would scream my ear off. Even more grating was how my father and other men would then always stop questioning her and apologize. They would back down immediately—perhaps to avoid further hassle—and take the blame themselves. Jill had come to expect this treatment from everybody, and that only made her worse.

"Your Highness, I don't know what Lord Philip told you about Leia and Jill, but as poor Jill is crying...couldn't we perhaps drop the matter?"

And, just as I foresaw, my conflict-avoidant father begged Prince Eric to drop the matter. Jill was still sniveling. I was almost impressed at how beautifully she could keep those giant tears rolling.

I watched Prince Eric, wondering what his next move would be.

“Jill, do you honestly expect those tears to fool me? Please don’t make me laugh. Such antics can’t twist the truth. Oh, how much easier my life would have been if they could. Speaking as someone who’s experienced a crying lady who nearly stabbed me in the back, I frankly find this situation most unpleasant.” In a tone that was both calm and firm, Prince Eric sent Jill the message that her tears were futile. His voice was quiet yet filled with a distinct rage.

All those assassination attempts had made Eric immune to tears. I had to wonder what circumstances led to a crying lady attempting to stab him in the back. I couldn’t imagine it, but it must have been quite the chaotic scene.

“Oh, oh...waaaah... Prince Eric... You’re just too *cruel!*”

Prince Eric’s harsh rebuke made Jill sob all the louder. Not knowing what I would even call this scene, all I could do was stand there in a daze and watch. The prince was disgusted by Jill—that much was clear. And my father was more troubled than I had ever seen him before.

“Well, one thing has been made quite clear: The accusations of Saint Leia abusing her little sister Jill hold not an ounce of truth. Jill admitted so herself, so there’s no doubt. In which case, there are no issues with Leia’s ability to be a saint. To settle the matter so quickly is truly a blessing. Now I can take her back to the palace with me with a free conscience.”

“Now, wait just a minute, Prince Eric!” Catherine snapped. It was clear she just wanted to stop me from going to the palace. “Leia *is* abusing Jill! She’s just tricked sweet, fragile Jill into not noticing it. If you take her back to the palace with you, she will *surely* cause you trouble. Mark my words!”

“Tricked Jill into not noticing, you say? Would a girl who, deliberately or not, told a misleading story about her sister abusing her really *not notice* such a thing? Now, let’s set aside the question of whether or not abuse has taken place. I’d like to determine that for myself, if you please.”

“Oh... I suppose that would suffice.”

"As long as there is a possibility of abuse, it's best that the sisters live apart. Wouldn't you agree, Count Westoria?"

"Hmm. Yes. Quite right. As long as Your Highness finds the arrangement acceptable..."

This time the muted gasp came from Catherine and Jill. From their expressions, it looked like they'd gotten the opposite of what they'd wagered.

"Then it's decided! Leia, starting today, you will be my bodyguard. And I won't take no for an answer. Also, it would be best if you left this house."

"Prince Eric?"

"Your Highness, wait! Leia does not belong in a *palace*!"

"Where are you taking her? You *mustn't*! Oh, Prince Eric! Please, *please* don't take my sweet sister away from meeee!"

As Prince Eric grabbed my hand to lead me out of the house, Jill forgot her tears and jumped to her feet in protest. Her voice was like a howling animal. But without so much as a nod in her direction, the prince tugged on my hand and whisked me into his carriage.

I too was stunned by the sudden turn of events, and before I knew it, I was at the palace. Seriously, I had no memory of the ride over there.

And that was how the new chapter in my life began.

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"Have a seat. Do you take sugar in your tea?"



"Thank you. Sugar in my tea, Your Highness? Er, no, thank you."

Having skipped supper at home, I was given a light meal when I arrived at the palace. Immediately after, the crown prince invited me into his study and urged me to sit on the sofa. Everything was moving so fast my brain couldn't keep up.

And it was then I realized that my broken engagement was already a distant, indifferent memory.

Incidentally, I didn't take sugar in my tea because anytime I saw something sweet, an image of Jill fake-crying and calling me her "sweet sister" popped into my mind. I got the sense that I had been avoiding sweets in particular ever since she started the tragic heroine act.

"I don't take sugar either, though I do add milk sometimes. My chief bodyguard Johann swears that adding the appropriate amount of sugar brings out the subtle nuances and richness of the tea leaf, but I just don't have much of a sweet tooth."

As he sat in front of his desk and talked, the servant who brought the tea tasted it for poison before Eric took a sip. It seemed he was more wary of assassins than normal. His teapot, cups, and other utensils were all made of silver as well.

*I heard somewhere that silver reacts to poison. If he has to employ this tactic on top of having his servants test his drinks for poison, that goes to show the danger of his situation.*

Seeing how the simple act of sipping tea could turn into such an ordeal made me feel a little bit of pity for the prince. Once Eric sipped his tea, I took a sip of my own. And it certainly was royal palace tea—its aroma was sublime.

"Thank you...it's delicious." I didn't mean to say the words out loud, but it was so much more delicious than I could have imagined that I couldn't help myself.

Prince Eric smiled and replied, "Glad to hear it. Help yourself to the cookies. I'm going to work on some documents... Of course, if you're bored, feel free to

read any of the books on the shelf. The topmost books are the ones I personally like most.” And with that, he got to work on his documents.

The cookies were from a recently opened bakery in the capital. I recalled the time Jill bought some just for herself, then flaunted them. Even cookies were triggering negative memories of my little sister now... She must have traumatized me more than I realized. I needed to try to forget and move on, now that I was away from home—even if my move was not exactly something I planned.

*I'm actually surprised that the crown prince is so busy, he needs to work into the night. I thought all a prince did was lean back and take credit for everyone else's work.*

In retrospect, it made me think that he was wasting his time when he watched me work, but I figured he was just that eager to make me his bodyguard.

I sat there, wondering how much longer I should relax and enjoy the tea and cookies. I assumed he would give orders to his new bodyguard, but he showed no such inclination. Perhaps he was going to wait until he finished with his papers.

Then again, even princes had their own problems. I decided to wait quietly until he was ready. And I could do more than just wait—I had cookies to eat and books to read. I could wait forever if I had to.

“.....”

*This is taking forever! He could've at least warned me it was going to take this long.*

How much longer was Prince Eric going to keep me waiting? An hour had already passed.

*Huh? There's somebody outside the window.*

To protect myself from monsters, I constantly sent out my magic energy in a ten-meter radius, so I could always sense when someone was approaching even without looking.

Apparently, attempts on the prince's life seemed to truly be a near daily occurrence. I thought I had it bad, but I had to admit that Prince Eric had it far worse.

*He hasn't given me any bodyguard orders yet, but I have to do something.*

I returned my cookie to my plate and drew a circle of light with my index finger.

*"Saintly Wind, pierce!"*

*"AAAAGGGHHH!!!"*

The assassin crashed through the window into the study...and was promptly flung back by the gale that burst from my circle of light. With assassins lurking this close to the prince, the palace seemed as dangerous as the rest of the world.

*"Hmm... Only one today, eh?"*

Prince Eric's reaction was way too mild for somebody whose life had just been threatened. He would have been perfectly justified if he showed a little terror or surprise... But despite the assassin breaking through his window, Prince Eric sat unmoved as he continued to work on his papers.

This was obviously just a part of his daily routine. Watching this scene unfold...made me feel sad somehow.

About two hours after tea, the prince rose and peered at my face. He was finally ready to explain my duties as a bodyguard. At the very least, I wanted to know what times of day he needed me to be on duty.

*"All right, that concludes your first assignment. Isn't that a good book?"*

“Yes, it’s very good, Your High—what? My first assignment?”

“Now, stay by my side every day like this starting tomorrow. My work ran late today, between negotiating with His Majesty and visiting your home, but usually I’ll need you to be my bodyguard in the evenings for one to two hours.”

The words “that concludes your first assignment” seemed too good to be true. All I did was eat cookies, drink tea, and read a book. The refreshments were delicious, and the book was good, but that was all I had done for two hours.

*Now, if you pointed out that I sensed the presence of an invader and attacked him with magic, you would be right. But that was all I did.* In short, I didn’t feel like I did any bodyguarding. And yet, the prince was trying to dismiss me for the day.

“Your Highness, please wait. I assumed my bodyguard duties would take the entire day.”

“Of course not. That’s not how it works. I have specialized bodyguards. Besides, you’re a saint. Not even a prince such as I would work you to death.”

To be honest, I was stunned. Although our time spent together was too quiet since we barely spoke, it seemed as though I was nothing but the prince’s tea buddy.

Why did he want me to do this for him? For that matter, if he had specialized bodyguards already, why did he need someone like me?

I had assumed that palace life would be a little better than my life back home, but finding out the job was this easy actually scared me.

“Then, with all due respect...why? Why did you go out of your way to make me your bodyguard? No matter how I look at it, you don’t need me.”

I couldn’t understand what Prince Eric was thinking. Between this and wanting to observe my saintly duties, I couldn’t see why he was so obsessed with me.

Since I completely denied his accusation that I abused Jill, I figured that had made him obstinate, almost as if he was determined to catch me red-handed and expose my evil nature. But doing that wouldn't benefit him in any way. Besides, from what I'd seen so far, Prince Eric already had his hands full with his duties as crown prince.

"At first...I was furious. I was so happy for my friend because I heard he was marrying a saint. I assumed she must be a very talented and virtuous woman—but my expectations were betrayed."

The truth had come out—he *was* angry about Philip's broken engagement. But I already knew that much. And since he had come at me when I was vulnerable, I had said some awful things to him too.

But, with the clarity of hindsight, I realized that from his point of view, I was the wench who had betrayed his friend. It was only natural for him to act the way he did, especially when his life was in such danger every day.

"Afterward, I watched you at work as a saint. And while there was no doubt that you were distracted by my presence, you wielded your great arcane powers calmly and without conceit to erect the barriers. Since you were not the woman Philip had made you out to be, I began to have doubts."

I silently took in his words.

"I was worried that I might have jumped to conclusions about you. And I was embarrassed that I had let my self-righteousness get the better of me and scolded you. I was ashamed that I had made assumptions about somebody I barely knew."

"Huh?"

Prince Eric's crystal-clear eyes looked directly into mine. He wanted to apologize for how he behaved earlier. And he was right: He had denounced me without getting the facts straight. To be honest, I did think Eric had acted poorly.

But since assassins were at his throat every day, it was understandable that he would be so untrusting. So as long as his apology was sincere, I was willing to forgive him.

“I’m sorry for how I treated you earlier today. I was wrong—I should have made an effort to confirm the facts. As the crown prince, and more importantly, as a human being, my behavior was just too inconsiderate.”

“Your Highness, please, don’t bow to me. I don’t hold any grudges.”

“Please, just let me observe you at work again with a fresh slate so that I may pass judgment. I want to have a good, proper look at you and determine if you truly are suited to be a saint and whether Philip was telling the truth. It’s true that I don’t have enough bodyguards, but that was only half of the reason I brought you here.”

“Huh?”

*Um, what? The matter isn’t closed?*

I couldn’t believe he still suspected me of foul play. Either that, or he simply wanted to consider Philip’s testimony and my own with an impartial gaze.

He was—how should I put it?—stubborn. Even though he owned up to his mistakes, there were still things he wouldn’t surrender so easily.

“So...you still won’t believe me, Your Highness?”

“I’m sorry... Naturally, I *want* to believe you, but I simply can’t be certain after knowing someone for such a short time. It’s my nature.”

I still had a hard time understanding what he was getting at, but the look in his eyes told me he was sincere. His eyes were so earnest that I looked away without meaning to.

*He’s so righteous, it hurts to look at him.*

“I’m going to keep an eye on you for a while. As a saint, and as my bodyguard.”

And with that, Prince Eric instructed his servant to show me to my room and walked out of the study. Now my work for the day was truly done.

I felt trapped. I was going to be judged by Prince Eric, and those clear, righteous eyes of his.

“Lady Leia, Prince Eric has instructed me to escort you to your room. This way, please.”

*Well, either way, at least I finally get to lie down.*

The servant showed me to my quarters. Once inside, I was immediately surprised by how spacious it was. It certainly was a palace-sized guest room—it was several times larger than my room at home.

The bed in here was so comfortable that it could plunge me into a deep and immediate sleep. And I couldn’t believe how much quieter things were without Catherine and Jill around.

*“Please, just let me observe you at work again with a fresh slate.”*

Maybe he truly was just virtuous and true to a fault. He really surprised me, admitting his mistakes one moment, then saying that in earnest the next. Truth be told, I almost laughed then. This might’ve been the first time I’ve ever been so curious about a person. Even after I closed my eyes, I could still see Prince Eric behind my lids, and I couldn’t sleep.

But the sensation faded after about ten minutes. The next thing I knew, it was morning. The succession of unexpected events had worn me out.

Today would be my first full day in my new life at the palace. A servant helped me dress and get ready for the day. After breakfast, I prepared for my saintly duties and went to Prince Eric’s study.

“You’re off to do your work as a saint, aren’t you? Use a palace carriage. I’ll ride with you.”

Thus, my life as Eric’s so-called bodyguard—more of a conversation partner—began.

The unexpected turn of events was dizzying, but I wanted to do my best at the tasks assigned to me. I may not have looked it, but I was highly competitive, so if Prince Eric wanted to judge my character with his own eyes, I vowed that I would win his approval at all costs.

I had never been ashamed of my actions, not even once. And starting today, I was going to show that to Prince Eric.

### **-Eric's Perspective-**

I DIDN'T HAVE MANY FRIENDS. Perhaps this had something to do with the fact that I had many foes. I was sure nobody was strange enough to *want* to face peril every day.

Philip Gilbert was one of the few friends I had. His father, Duke Gilbert, was a longtime friend of my father, which is how he and I became childhood friends. Frankly, aside from early childhood, I never had a friend I could wholly trust.

Assassins threatened my life every day, and I was constantly beset by adversaries. I was slow to trust—that was why longtime friends like Philip were so important to me.

“Prince Eric! Oh, something terrible has happened! Saint Leia is an *evil* woman!”

One day, Philip came to me in distress, claiming Saint Leia had a rotten personality. It was unusual for Philip to be so forthright in his condemnations. At the very least, I’d never heard him make a declaration like this before, so I assumed it was rather serious.

After all, Leia Westoria was Philip’s wife-to-be. And a saint, no less. Since there were only three saints in Elshaid, the church screened them to make certain there were no flaws in their character.

So I wondered what this Saint Leia must have done for my friend to be so strident in his criticisms. I decided I would start by hearing Philip's side of the story.

"Slow down, you're not making any sense. Tell me in detail, what did Leia do?" I soothed the seething Philip so he could relay the events with precision.

Due to the fact that I couldn't attend parties often for fear of assassination attempts, I was not acquainted with Leia, but since I attended the saint confirmation ceremony, I at least knew what she looked like: blonde hair, blue eyes, and exuding a strong-willed aura.

"F-forgive me, Your Highness! Anyway, do you know what sort of person her little sister is?!"

"Saint Leia's little sister, you say? Nothing comes to mind, but I do vaguely recall her appearance. I've never spoken with her, though."

*Hmm. Leia's little sister... I have a vague sense she was also at the confirmation...*

I knew all the names of the government officials from top to bottom, but I didn't know the names of all the daughters of the nobility. If I had attended parties regularly, I might have learned some of them, though.

"Well, Leia's little sister is named Jill, and she's such a lovely, elegant little lady," Philip explained, sensing I didn't know her.

*Aha. Jill Westoria... So that's the name of Leia's little sister.*

According to Philip, Jill was as beautiful as a flower.

"Jill has dreamed of being a saint all her life! She endured the grueling examination process and made it all the way to the finals! But unfortunately, Leia was chosen over her in the end!"

"It can't be helped; there was only one open position."

"Yes, and Jill said as much! She said that her sister was a genius and more worthy of the position!"

"Well, if she understands that, then I don't see the problem."

According to the Aejis Faith, the number of saints was limited to three. It was a strict rule with no exceptions. And because it was such an exclusive profession, many girls dreamed of being saints when they grew up.

If Jill still acknowledged Leia's talents in spite of her own dreams being crushed, I could sympathize with the girl, but I didn't see any major problem...

"Your Highness, *this* is the most important part. Are you listening?"

"I can hear you just fine, you don't need to stand so close! I'm not going to run and hide or anything, so please, just say what you're going to say."

"F-forgive me. I just got carried away... Leia, knowing it was Jill's dream to become a saint, has taken to *flaunting* her status as a saint. For example..."

From Philip's testimony, I gathered that Leia had psychologically tormented Jill. Knowing full well that Jill was struggling to get over her grief of not becoming a saint, Leia mocked her for not being chosen, breaking Jill's heart.

"When Jill came to me with tears in her eyes, telling me of Leia's abuse, I couldn't bear to look at her. Oh-oh...! Your Highness, do you understand?! How *tragic* for poor, fragile Jill! Oh-ohh, oh-ohhh!"

*Philip...no need for you to cry.*

I couldn't stand to see tears in Philip's eyes. That was my first time seeing him weep—to be honest, I was shocked.

What in the world was wrong with the church? I thought they thoroughly screened saint candidates not only for their arcane abilities but for their moral rectitude as well. At the very least, the church wouldn't choose the sort of lady who would belittle her sister's feelings.

Seeing my friend cry for the first time made my heart burn with rage.

*So the government isn't the only thing in Elshaid that's rotten...the church is too.*

This meant more work for me, but there was no point in complaining. I was used to making many enemies by then. My heart had a strong sense of justice that I couldn't—no, didn't want to—betray. It seemed I would need to meet this Leia Westoria.

"Anyway, I'm breaking off my engagement to Leia! I've come to tell you so, since I had promised I would introduce her to you last time we spoke!"

"Breaking off the engagement? Ah, good. Do as you wish. Philip...I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt, but can you swear to me that what you said was completely truthful? I trust you aren't spreading falsehoods about Leia's misdeeds?"

"Of course not, Your Highness. I've known you since we were small lads; I know how much you detest lies. I have never once lied to you, my prince."

"Of course. I was just making sure. All right then, I will put my faith in our friendship."

And so, in hearing Philip's testimony, I decided to meet the saint named Leia who was allegedly abusing her little sister. As luck would have it, the royal family assigned saintly tasks through the church. While the three saints' tasks differed, it was quite easy to track down Leia's whereabouts.

*Aha. So she'll be erecting barriers in the forest tomorrow. I'll go see her then.*

"Are you Saint Leia?" I called out to the lady who was expertly drawing summoning circles.

She had noticed my presence before I spoke, but from the shocked expression on her face when she turned to look at me, it was clear she knew who I was.

"Are you the insolent saint who has been abusing her little sister?"

When Leia just stood there, staring at me in silence, I pressed further.

"What? Why aren't you speaking?"

Surely she was confused by my presence. It was indeed out of the ordinary for a crown prince such as myself to call on a saint.

"Prince Eric, it is an honor to meet you. I am Leia Westoria," she greeted me while erecting her barriers. "This abuse of which you speak, it never happened. Not a mite."

*Ooh, impressive. Despite my sudden intrusion, she hasn't forgotten about her duty. She's definitely talented, just as I expected. And she refuted the abuse claims outright.*

"Hmm. Well, my friend Philip said that you abused your sister quite severely, causing her great psychological trauma."

"Yes, I heard the same story from Lord Philip myself, Your Highness, but those claims are groundless. I can only assume Jill has a persecution complex."

"Yes, but abusers are rarely aware of their actions, so you may only *think* you're innocent."

So, Philip must have already confronted her. He probably had broken off their engagement right after he told me he would. If that was the case, her poise was commendable. She had strong mental fortitude.

"Say what you will, I have never said anything to denigrate Jill. I've heard that you are a righteous and equitable man, Prince Eric, so I'm shocked to see you jump to such quick conclusions over a matter you know nothing about based on the testimony of *one* person. I guess rumors can't be trusted, can they?"

I didn't respond.

*...I guess I had it coming. She's a sassy one.*

But she was right. And I would need to own up to my mistake. Philip may be an old friend, but Leia's abuse of her sister was hearsay, nothing more. I didn't witness it personally, so my knee-jerk condemnation was careless at best.

*Wow, Eric, what are you doing? You claim you're going to purge the rot from Elshaid and then casually pass judgment on someone in the same breath. Have*

*you no shame?*

Leia had looked right at me when she answered my accusations. There was a strong gleam in her eyes I couldn't dismiss—her bold spirit was overpowering me.

"I see. You are correct, I know nothing about the matter. But Philip came to me with actual *tears* in his eyes and told me how cruel you had been to your little sister. I suppose seeing my friend cry like that allowed my emotions to get the better of me..."

She said nothing.

"All right, let's start over. I'll get to know you first. You're right, it wasn't fair of me to believe Philip's testimony without question. I apologize for that."

I was ashamed of myself for being so unfair. I had taken my friend's words at face value and accused Leia of foul play. That was unacceptable.

If Leia was telling the truth, then that would mean my friend wrongfully broke his engagement and hurt his former fiancée. Whether it was Saint Leia or Philip—one of my only friends—who was in the right, I had to pass fair and equitable judgment.

So I decided to observe Leia. As Philip's friend, it was my duty to determine which one of them was telling the truth. Having said that, it was impossible to learn everything about Leia's personality in an afternoon.

As I watched Leia finish erecting her barriers, I thought to myself: What would be the best way for me to learn everything about her?

*I can't make an impartial judgment about her in such a short time. What should I do about this... Isn't there some excuse I can use to have Leia by my side? I don't suppose it's possible to have Leia live at the palace as a handmaid. She's the daughter of Count Westoria; I could never disgrace her like that. All right, how about a lady of the court? No, that wouldn't be appropriate, considering the objective is to spend more time with her.*

Her duties for the day complete, Saint Leia and I parted ways, and my chief bodyguard Johann ran over to me. He had been keeping over us the entire time she and I spoke.

"Your Highness, something on your mind? My ears are open, if I may be so humble."

"I wish to keep Leia by my side. I need time to assess her worthiness of sainthood up close."

"Ah, you wish to have Lady Leia near at hand... Why not have her be your bodyguard? I witnessed how she handled that monster just now, and it was most impressive. And I don't think anyone could blame you for adding another bodyguard to your roster. Furthermore, as a saint, she wouldn't disadvantage Elshaid in any way—wouldn't that make her more trustworthy in your eyes as well, Your Highness?"

*Aha...a bodyguard! I consider myself a good fighter, but she just might have me beat. And Johann's right, I was just thinking it was time to add another bodyguard to the team. We may have a winning idea here.*

It worked out perfectly for me, since I could observe her and solve my bodyguard shortage. I could also accompany her on her saintly tasks. Assassins would come for me regardless; I was in danger no matter where I went.

"Very well, Leia Westoria shall be my bodyguard. I'll go get permission from His Majesty. Johann, prepare the paperwork we'll need to send to the church."

"Yes, Your Highness!"

And thus, I set the wheels in motion to make Leia my bodyguard. Before the day's end, I paid Westoria Manor a visit to take Leia home to the palace with me.

**-Jill's Perspective-**

“IT’S AS I FEARED...God is a bully.”

*The world is cruel and unfair.*

I worked very hard and strove diligently every day to live my life in an upright and honest way, yet my dear sister had denied me all my greatest desires.

Take, for example, when I was training to be a saint. My sister got a head start when she received far more tutoring from our magic teachers than me. And when I failed the exam, she had to go rub salt in the wound by immediately getting recognized as a saint by the church.

It was unfair that she got so much private tutoring! And if Mother hadn’t told me about it, I never would have even known. It made me so disappointed in her; she had such a smug look on her face for a cheater. I couldn’t believe that I once felt admiration for her.

But then, as if that wasn’t bad enough, she decided to seduce the man of my dreams, Prince Eric! I was going to make her pay dearly for that.

“Ohhh...”

“What’s wrong, Jill? You’ve been all sighs today,” said Lord Philip, heir to a duke.

He was a very kind man who listened to my woes. After advising me countless times, he unexpectedly broke off his engagement with my sister and proposed to me. I was flattered by the proposal, but now that my sister had left to go live with Prince Eric in the palace, the world had lost its luster.

*Prince Eric’s face is far more handsome than Lord Philip’s...*

Ohh, dearest Prince Eric, why did you hurl such harsh words at me? I was so enraptured by you, even more so than when I first met you. And yet you were just *too* cruel.

It was all my big sister’s fault... I was certain she *cheated* her way into Prince Eric’s employ too.

If I were the one chosen to become a saint, the one at Prince Eric's side right now would've been me. But my sister was chosen instead, and so *she* was chosen to be by Prince Eric's side. It was too late to change the facts. The more I thought about it, the deeper I sunk into my woes. *Why, why must I be cast into this bottomless abyss of despair?*

Why did Lord Philip say something that would make Prince Eric and my sister grow closer? I could only assume he did so out of spite.

"Lord Philip, why did you tell Prince Eric that *horrendous slander* that Leia was abusing me? Now Prince Eric has whisked her away to live with *him* at the palace!"

"Er, but Jill, didn't you tell me Leia was abusing you? Remember how you cried, saying that despite being a saint, she had a rotten soul? I simply relayed your words to the prince. He is a man of justice, you know, so I was sure he would do something about it. I did this all for your sake, Jill."

*What?! W-well, I certainly didn't expect him to say a thing like that. Why, from the way he phrased it, it sounds like he thinks I'm some reprobate who lied about being abused. Aha, I see, Lord Philip, you think I'm a rotten wench. How cruel. I only wanted to confide in you that I am not as talented nor as blessed as my sister. And you twisted my words to Prince Eric? What a dreadful thing to do.*

So that was why Prince Eric looked upon me with such scorn—it was all Lord Philip's fault!

"Do you mean to say that you *intentionally* brought my sister and Prince Eric together? And you portrayed me as a *conniving, duplicitous wench*? It's just *too* cruuuel! Oh! Oh-oh! Wahhhh!"

"What?! A-are you crying?! Wh-why?!"

If only Lord Philip hadn't told such absurd lies, my sister wouldn't be living at the palace with Prince Eric, and my inferiority complex wouldn't torment me more than it already did...

*The tears simply will not stop! I am in grief...in misery... I curse my misfortune that led Prince Eric to say such cruel things to me—everything is just too terrible!*

Why...why did my big sister get all the blessings while I endured such odious hardship?

“Oh-oh...oh, me...! L-Lord Philip, you shouldn’t have b-broken off your engagement with my sister. D-don’t you feel at all sorry for her?”

Lord Philip was just too *fickle* and too *selfish*. Most men in his position *wouldn’t* have broken off their engagements so frivolously. He surely didn’t consider how poor Leia would feel, abandoned and isolated.

“Whoa, wait just a minute now! When I proposed to you, you were crying with joy!”

Philip raised his voice, and my heartbeat raced. “*P-please* don’t yell! You’re *frightening* meeee! I *had* to act happy, didn’t I? I didn’t want to be *rude* to you!”

*I did not realize what a terror this man was. Look at him, yelling and pressuring me out of nowhere—I cannot believe my eyes! I can’t believe I thought he was kind... Lord Philip is so terrifying, I cannot stand the sight of him! My hands simply will not stop shaking.*

“Yes, I suppose Prince Eric *would* be more suited to someone like Leia, not a talentless, *pathetic* girl like me who can’t even be a saint. It’s *obvious*, really. Oh-ohhh... But just the *thought* of them together makes my heart *ache* so!”

“Whoa, now, Jill... I hope you’re not implying you’d prefer Prince Eric over me?!”

Once again, Lord Philip lashed out at me with cruelty in his heart.

*Now, you know I can’t answer a question like that! Whom do I prefer, Prince Eric or Lord Philip? Why, there’s no comparison.*

But if I were to give him my answer, Lord Philip’s feelings would be hurt—worst-case scenario, he could become overwhelmed with rage. He did yell at

me earlier, and if I angered him any further, he could even strike me. And that would be more than I could bear. My only recourse was to remain silent.

“Your silence says it all... I’ll admit, Prince Eric is handsome, and he *is* the crown prince, after all. I see... The heir to a duke just isn’t good enough for you!”

“B-but I *never* said such a thing! First, you *brazenly* misinterpreted what I said about my sister, and now this? It’s just *too much!* Wahhh...”

*How could he suggest such a thing?! I didn’t even speak, and yet he’s already decided I’m wicked. Once again, Lord Philip has imagined what’s in my heart and is trying to vilify me.*

*How could he say such cruel things? I simply cannot bear it! It’s just too much. Where did my sweet, gentle Lord Philip go...*

“Argh, what a nuisance! Fine, you win, I’ll annul our engagement! Leia is *ten times* the lady you are! She has talents enough to become a saint, and she most certainly did *not* abuse you! That’s it, I’m marrying Leia after all!”

In his fury, Lord Philip cast me aside. Never before had a gentleman expressed such cruel sentiments to me—it was too frightful to bear.

*Are you really going to discard me? Please, don’t say you’ll marry Leia! That would sadden me the most.*

As I feared, Lord Philip found my sister to be more blessed than me—he was merely making a fool out of me.

*If even Lord Philip abandons me, how ever can I go on living? Dear God, why must you torment me so?*

But Lord Philip vanished before my eyes...leaving sorrow in his wake.

*Oh, this is just too cruuuel!*

## Chapter 2: As a Saint, as a Bodyguard

**A**BOUT A WEEK HAD PASSED since I came to live at the palace. As both a saint and as a bodyguard, I was starting to feel right at home. Every day, I cured the wounded with healing magic, erected barriers near monster nests, and performed other such saintly duties. Prince Eric observed me during these tasks, and afterward, I acted as his bodyguard.

In other words, I was by Prince Eric's side all day, every day...yet strangely enough, it didn't feel exhausting.

After two weeks as Prince Eric's bodyguard, most of my time on duty was spent chatting with him. To be honest, living at home with nothing to do was much harder. Here, I neither needed to endure Catherine's scolding and grumbling nor did I fume over Jill. If anything, you could say my life was now *more* comfortable.

Occasionally, an assassin would attack us, but I always foiled them with magic, just as I did on the first day. Curiously, the ones who reached us were only about half of the total assassins caught. That was startling for me to hear. I was shocked to discover how many assassins were able to infiltrate the palace. Incidentally, Prince Eric's bodyguards were the ones who caught the other half of the would-be assassins.

"Well, hello there, Lady Leia. On your way to work?"

"Yes, I'm about to go see Prince Eric right now. He wishes to accompany me to my work again today. Sir Johann, have you caught another assassin? Thank you for your service."

"Oh, tut. Your arrival at the palace has made my job much easier, Lady Leia."

On my way to Prince Eric's study, I crossed paths with his chief bodyguard, Johann Olbrun. He was in the middle of hauling off a couple of outlaws bound

with rope.

The Olbrun school of fencing boasted a history of over four hundred years, and Johann was the acting swordmaster and a renowned swordsman. I heard that Prince Eric had studied the sword with Johann's father at the Olbrun training hall. In other words, Johann was Prince Eric's senior.

"I just realized that a week has passed since you joined us, Lady Leia. Have you and Prince Eric become friends?"

"Er—f-friends, you say? Th—that's a bit sudden. I already have my hands full just trying to keep up with my daily tasks."

Johann's unexpected question took me aback. Since our first encounter wasn't exactly on the best terms, closing the distance between us was a challenge. Naturally, I knew the prince wasn't a bad person: After escaping daily assassination attempts, it was inevitable that he'd become severe and unapproachable. But all I could do about it was wait for time to pass. To the prince, I was nothing more than an object of study—there was nothing special about our relationship whatsoever.

"Is that so, my lady? Hmm... I was hoping you would be able to get Prince Eric to open up sooner."

"You flatter me, sir. In truth, I tend to make enemies without meaning to."

*I just don't understand. What exactly is Johann hoping I'll accomplish?*

Johann assured me that Eric and I could become friends, but I knew that would be a difficult task for me. I didn't know what to say around him, and I had no idea how to get closer to a prince who was so prickly. Even after a week, I still felt like I was walking on eggshells every day, worried that if I let my guard down even a little, I would anger Prince Eric again.

That being said, I was telling the truth when I said I felt more comfortable here than I had at home. Only now did I realize how constrictive my old life had been.

“Ha ha ha! You and His Highness are alike in that regard. Prince Eric has always been quite stubborn, even as a boy. Whenever we sparred, he hated when I gave him a handicap, even though I’m older than him. I tried to appease him, saying I didn’t want to hurt him, but then he would just say, ‘If you go easy on me, I won’t speak with you anymore!’ and, well, he was a real handful.”

“Oh my...how adorable. However, it sounds like you’re implying that I am stubborn and immature.”

“Oops, pardon me! I misspoke, my lady. Do forgive me.”

I chuckled, “Well, you’ve told me such a delightful anecdote, so I’ll forgive you.”

*I shouldn’t be surprised, but even Prince Eric was a child once.*

Come to think of it, I was a little untamed as a child myself. Perhaps that’s why my stepmother disliked me, why she said I was unlovable.

“Well, I’m glad you liked my little story. Now then, would you like to hear another? On Prince Eric’s fifth birthday, he—”

“Don’t you have outlaws to tend to, *Captain Johann Olbrun?*” a voice interrupted.

“Urk... Hello there, Your Highness,” he said, turning around awkwardly.  
“Weren’t you in your study?”

Johann’s nostalgic reverie was deflated by the prince’s sudden appearance behind him.

*Prince Eric seems a bit peeved. Does he really hate reminiscing so?*

“Leia was late, so I came to check on her. We have no time to stroll down memory lane. It is surely of no interest to her anyway.”

“Oh, but I *am* interested, Your Highness. I’m sad that I didn’t get to hear Sir Johann finish his story.”

“My heavens! You like my stories? Well, I shall have to tell you some more

tomorrow!"

Prince Eric's eyes widened in dismay. "Johann. Keep your mouth shut! That's an order."

*So even Prince Eric can get embarrassed sometimes.*

Here we were, having a harmless conversation, and he just snapped at us—it was quite unexpected. Perhaps he only let his true colors show because he was comfortable around Johann. He was always weirdly standoffish around me.

Unable to disguise the amusement in my voice, I said, "I guess you do know how to enjoy yourself, don't you, Prince Eric?"

It was unusual to see Prince Eric look so flustered.

"Enjoy myself? Right... Isn't it time for your saintly duties? Why don't you get ready to go. The carriage is already waiting."

It was a small step...but I felt like I had gotten closer to Prince Eric. I realized he was more normal than I'd assumed and that was why Sir Johann wanted us to be friends.

"Come, let's go. Are you ready?"

And with this on my mind, I departed with the prince for my daily assignment.

Today's assignment was in the rocky mountains near the wastelands. There were reports of monsters in the area, so the church had received a request for barriers to be erected.

Prince Eric was busy reviewing his documents, even during the carriage ride. I had asked him once out of curiosity why he was so busy all the time, and it apparently had something to do with why assassins targeted him.

Most of Prince Eric's work entailed compiling reports that exposed corrupt nobles and government officials. Having such a strong sense of justice, Prince Eric couldn't stand people with dirt on their hands controlling the government.

Purging these corrupt officials by force simply because he did not like them was not Prince Eric's style—he was gathering irrefutable evidence so he could prosecute them properly.

Once Prince Eric had a corrupt nobleman on his radar, no amount of power or influence could shield that noble from losing everything. So the most influential people, terrified of being exposed and losing their power, were trying to rid themselves of Prince Eric.

It wasn't hard to see why they'd be scared of him. No one was safe from a crown prince armed with pure, cold logic—even I found him frightening.

If my father, Count Westoria, had one redeeming quality, it would be his innate aversion to rocking the boat. He stayed out of power struggles and focused only on the lands he was given, governing them with a light hand. Since he was harmless on a base level, I could rest at ease knowing I wouldn't have to worry about Prince Eric going after him. In that regard, Philip's father, Duke Gilbert, was much like mine, though it was probably more thanks to him holding the higher rank of duke, which allowed him to live a life of opulence without getting his hands dirty.

Philip likely was able to maintain his friendship with Prince Eric thanks to inheriting his father's disposition and, as such, disinterest in things like fraud or corruption. He had plenty of wealth and would inherit his father's lands in time—there really was no need for him to harbor any cutthroat ambitions.

Until Jill tricked him, I never once thought unfavorably of Philip. He was a warmhearted and textbook-perfect nobleman of high rank. He was a little spoiled and could be insensitive at times, but given the family environment I had grown up in, it was nothing I couldn't endure.

I hoped he wouldn't be so inconsiderate as to invite me to his wedding with Jill after breaking off his engagement with me, but I had a feeling that Jill would insist I come to the wedding regardless. I could clearly envision her pleading to me, tears streaming down her face: "But *Leia*, don't you want to bless your little

sister on her *special* daaaaay?"

And if I turned her down, Catherine would show up and scold me for being heartless.

*Okay, let's nip that thought in the bud. Worrying over it now won't do any good—it will only put me in a sour mood. Besides, it would just be one bad day to endure; I should take a page from my father's book and not rock the boat.*

"What's wrong? You look troubled. Did something happen?"

"No, Your Highness. I was just wondering what might have happened to you on your fifth birthday."

"Ah, that again. That Johann sure does like to stir up trouble. There's nothing much to tell, but if it will wipe that nonplussed look off your face, I'll tell you. Just promise not to laugh."

"Of course I won't laugh, Your Highness."

"You mean it?"

"Yes. I swear as a holy saint, my word is my bond."

"Huh... All right, I believe you. Well, the day I turned five, I considered myself already an adult, so I sneaked a bottle of my father's wine. Johann and I drank it together and caused a drunken ruckus. That's all."

"So that's what happened... I heard that you stay away from alcohol, seeing as it impairs judgment. You're right, a five-year-old thinking he's an adult isn't much of a story."

I spoke with a measure of reluctance, but the prince was kind enough to tell me a story about his childhood to get my mind off my little sister crying selfishly. His story was just the sort of minor mishap every child experienced.

From the way Johann spoke and the story Prince Eric told me just now, it seemed like the prince was a bit of a scamp in his youth. It saddened me a little that he suppressed that side of him now. He hid the parts of his personality that made him human so he could live in a state of constant vigilance. Even from my

short time together with him, that much was painfully clear.

“Yes, exactly. So there’s no need to pry into my past. All right, we’re here. These lands are too desolate to be farmland, and not hospitable for human habitation either, so we don’t know exactly what to do with them. They are dangerous, though, as monsters are prone to come out.”

“Yes, I am aware, Your Highness. I’d like to test something.”

“Test something?”

After our long conversation, we had arrived at the wastelands. Like Prince Eric said, the land was worthless, so it was abandoned and forgotten. As a saint, it was my job to make Elshaid a prosperous kingdom, and I had taken the title of saint because I believed in that philosophy. As such, I often asked myself the question, “What can I do to make Elshaid a better place?”

I arranged extra steles on the ground, then I gazed up heavenward and prayed. With the power of God in my hands, I amplified my magic energy and activated two summoning circles.

“Y-you activated two summoning circles at once?! What in the world are you trying to do here?!”

*“O great powers of divine protection! Heal the earth!”*

When the two summoning circles converged into one, I amplified my magic energy further. It was a spell that granted energy to all living things within an enclosed area—including even the very soil itself. New buds sprouted from the ground, and bits of green peeked out from the patches of snow remaining on the boulders.

*I wasn’t sure this would work, since this orison requires spending a large amount of magic energy, but I think I was successful.*

“I figured this was a wasteland that would never again be arable... I had no idea saints could use healing magic to revitalize the soil itself.”

“I’ve only just recently gained this ability. I was hoping there was some other way I could serve Elshaid besides erecting protective barriers, and since most of the areas that border monster territory are wastelands, I figured I could regenerate them little by little by using my magic like this.”

The new barrier spell I had developed in secret received high praise from Prince Eric. It was a synthesis of healing magic and the barrier spell. It still only produced minimal results, and I hadn’t yet tried it outside of experiments, but seeing the smile on Prince Eric’s face made all that hard work worth it.

“This is a truly fantastic discovery. You should be proud of yourself. Then again, it’s very like you to not boast—that’s one of your virtues.”

“I don’t know what you mean, but I am honored, Your Highness.”

I didn’t become a saint to brag about my achievements, I just wanted to do the most I could to serve those who relied on my powers. Even so, I was truly happy to receive praise for my hard work.

Prince Eric saw me for who I really was. When he first said that he was going to observe me to see if I was worthy to be a saint, I thought it meant he would intentionally seek out mistakes or flaws, but he really was simply observing me. If anything, it was a little unnerving how he had nothing but praise for the things I did.

We spent the rest of our time in the wasteland disposing of monsters and occasional assassins—me by magic, him by sword—while I finished erecting my barriers.

Watching Prince Eric’s swordsmanship, I could see why he didn’t need a bodyguard. Most notable were his speed and the merciless precision of his strikes against an enemy’s vitals. The prince specialized in disposing of his enemies without giving them an opening. I realized that, while Prince Eric trusted Johann, he had still worked very hard to ensure that he was able to defend himself and keep himself safe.

Watching him wipe green monster blood off his blade, I began to worry that

Prince Eric would eventually snap under all the pressure he was under. Perhaps if there were more people in his life he could trust, the tense atmosphere around the prince would soften at least a little. But as things stood now, Prince Eric looked dangerously close to his breaking point. I wanted to reach out and help him.

*I don't necessarily want to make the first move, but maybe I should try to get a little closer to him. Thinking back, I only had a bad first impression of him. In his daily life, he's a peaceful man, despite his strong sense of justice.*

“Helloooo! Prince Eric! Leia!”

As I pondered these matters and completed my barriers, I heard a voice call out to us. It was Lord Philip. What was he doing all the way out here?

Panting for breath, he said, “Your Highness! Long time no see...”

“I hardly think that much time has passed, but what’s wrong? Why did you come all the way out here? And in such a hurry at that?”

“Oh, it’s nothing pressing, Your Highness. And Leia, you are every bit as beautiful as Jill.”

“Well, thank you. It’s not often I hear praise from you, Lord Philip.”

Prince Eric seemed just as baffled as I was by Philip’s desperate expression as he ran over to us. And he was praising my physical appearance too—was there something in the air?

*I know it's rude to say so, but it just feels weird.*

When we were engaged, he often praised my talents and my intellect, but he never said a word about my appearance. That’s why I could say with confidence that his attitude was the exact opposite of usual.

*I wonder why he really came here... I've got a bad feeling about this.*

“Leia, I’ve just broken off my engagement with Jill!”

I was at a loss for words at Philip’s sudden confession.

*Um...what did he just say? It sounded like he said, "I've just broken off my engagement..."*

I mean, it was barely a week ago that he broke off *our* engagement and proposed to Jill. I couldn't get a grasp on the situation at all—was it a joke?

*"I realized that Jill is nothing but trouble. You would *never* abuse her, yet she used her nefarious wiles to trick me into believing it. So I broke things off with her."*

*Okay, he looks like he's serious. Is this the other side of speed-dating, speed-dumping?*

After being engaged to Jill for only a week, Philip broke up with her. It was almost like he was trying to break some sort of world record.

I thought it over and decided it had absolutely nothing to do with me—this was between him and Jill. It might have been out of line for me to complain. In the end, his jilting me was all in the past. It was over.

*"Is that so? Sorry to hear it. I suppose that means that the houses of Westoria and Gilbert are not meant to be joined after all."*

*"Preposterous! There *is* still a connection!"*

*"Huh? But you broke off your engagements to both me and Jill, so the connection is as good as severed."*

*What in the world is this gentleman even saying? I don't get it.*

He ended his engagements with both of Westoria's daughters—clearly the connection was severed. I could only conclude that was what Philip had wanted.

*"I'll get engaged again! To you, Leia! After all, that's the way things were up until just last week! We can get back together, water under the bridge, all's well that ends well!"*

*Wow...I didn't think he was actually this stupid.*

The look on Philip's face during his re-proposal was just so optimistic that I had to curse him under my breath.

If he was joking, I would let it slide, but his eyes were so earnest...and *that* made my blood boil. He had refused to listen when I begged him to hear my side of the story, and now this? Could a person *be* any more entitled?

Since it all happened only a week ago, it was still fresh in my memory. If he thought I could just close my eyes and sweep everything under the rug, he was an idiot.

"Lord Philip, our union ended on that day. An engagement is a sort of promise. You can't unilaterally break it, then act like that didn't happen when it suits you—don't you think that's a *little* dishonorable?"

My emotions were about to get the better of me, so I suppressed them and calmly informed Philip of the absurdity of his words. I wished I didn't have to spell it out for him like this. The thought that this man—the son of a duke, no less—used to be my fiancé just made me feel sad.

"Y-you may have a point there, but I was deceived, you know? I'm a victim of your sister's lies! Please spare me some empathy."

He might have been fooled, but that wasn't my problem. He wanted my grace, but setting aside his personal reasons, he had been my fiancé, somebody I spent so much time with, yet had refused to hear my side of the story, broke our engagement, and as if to twist the knife he had stabbed into my back, proposed to my little sister on the very same day! The reality of his actions wouldn't simply vanish.

The very concept of breaking up with somebody, then getting right back together with them disgusted me. He hadn't shown a bit of remorse for doubting me and didn't even make an effort to apologize, and that had made me thoroughly repulsed by him.

"After some thought, I realized that you were a better fit for me, as you are quiet and manageable. Not to mention the prestige that comes with being a

saint. Prince Eric, do put in a good word for me? I came to you for advice on the matter earlier, so I'm sure you understand."

Philip was frantically trying to propose to me. To be blunt, his behavior was downright unpleasant, and I couldn't understand why he was so fixated on getting me back. He had even escalated his efforts by asking the prince to back him up.

*Now that I think about it, Prince Eric confronted me that day in the forest because Philip had gone to him for advice. Naturally, he wanted to help Philip, one of his only friends.*

After a long pause, Prince Eric uttered with simmering rage, "You loathsome disgrace."

"Heh?!" Philip yelped, now hysterical.

It seemed our prince was furious.

"Philip. I am honestly disgusted by you. You took Jill's fabrication without question and told me that Leia was not worthy of being a saint. I was going to let that slide as temporary poor judgment, seeing as I made the same mistake myself. In that regard, you and I are equally guilty."

Prince Eric scrutinized Philip with eyes colder than I had ever seen before. His tone was calm and firm, but his rage was palpable—a fury which stunned Philip into silence. The prince felt it would be hypocritical of him to blame Philip for denouncing me based on someone else's lies, since he had done just the same. But Prince Eric at least had given me a chance rather than jumping to conclusions, and he apologized to me when he realized he was wrong, so I had no intentions of pressing him further.

He continued to berate Philip. "However, you failed to own up to your own carelessness, and you have the gall to propose to Leia again without so much as an apology? Have you no morals? I did not realize that Duke Gilbert failed to instill a basic understanding of human decency in his heir."

"B-but, Your Highness, um, I'm just a little disconcerted since I was deceived! I fully intended to apologize to Leia."

"And I'm saying you're being self-centered. In your shallowness, you only sought to gratify your own desires. You're shameless if you think you can just turn around and propose to somebody you just dumped. You have abandoned human decency and behaved as a monster. *You are a disgrace.*"

Philip tried to plead his case, but that only fanned the flames of Prince Eric's rage. The color drained from his face as he began to tremble.

This was an example of Philip's naivete—he wasn't used to anger being directed at him. All his life, he had wanted for nothing, had no need for remorse or guilt. That shaped him into the man he was today.

*Still, Prince Eric is being awfully merciless.*

Philip was rendered defenseless and on the brink of surrender. I started to have an idea of why Prince Eric had such a strong sense of justice—and why he made enemies so easily. It didn't matter who you were—if he sensed you had no principles, he would not turn a blind eye.

I admired that about him, but it seemed like a rough way to live.

"Moving forward, I'm going to reconsider my association with House of Gilbert. I will inform your father as much, so keep that in mind."

"Y-Your Highness?! That's uncalled for! I thought we were friends—eep?!"

The point of Prince Eric's sword brushed against Philip's throat.

"I'm sure you're aware this area is teeming with monsters. A true friend tells his friend when he's wrong. If you think a friend is somebody who doesn't challenge you and agrees with everything you say and do, then you and I were never truly friends."

There was a monster, fangs bared, skewered on Eric's blade. Philip opened and closed his mouth in terror as he fell on his rear. Then, with tears in his eyes, he stood up and ran away. It was a pathetic sight to behold; I couldn't bear to

watch.

His terror had to have been quite real. Prince Eric's spirit was just that overpowering.

"Phew... Sorry you had to see that. It seems I've just lost another friend."

"I am so sorry, Your Highness. I never wanted to involve you in the fallout of my broken engagement."

"Don't blame yourself, Leia. I chose to get involved."

Prince Eric was kind enough to accept my apology, but his sad eyes lacked their usual vigor. He had cherished Philip's friendship, and he surely must have had reservations about ending it.

"Um...Prince Eric! It really is a shame what happened with Lord Philip, but if you make another friend, that'll even the score."

After a pause, Prince Eric said, "Hmm... Yes, I suppose you're right."

*That's pretty good for spur-of-the-moment advice, in my opinion.*

Making friends wasn't easy, but if Prince Eric had a positive attitude, I was sure things would work out for him.

"I hadn't even considered that before you suggested it. A new friend... I see..."

"Well, I'm happy I could help."

"What about you, Leia? Would you be my friend?"

"Huh?!"

His request for friendship blindsided me. I was sure he was joking. How could a man who said he needed to "observe" me only a week ago want to be my friend? The question was completely out of the blue.

"Er, forgive me. I'm not exactly in the right place to ask you to be my friend." After retracting his friend request, he turned his back.

"Prince Eric?"

He didn't prefer solitude, that much was obvious. He was just an awkward man who only knew how to approach things in a stupidly direct way.

*What's come over me... In my heart, I genuinely do want to get to know Prince Eric better.*

He had rescued me from that dreadful house. If my new life began that day, you could call Prince Eric my own personal savior. Maybe that was why I wanted to get to know him better. And if we both made the effort to get to know each other, I was sure that moments like this would feel much more joyful.

But we were having a heart-to-heart talk now...so I had the sense that such a day would come.

"Well, let's head back."

"All right. I'd love to hear about your fifth birthday in greater detail on the ride back."

"Um...just ask Johann."

"But I want to hear the story from you, Your Highness."

I walked a little behind him. If that distance between us ever were to close, there would need to be a big change in either my feelings or his.



Maybe it was just the sun reflecting off his silver hair, but as he walked ahead of me, Prince Eric looked all the more majestic.

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Another week had passed since Philip tried to resurrect our engagement. Eric's lecture seemed to have worked—I hadn't heard a peep from Philip since.

I wondered if any trouble arose from ending his engagement to Jill. Then again, even if it caused problems, my father didn't have the courage to complain to Duke Gilbert. He would probably stick to his creed of not rocking the boat and stay out of it.

But my stepmother Catherine was likely fuming. It must have been humiliating to have her beloved Jill cast aside like that.

And in spite of how troublesome my family was, I was considering going back for a visit. Not because I missed them, of course. I had another reason.

Since my move to the palace was so sudden, most of my personal belongings remained in my old home. I just wanted to retrieve them. I had more than the clothes on my back, but only just. Today was my day off from bodyguard duties and I had no saintly tasks either, so I took the opportunity to swing by.

I made my way to Prince Eric's study to request permission to go. Looking back, the reason I was employed as his bodyguard in the first place was because one of his bodyguards was suspended. Apparently that bodyguard was to come back to work starting today.

I wondered what sort of person this bodyguard was. Since they had been suspended, they had to have done something bad, but if the morally righteous Prince Eric was allowing them to come back to work, it couldn't have been too transgressive.

“Yarrgh!!!”

*Huh?! Wh-what?! Er, what in the world is happening?!*

As I walked down the hall to the prince's study, two men who looked like they

didn't belong there crashed through the windows, one after the other.

*They must be assassins after the prince. Wow, I didn't know people could fly so fast!*

“You’re not escaping from me, oh no! Aha! *There* you are!”

“Eeeeep!!!”

A woman with a slight build and black hair that was pulled up in two buns chased after the duo. She leaped through the shattered window and smacked the intruders without mercy.

*Errrrr...we’re on the second floor, aren’t we? How has she singlehandedly overpowered two men twice her size?*

“Graaaah!”

“P-please don’t kill me!”

The men were probably assassins after Prince Eric. If they were arrested, they would likely face harsh sentencing, but I still couldn’t let them be killed in the palace hallway.

“Could you please stop hurting those men? They’ll die.”

“Hm?! We wouldn’t want assassins dying on us, *no*. Thanks for stopping me, lady. *Xie xie!*”

Judging by her accent, she was clearly not a local. Perhaps she was a refugee. From the way she looked, chances were high she came from the kingdom in the east, perhaps the Ren Empire.

“It’s reassuring that you know it would be bad for them to die, but why did it take me intervening for you to not kill them?”

“Master taught me that if somebody gives me a bad feeling, I hit until he stops moving, see? That’s vital wisdom for survival!”

I wouldn’t call that *wisdom*—more like simple assault. But between her death glare and her brawn, she was clearly no ordinary woman.

*Seriously, who is she?*

As I tried to make sense of the confusing new information, Prince Eric's study door swung open and he appeared, a troubled look on his face.

"Lingsha... I thought it was you when I heard the loud crash."

"Eric! My suspension is over, yes! Now I can bodyguard you again."

*Bodyguard? And she said suspension, meaning she's the suspended bodyguard that was supposed to come back to work today.*

Prince Eric sure did seem to have a unique collection of bodyguards in his service. But from what I saw earlier, she certainly could hold her own in a fight.

"Hm? Leia? I thought you were taking the day off. Never mind, now that you're here, let me introduce you to my bodyguard, Lingsha. She was suspended, but she's back on duty today. The two of you will likely work together often."

"Nice to meet you, Lingsha. I'm Leia Westoria."

"Leia, yes! So nice to meet you!"

An innocent smile bloomed on her face, melting away all trace of the death glare that was once there. She seemed like a bubbly, cheerful girl. At the very least, it was a relief to find out she wasn't bad. Prince Eric acted naturally around her, so it was clear she had his trust.

"Lingsha is the twelfth princess of the Ren Empire, but she got caught up in a power struggle, so she ran away and sought asylum in Elshaid as a refugee."

"W-wow, a princess? Do forgive my rudeness earlier, Princess Lingsha."

I never would have guessed she was a princess of the Ren Empire. I figured she was a refugee, but I had no inkling that she was of such high status.

"Leiaaaa, I don't need the princess title, yes? When I left my motherland, I left my title behind. Now I'm Eric's bodyguard. Just like you, Leia!"

"But, Princess Lin—"

“Just Lingsha, *please*. Thanks. Be less humble, yes?”

*I don’t feel like I’m being particularly humble...*

*Her aversion to being called princess might be a personal hang-up of hers, so I should respect that*, I thought. Still, I felt uncomfortable addressing royalty by name and nothing else. As a saint of Elshaid, I wanted to pay everyone the most basic courtesy.

“All right...I’ll call you Miss Lingsha, then.”

“Oh, Leia, you are a lady of honor! I like it. Let’s be friends, yes?”

She nodded eagerly and extended a friendly hand. I gripped her small hand in mine. I genuinely wanted to be friends with Lingsha—I had a feeling she would make my life a lot more exciting.

“Oh, that’s right, you still haven’t told me why you’re here. Is something wrong?”

“Oh, er, no, Your Highness. I just came to ask permission to go to my parents’ manor to pick up my personal belongings.”

I knew I was in for an earful of unpleasantness when I got home, but it couldn’t be helped. All I had to do was grit my teeth and bear it for a while.

The past two weeks without the constant abuse from Catherine and Jill made me feel like I could handle anything. The prospect of being around the pair wasn’t so dreadful anymore—I knew with a little determination, it would pass. It wasn’t a problem to me anymore because I knew I could go back home to the palace afterward.

“Of course, you’re welcome to retrieve your personal belongings, but are you sure you’re all right going back to that house alone? Shall I send a bodyguard with you?”

“Er... A b-bodyguard, Your Highness? Is there a problem with my going home alone?”

I’d gotten Prince Eric’s permission, but he looked worried and gave the

strange suggestion of sending a bodyguard along. Unlike the prince, my life wasn't even in danger.

"I know your stepmother and sister dislike you, so I was trying to be considerate."

"Your Highness, please don't make any statements that are difficult for me to respond to..."

I knew that my stepmother and sister disliked me, but hearing it from someone else made me uncomfortable. I wished he had been a bit more tactful.

This was the first time anybody had ever said my stepmother and sister disliked me to my face. It was true of course, and maybe their cruelty was so obvious that Prince Eric noticed it after meeting them for such a short duration, but he said it so bluntly that it pained my heart.

"I could come with you, naturally, but would you like Lingsha to join you?"

"If your family abuses you, Leia, I'll throw them out the window to their death, yes?"

"No, you needn't worry about me. I'm used to it."

I wouldn't wish that on anyone, even Catherine. Besides, this was my problem to deal with. And I was only going to pop in and out, so I couldn't trouble the prince with this. I appreciated how attentive he has been toward me recently, but I didn't want to let myself get too soft. After all, I was technically here to be observed.

"All right...then I'll send you off in a royal carriage with an attendant. That will likely keep Countess Westoria at bay."

Prince Eric's offer to let me borrow an official royal carriage of Elshaid was generous. If I showed up in one of those, that would make me a royal guest. According to the prince, that would deter any funny business. Personally, I wasn't sure how much good the royal carriage would actually do, but it was a kind gesture, so I graciously accepted.

Probably, the prince still felt guilt over how he treated me when we first met. He'd since stopped apologizing for it, but I got the impression that he wasn't over it. Nonetheless, I was flattered by his attention, so I would let him coddle me when necessary. However, I would be fine today—even on my own, I would be safe.

And so, I turned to go on my way...to pay a visit to the family that probably hated me for the first time in two weeks.

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"We've arrived, Lady Leia."

"Thank you. I don't have many belongings; this should take no more than an hour."

I thanked the attendant and opened the door to my family home to see Jill standing there to greet me, a smile creeping across her face. She had probably rushed to the door when she heard the carriage approach.

"Oh, my sweet sister Leia, I see you're back from the palace! Poor dear, to think that Prince Eric got *sick* of you after a mere two weeks... But fear not, I'm not like him. I know you have many redeeming qualities, Leia."

*Well, that's new. She never used to butter me up like this before.*

Her eyes sparkled with joy when she looked at me, and I was at a loss for words. She was under the impression that I had been kicked out of the palace. I recalled how Prince Eric had come to take me away the first time and she desperately tried to stop him.

*Does the idea of me living at the palace really upset her that much? I just don't get how she really feels.*

"Hello, Jill. Thanks for coming to greet me. Oh...by the way, I'm sorry about Lord Philip."

If what Philip had told me the other day was true, Jill's engagement with him was broken. She had mentioned now and then during my engagement how she

thought Philip was handsome, so I'd assumed the breakup had hurt her, but she seemed rather well.

"Oh, Lord Philip? What makes you think I'd be upset? Do I *look* upset?"

"Er, but I heard that Lord Philip broke off his engagement to you..."

When I saw the curious, blank expression on Jill's face, I got the feeling I was way off base.

*What's going on? I get the sense we're talking past each other...*

Did Philip lie when he said he broke off their engagement? No, that wasn't possible. He didn't seem to be lying at all.

"Duke Gilbert *begged* for our forgiveness," Catherine said as she descended the stairs. She was clearly in a foul mood. "He said if word got out that his son had broken his engagement with a girl as sweet as Jill, it would bring *shame* to his house. So he begged Jill to pretend Lord Philip didn't break off the engagement to begin with. What *is* that gentleman thinking? *How* could he tell my *darling* Jill that she's *annoying*!?"

"Oh, Mother, I'm not bothered by it. Lord Philip must have been under a terrible amount of stress. I've forgiven him."

*I didn't see that coming... After making such a big fuss of trying to get me to marry him, he went back to Jill in the end?*

If it were me, I would be far too embarrassed to do such a thing, but I supposed he was different. Though, since Duke Gilbert was the one who had come begging for forgiveness, I couldn't be sure this was Philip's handiwork.

*Well, I wash my hands of it. If Jill's fine with it, then I don't care. I just want to steer clear of this mess—that's my sincerest wish.*

"Still, for somebody who went off to the palace with such a *smug* look on her face, you've come crawling back awfully quick. I must say, I'm not at *all* surprised. Fate wouldn't permit a wretch like you to stay by His Highness's side and abandon poor Jill."

“Oh, Mother, *please* don’t blame poor Leia. Her heart has surely shattered over falling out of His Highness’s favor. I’m so sorry, my *sweet sister*. Looks like I’ll be first to marry after all, and *you’ll* simply become a spinster...”

Under the mistaken impression that I had come back for good, Catherine didn’t even pretend to hide her joy, and Jill was as verbose as ever. I didn’t expect to feel so awful after only a few moments back in my old home; it reconfirmed just how miserable I’d been here.

Of course, I hadn’t said a word about losing the prince’s favor. As for the matter of Jill marrying before me, that was only because Jill stole Philip from me in the first place. When confronted by the utterly oblivious women, I found myself wishing I could go back to the serenity of the palace as soon as possible, but I couldn’t do that until I explained to them that I needed to gather my things.

The only problem was: I knew that explaining it to them would only cause further havoc. It was easy to imagine the drama that would unfold—and that was why I dreaded telling them.

*My desire to leave this house outweighs my dread*, I realized.

“Um... I’m returning to the palace. I only came here to collect my belongings.”

“*What?!*” my stepmother and sister gasped in perfect unison. Their saccharine smiles melted in a flash. Catherine’s anger was on full display, and Jill’s eyes shot daggers at me.

They were surely disappointed, since looking down on me was their only source of joy when I was around. They weren’t even trying to hide their emotions, so I understood perfectly well what they were thinking without a word.

“W-w-well, my *goodness*! Does your wickedness know no bounds?!”

“H-how *cruel* of you, Leia! I was merely trying to *console* your broken heart—I would *never* mock you! You’re just *too* cruel!”

They let loose all their hostility, no holds barred.

*Do they really think I'm the bad guy here?*

The way they just assumed I came back because the prince hated me and mocked me for it—that was a hundred times more wicked than anything I could have done. It was troublesome that they could only interpret the facts in a way that benefitted them. I was starting to think I would not be able to take it lying down anymore.

“My sweet sister gets to be with the *crown prince*—the man of my dreams—and who do I wind up with? Oh, woe is me...” she finished with a sigh so over-the-top that, if Philip were here, he would’ve wanted to break off the engagement yet again.

Her sighs transitioned into sobs, causing Catherine to chew me out for tormenting Jill, so I silently ascended the stairs, stashed my most important possessions in a bag, and hurried out of the house.

“That was fast, my lady. Is that all your belongings?”

“Yes, thank you. This is all I need...”

I hastily clambered into the carriage, plopped down in my seat, and let out a long, low groan. The ordeal was even more hellish than I’d imagined. Mind you, I’d never been to Hell, but I sometimes wondered if Hell was nicer than that house.

My short trip back home after two weeks at the palace was simply that exhausting and excruciating. I only kept my sanity by telling myself those grim little jokes while I was there.

Until I moved out, I had no clue that the way my family acted was so abnormal. I also didn’t realize how frayed my sanity was after having endured that treatment all those years.

*Still, it sounds like Jill and Philip are back together. Though, from the way she was acting, I foresee trouble in paradise. I hope they’ll be okay...*

It was pointless to worry. If I got involved, Catherine would only yell at me for meddling.

In any case, I didn't want to return to that house any time soon. Just thinking about my family made me sick. So I decided to clear my thoughts and focus instead on the joy I would feel when I returned to the palace.

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It wasn't yet noon when I arrived back at the palace and went to Prince Eric's study to tell him what happened. I also needed to thank him for letting me use the royal carriage.

"That was quick—not *too* quick, I hope?"

Prince Eric greeted me with a smile as he sipped his tea. The warm, calm atmosphere soothed my heart, shaken as it was by the encounter with my stepmother and sister.

Only a little while ago, I didn't recognize the bliss that came from inhabiting such a serene, untroubled environment.

"Do you want some tea, Leia? It's warm, very tasty, yes."

"Oh, yes, thank you."

*Wow... Peace and quiet truly is a beautiful thing. Hard to believe that the mere absence of my stepmother and sister and their constant yelling could make me feel so blessed.*

"Urrgghh, forgive me! I was wrong! Please spare me!"

"Huh?!" I looked up in confusion.

"Here you go! Do you want milk and sugar?" Lingsha held out a cup of tea for me with one hand while her other was holding a large man by the scruff of his neck.

*That's right...Prince Eric is surrounded by assassins.*

Even knowing that, I considered this place peaceful—was there something

wrong with me? I started to worry about myself like I was a concerned friend.

“No sugar, thank you, and I’ll add my own milk. You seem to have your hands full, Miss Lingsha.”

“Oh, *no*, Leia, it’s no problem at all! Let Lingsha take care of you!” As Lingsha skillfully poured milk into my cup, the scent of tea reached my nose. “Here you go. Just relax, yes?”

Lingsha handed the giant assassin over to a policeman and sat beside me.

*This tea is so good. Lingsha must really be skilled at brewing it.*

From the rough way the bodyguard had handed me the tea, it was hard to believe just how delicate its flavor was.

“Doesn’t Lingsha make the best tea?”

“Oh yes, Your Highness. Its flavor fills my heart with warmth.”

Even though I spent my days fighting off assassins, I felt at peace. My heart was as warm and cozy as this cup of tea.

“I’ve been so happy lately that I was starting to worry something terrible was going to happen. Returning home this morning made that worry even stronger.”

After some time of living at the palace, I felt as if my life had been blessed by some kind of miracle. It was just so unbelievably perfect that I was starting to worry that everything that had happened after my broken engagement was just a dream.

“There was a time when I felt the same way, you know.”

“Oh! Did you really, Miss Lingsha?”

“Well, yes, back in the Ren Empire, everyone in my family kept killing each other. Elshaid is a hundred times more comfortable to live in, oh yes indeed. So I’ve adopted it as my home.”

I was alarmed by Lingsha’s casual tone. I couldn’t even imagine what it was

like to have your entire family trying to kill you. She had mentioned earlier that people were often beaten senseless there—the Ren Empire was surely a lot wilder than Elshaid.

But after everything she'd been through, Lingsha saw Elshaid as her homeland now.

*What caused her change of heart, I wonder...*

"You consider Elshaid...to be your home?"

"Oh yes! Once it became truth, I didn't have to think about anything, and life got better, you see."

"By *become truth*...do you mean you convinced yourself that Elshaid was your homeland?"

"Oh yes! At first, I was shocked that I could eat every day without worrying about anybody stealing my food. But always being shocked wore me out, you see. Wondering and fretting won't change anything either. It's a luxury, not needing to think."

"Not needing to think is a luxury... Is that really how it works?"

"For the last four thousand years, it's worked that way, oh yes. The people of the Ren Empire have always, *always* loved luxury. And I know life will be much easier for you if your life here becomes truth in your mind, Leia. I promise you'll think it's stranger *not* to see your life that way."

I chuckled, "That does sound like a carefree way to live. I think I'll follow your example, Miss Lingsha."

"Oh yes, I promise you'll have more fun that way. The tea here is tasty too."

I realized that I'd been smiling a lot more when I talked to people now. All those years living at that house made me forget how to enjoy conversations. It may have made me sad in the past, but now, it felt so insignificant.

*I think I'll take a page from Lingsha's book and try to forget about my family.*

“Prince Eric, I’m going to extract a confession from the assassin Lady Lingsha just captured.”

Johann had been in the room this whole time, but he’d been having a staring contest with some important papers until he excused himself just now to deal with the assassin. I felt like it was too soon to get a confession, but he surely had his reasons to rush.

“You question your assassins so soon after their attempts?” I blurted out. The arrest transpired so quickly before my eyes that my curiosity was piqued. I knew I was out of line to ask, but I just had to know. *Of course, if the information was confidential, I wouldn’t pry.*

“As Lady Lingsha has captured three assassins today, I’ll have to start right away if I want to finish questioning them before nightfall.”

“Oh, I see. She caught *three* assassins?”

“Yes, although we’ve had fewer assassins than usual this week. Here, you can see the information on this graph I’ve created. While we mustn’t be complacent, the number of arrests has been trending downward.”

One glance at Johann’s graph was enough to recognize that the line had been on a downward slope. I then remembered that Lingsha had two assassins in tow this morning. Adding the one she just caught, that made three.

If there were fewer assassination attempts now, it was scary to imagine how many there used to be. Though now that I was presented with the facts, I did get the sense that there were fewer assassins now than there were when I first arrived.

“Isn’t having fewer assassins a good thing?” I asked.

“Quite right, Leia, but that isn’t what concerns Johann. Aren’t you curious as to why there are fewer assassins? Answering that question will help us track down the mastermind behind them all.”

“Yes indeed, Your Highness. We must find these fiendish criminals who want

our prince dead as soon as possible, so that we may stop them for good.”

Now I understood. The mastermind who sent the assassins surely had a reason to attempt fewer assassinations. Figuring that out might help us uncover their identity.

*Who could it be?* I wondered. They had sent so many assassins to do their dirty work, yet they didn’t leave a trace. In other words, this mastermind had to have access to a great deal of money and resources, perhaps even aid from other kingdoms.

*I can think of one sort of person who has the money, the resources, and the connections with other kingdoms...but it can't be...*

“W-wait a minute, don’t tell me the mastermind is one of Elshaid’s—”

“You’re a sharp one, Lady Leia. I’d rather this information not leave this room, but yes, His Highness and I both theorize that the mastermind is a member of the Great Four.”

The air of the study turned tense when Johann revealed that the mastermind behind the attempts on Prince Eric’s life was likely someone in the four greatest noble houses. There were four dukes in Elshaid who managed large tracts of land, supported the royal family, and were central to the national government. Their families were called the Great Four, and they were treated differently from the other noble houses.

With special rights and privileges far greater than that of the rest of the nobility, the Great Four wielded tremendous power—and Lord Philip’s house, Gilbert, was one of those four families. That was why it was unheard of for a member of House Gilbert to come crawling to beg forgiveness of a lowly count like my father.

Of course, it was easy to deduce that Duke Gilbert had only done so because he was terrified that Philip had so angered Prince Eric that his title was in jeopardy. Even so, it was unthinkable that people so privileged would be dissatisfied with their circumstances. They were second only to the crown in

power.

“About seventy percent of the government officials whom Prince Eric has stripped of title had connections to the Great Four. They have ample reason to hold a grudge.”

“That said, nobody from the Gilbert house was involved,” Prince Eric conceded. “The other three houses are suspect, though.”

Everything was now starting to make sense. Among the special privileges of dukes was the power of appointment. Since Prince Eric showed no clemency for the corrupt, the bureaucrats who had dirtied their hands fell and the dukes grew angry—those officials were appointed and influenced by the dukes. The more government officials fired, the weaker the influence the dukes held in the workings of government.

“Those three houses wish that my younger brother Dale would become the rightful heir to the throne instead of me. They aren’t shy about telling His Majesty so. It’s clear they want me to disappear.”

I had spoken with Prince Dale, Eric’s younger brother, many times at parties. His face was like Eric’s, but that was all they had in common. He was cordial and nonthreatening, and this demeanor made the eligible bachelor quite popular with ladies, at least judging by the longing gazes he received wherever he went.

Prince Eric wasn’t betrothed either, but according to Johann, this was because marriage was out of the question when his life was in constant peril.

*Is Prince Dale refraining from marriage out of respect for his brother?*

I couldn’t imagine what their relationship was like, but it was rather alarming to learn that three of the four most influential houses favored Prince Dale over the crown prince.

The notion that the crown prince chosen by the king—the will of the kingdom by extension—was unfit to rule existed due to the tension between the royal family and the Great Four.

"It concerns me that His Majesty the King has done nothing, despite the numerous assassination attempts on the crown prince's life," I said. "Wouldn't most kings take some sort of action?"

I couldn't understand His Majesty's thought process. It was unbelievable that he would sit idly by while his heir received such horrid treatment. Any other king would stand up to those who dared slight his chosen heir—even if they were the four most powerful noble houses.

"His Majesty is not being careless. His request to the church that you be my bodyguard is proof of that. It is tacitly understood within the kingdom that the Great Four are a breeding ground for fraud and corruption. If your goal was to maintain a temporary peace, then it wouldn't be a mistake to leave the Great Four alone."

"Your Highness... Are you saying that His Majesty decided to leave the Great Four alone in order to maintain this temporary peace?"

"That's right. And that's the way a statesman should act. If His Majesty truly wished to give the Great Four free rein, I would have already lost my claim to the throne. Do you see what I'm getting at?"

Prince Eric had a point—if the king wasn't concerned with Prince Eric's safety, he wouldn't have made the arrangements to secure me as his bodyguard. But I still felt it was irresponsible of him to not make proactive attempts to intervene, for fear of war breaking out in Elshaid. Therefore, I could only conclude that His Majesty likely had a secret agenda.

"Do you suppose that His Majesty secretly hopes that you will change the balance of power, Prince Eric? Perhaps that's why he hasn't officially named Prince Dale his heir. And he won't say so personally so as to avoid political chaos, right?"

"At the very least, His Majesty is testing me—that's what I believe."

"As do I," Johann agreed. "His Majesty is most certainly anything but careless."

Perhaps this “test” was to determine if Prince Eric was capable of unmasking the mastermind on his own. That would explain why Johann was working so diligently to uncover clues.

*Prince Eric is incredible. Even when he’s surrounded by enemies, he still puts his trust in his father the king and doesn’t resent him.*

He was surely dying for help. There was no joy to be found in a life of ceaseless danger.

I looked at Prince Eric. His gaze was diligent as ever, truly the product of a strong spirit. The frightful impression I had of him when we first met was long gone now, and I was losing myself in the beauty of his gaze.

“Well, I’ll take my leave now,” Johann said, then left the study to interrogate the assassins.

I wanted to help—if only there was something I could do. I didn’t want him to lose the sparkle in his eyes.

“The solemn conversation is over now, yes?” Lingsha asked. “Come on, Leia, your trip home, tell me about it. I’m worried they bullied you, see?”

“That’s right, Leia. Did your family have any news of Philip?”

Just when I thought the tension in the air would dissipate, Lingsha brought up my family. It seemed that Prince Eric received word about Philip and Jill from Duke Gilbert—though that was to be expected.

“Yes, I heard that he and Jill are to be wed after all.”

“It wasn’t what I was pushing for, but Duke Gilbert was so determined, and as long as you are willing to forgive him, I’m prepared to let it slide so they can save face.”

Prince Eric was angrier with Lord Philip than I was, but Duke Gilbert’s apology had smoothed things over.

“I’m not at all bothered by it. The whole ordeal has made me rather disenchanted by marriage.”

"Sorry to hear that—but there's nothing wrong with being alone. I'm not yet betrothed, and my life has no shortage of excitement."

"Then perhaps I should follow your lead and find ways to rejoice in my solitude as well."

"Yes, you would be well served to do so for a while. You are both talented and supernaturally powerful. You will bid farewell to your life alone when the time is right, I'd wager."

Would the day truly come when I could bid farewell to my life alone? The way my life was now, I certainly couldn't imagine it, and surely Prince Eric was only able to accept my declaration against marriage with such ease because he himself had not yet chosen a partner to share his life with. He probably thought he needed to steel himself until he unmasked the mastermind. But after this was all over, as crown prince, Eric was expected to marry. I wondered what sort of person would become his wife...

*Knowing Prince Eric, she would surely be devout. Someone he could trust...*

What was I even thinking? It didn't concern me at all. I just needed to keep my mind on protecting Prince Eric until he unmasked the mastermind.

I started to get the feeling that I would be alone for a long time hence. After what happened with Philip, I wasn't too eager to get married, so I was better off alone. At least I was enjoying my life for now, in spite of all that.

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About a month had passed since I became Prince Eric's bodyguard. Being reserved by nature, I mostly kept to myself and made no particular effort to talk to anybody, but little by little, I warmed up to the other bodyguards and could now speak freely with them.

They were all lovely people who were fun to talk to. I became especially close friends with Johann and Lingsha. As Prince Eric trusted them both greatly, we spent a lot of time in his study, lending an ear and giving advice.

“Here, Leia, I thought you’d like this bread when I saw it, so I bought it, you see. I’d be so happy if you ate some!”

“Thank you very much... Ooh, it is good. And what a mellow aroma too. Did you buy this in the capital?”

“Oh, yes! This elderly couple who runs a pizzeria? Well, their son opened a bakery against their wishes, you see. The bread tastes of *contempt* for home!”

“O-oh, really?”

It was hard to believe his parents didn’t support him when his bread was this good.

*Wait a minute... As soon as she said it tasted of contempt for home, the bread started tasting extra salty. I hope I’m just imagining it...*

Lingsha knew all the best eateries in the capital. Because of her influence, I’d been buying dinner on the way home from my saintly duties more and more.

“Lady Leia, could you notify Prince Eric that his new sword will be delivered tomorrow? There’s another matter I must attend to,” said Johann.

“Oh, of course! Anything I can do to make your job easier.”

Johann was not only the captain of Prince Eric’s bodyguards, he also assisted the prince in his administrative tasks. This was because he simultaneously held the position of Captain of the Guard and Police Deputy of the Crown Prince. Because he had looked after Prince Eric since childhood as if he were his own baby brother, Eric trusted him more than anyone. It was only when the two of them talked that Prince Eric ever smiled like an innocent boy.

Johann was a skilled bodyguard, as one would expect. He rounded up assassins one after another. It could be argued that without Johann around to serve him, Prince Eric would not have been able to follow the path of justice.

With his message in my care, Johann left Prince Eric’s study.

“Leia, I’ll make more tea, yes? Give me the cups.”

"Thank you, Miss Lin, your tea always tastes so good. Where did you learn how to make it?"

Lingsha's tea had a rich, heavenly aroma. Neither me nor Johann could make tea like she did. She seemed to have some trick up her sleeve, but she never had an answer for us when we asked what it was.

"Learning to make tea was part of my training to lull my enemies into a false sense of security. Ren's people drink lots of tea, you see. After they drink a cup of tea is when they're the most relaxed. And if your enemy feels safe, you can blast 'em to Heaven with one punch, you see?"

"M-my goodness, you've studied under some very unique circumstances, haven't you?"

Lingsha's tea was delicious, in any case. But I learned a valuable lesson: Some questions were better left unasked. It was possibly one of the most important lessons I'd ever learned.

Three years ago, Lingsha abandoned her title of imperial princess and fled to Elshaid as a refugee. When Prince Eric declared that he would take her under his wing, he became a pillar of support for Lingsha in Elshaid. There were plenty of bumps along the way, but the important thing was that she had successfully escaped the Ren Empire and could lead a peaceful life in Elshaid. She became a bodyguard because of her mastery of martial arts, and because she'd volunteered herself for the task.

I was happy to have yet another nice person I could talk to. All the traces of hardship I felt while living with my family were now gone, and my days were filled with joy. All that remained was to find and stop the mastermind that targeted Prince Eric. As one of his bodyguards, I worked hard to try and solve that problem.

"Oh no! I forgot my request from the church in my room. I was supposed to read it through and show it to His Highness by the end of day. Miss Lin, if His Highness should come by, could you tell him I went to get something I forgot

and that I'll be right back?"

"I can, oh yes. You are in good hands!"

Having assured Lingsha that I would return promptly, I rushed off to my room to fetch the church's request.

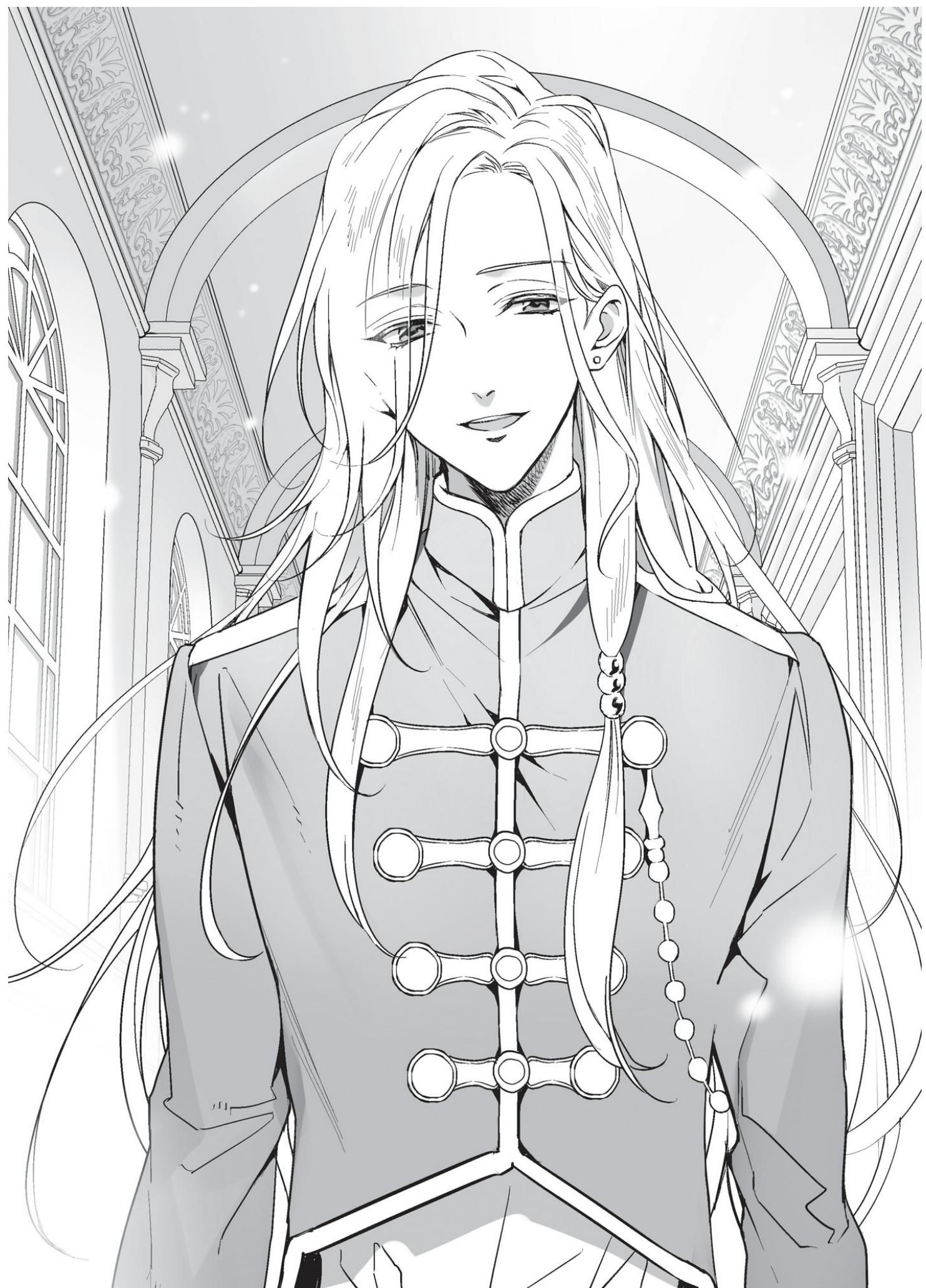
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I returned to my room, tucked the document under my arm, and was about to make my way back to the study when I had an unexpected encounter with someone. It made me nervous because this was the first time I'd seen him in this kind of situation, and the last time I saw him was likely a year ago.

"Hi there, Leia. Long time no see. I was surprised to hear you had been appointed my brother's bodyguard—only a little while prior, I'd heard you were to be wed to Duke Gilbert's son."

"Prince Dale, it is an honor to see you again. I'm terribly sorry to tell you this after you were so kind as to give our marriage your blessing, but I was inadequate and thus my betrothal was annulled. I'm terribly ashamed."

Elshaid's second prince, Dale, stood before me. We'd exchanged pleasantries now and then at parties, but I didn't know him very well beyond that.



He was in many ways the polar opposite of the prickly Prince Eric. He approached everyone cordially with a smile that never left his face. In short, he was the very embodiment of harmlessness.

His hair was the same silver as Eric's, though he wore his long. With a delicate, androgynous face and a beautiful slender body, he was just as beautiful as any lady. He was wildly popular with nobles and peasants alike.

I suspected the Great Four favored him over Prince Eric to succeed the throne because he would be easier to control.

"No need to apologize, my lady! In fact, I could not feel more reassured, knowing a fantastic saint such as yourself is taking care of my brother. Elshaid simply cannot function without him. I hope we have you in our service for many years to come."

Prince Dale smiled sweetly at me. Apparently, he thought my presence as Prince Eric's bodyguard was to be celebrated. I wondered if he truly had no ambitions of his own—slitting Prince Eric's throat in his sleep and becoming the next king, for example.

Of course, since he always spoke so lovingly about his brother, my suspicions were nothing more than meanspirited conjecture. However—and maybe it was because the Great Four conversation was fresh on my mind—I couldn't help but wonder what his true feelings were. Naturally, I never dared to ask such an impertinent question, but I was dying to know what secrets lay behind that sweet smile of his.

"Thank you. I shall defend Prince Eric with my life."

"Defend him with your life? Huh... Well, let's you and I have a nice chat sometime."

When he heard the words "defend him with my life," Dale's constant smile faltered for a moment. He almost seemed sad in that instant...or perhaps it was an expression of love... His face hinted at mixed emotions beneath the surface.

But his smile quickly returned, and with a bow, he slipped past me and left.

What in the world was that look on Prince Dale's face? An impulse to ask him as he walked away seized me, but I didn't have the courage to act on it, so I continued on my way to Prince Eric's study.

Prince Eric was surely in there already. I would need to apologize for my tardiness, and then perhaps we could talk a little about Prince Dale.

"I see. So you saw Dale. Well, did he say anything to you?"

When I told Prince Eric about my encounter with his brother, he gave me a noncommittal response. I hadn't heard any rumors of bad blood between the brothers, but he had said they didn't see each other often. I wondered if neither of them cared much about that.

"No, Your Highness, only to give my regards to you."

"I see," he answered curtly, and took a sip of tea.

It seemed he had complicated feelings about his brother. After all, the conspiracy to assassinate Prince Eric was motivated by the goal of putting Prince Dale on the throne.

I wanted to believe that the eternally smiling prince was harmless, but given what I'd been through, I couldn't trust him—and that frustrated me. It hurt, wanting to believe in something but being unable to.

"Oh, Eric, Leia, why so doom and gloom? In the Ren Empire, everyone I crossed paths with would beat me and call me the enemy, you see! Elshaid is like Heaven compared to that, oh yes *indeed!*"

"Miss Lin?"

"Lingsha, why the sudden outburst?"

Lingsha had just declared, her eyes dead serious, that Prince Eric's precarious life of daily assassination attempts, a life in which he had to suspect his own brother, was like Heaven.

It was hard to explain...and maybe it was because she was so valiant, but looking at her always made me feel refreshed. Seeing the big smile on her face made me proud to have made a friend that made me feel so good. Watching Lingsha smile, I could almost feel myself growing more cheerful.

"My master always told me, 'Lingsha, if you can't fight off your attackers while you're asleep, then you'll never wake up again.' Get it? But I can sleep real good in a bed now, oh yes! It's a wonderful thing that the mattress merchants in Elshaid aren't starving from poverty!"

"Lingsha. I'll ask you again... *What* are you talking about?"

"You have me, Miss Lingsha, and also Sir Johann, Your Highness. You do have many enemies, that I can't deny, but you also have allies. And we're all very blessed to be able to feel safe with each other and relax over a cup of tea. I believe that is what Miss Lingsha was trying to say."

"Oh... Yes, you're both right. If I suspect everything and everyone, I will never be at peace. I truly am grateful to you both. To me, *trust* is the greatest treasure of all. In comparison, my title as crown prince is nothing more than a rock in the road. Thank you, both of you. I feel better now."

Prince Eric offered us his sincere gratitude. Trust was his treasure—he was probably on to something.

On the day my engagement ended, I'd wished that Lord Philip had believed me, so I was sincerely happy to be included in Prince Eric's short list of trusted people.

I vowed in my heart to always cherish the treasure of Prince Eric's trust.

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As the light of the full moon shone through the lace curtains, Prince Eric suddenly muttered, "That's odd."

He sat at his desk in the study doing his usual paperwork. My saintly duties had taken longer than usual today. Since he had accompanied me, that meant

he had gotten to work later than usual, and I was guarding him at night for the first time in a while.

I wondered what he thought was odd. It was a quiet night, and not a single assassin had shown up in two days. It was the definition of peaceful—so what was the matter?

I had nothing in particular to do, so I busied myself eating the cookies Lingsha had bought me and flipped through the pages of the novel Johann had recommended. It was so peaceful I was starting to feel guilty and a little anxious. However, if it meant Prince Eric was in no danger, a bodyguard feeling bored was definitely a good thing.

*Wow, these cookies are so good. I need to ask Lingsha where she bought them next time I see her.*

“Yeah... This is odd. It’s been too long since somebody’s tried to kill me.”

“Er—that’s your problem?!”

His chair rattled as Eric leaped out of it, went to the window, and opened it to look outside. I sat there, stunned by what he just said. The revelation that assassination attempts had become part of his definition of “normal” was just too much. It was such a shock that I blurted out my feelings without thinking.

Technically, it *was* unusual. During the month or so since I’d arrived here, assassins made constant attempts until early spring. It was almost like they’d lost interest as the weather grew warmer; however, since I was a new recruit, I had just assumed that this was typical and thought nothing more of it.

Johann said, “Your Highness, step back from the window. I don’t care if we haven’t had as many assassins—it’s dangerous for you to stand there.”

He was quite right to warn the prince—assassins would love to attack the prince if they spotted him at the window. Goodness, the prince could be so reckless. He was probably confident that they wouldn’t be able to kill him so easily, which wasn’t to say that I approved of him purposefully putting himself

in danger.

“Oh, sorry. I thought that if I showed them an opening, they might make a move.”

“I don’t think offering yourself as bait would be wise, Your Highness. No point in luring out an assassin if you end up dead.”

“Fair enough. I’ll heed your warning,” Prince Eric said and obediently sat back at his desk.

It helped that Prince Eric was surprisingly flexible. He wasn’t like this just with Johann—if Lingsha or I gave him legitimate-sounding advice, he would take it. Even so, I wondered if it was really necessary for us to think so deeply about the waning of assassination attempts.

“Eric, are you bored? No assassins to *blast* away?”

“Lady Lingsha, you have the wrong idea. What His Highness is trying to express is his concern that the assassination attempts haven’t merely decreased, they’ve *stopped*. He feels a great sense that something is wrong about it all.”

I couldn’t say that it *didn’t* feel wrong...but I thought there was a rather simple explanation for the sudden decrease in assassins. We had to remember that the situation up until now was *not* normal, so it naturally followed that people would assume the situation returned to normal for abnormal reasons.

“Don’t you think they’ve simply run out of assassins? I doubt the mastermind who wants Prince Eric dead has a magic cauldron that spawns an infinite supply of assassins.”

That was my theory: The mastermind simply ran out of willing assassins. I didn’t know where they came from, but they surely didn’t run cheap. Assassins were single-use pawns—if they failed, they were executed. If they succeeded, they would need to be compensated, along with a suitable advance on the job. Moreover, the mastermind needed to put all sorts of measures in place to

ensure nobody discovered them. That alone would take a large sum of money.

Besides, most people wouldn't be assassins, and some lines were so difficult to cross that no amount of money would suffice. The way I saw it, I wouldn't be surprised if we had simply caught every single assassin in the kingdom.

"You may be right," Prince Eric said, seeming to agree somewhat with my theory. "This month alone, we caught and executed quite a number of assassins."

He was right. Since I'd arrived, we had captured dozens of assassins. They weren't in infinite supply, so it was only natural that they would run out eventually.

But there was an evasiveness in Prince Eric's reaction to my theory. Like there was some small detail of it that concerned him. From my vantage point, an abnormal number of assassins had already been sent after the prince—enough to make me contemplate the existence of a magic assassin-spawning cauldron, but I knew that couldn't be.

"Well, I did send a lot of assassins and non-assassins flying, you see!"

"Lady Lingsha...I'm not sure how I feel about that. Anyway, Your Highness, we will take a brief patrol outside."

After chiding Lingsha, Johann took her outside. In these situations, patrolling outside was especially important; it was possible our enemy was counting on us letting our guard down.

"Your Highness, is there anything else that's concerning you? I still think the decrease of assassins is something to celebrate."

After Lingsha and Johann left, I pressed the still-skeptical Prince Eric further. As his bodyguard, I felt it was important that I knew about any misgivings he might have.

"Not in particular, no. I agree with you, it's most likely they simply ran out of assassins. And I realize I should celebrate the lack of wrongdoers...but I just

can't bring myself to be happy about the end of this battle. Is something wrong with me?"

Now it made sense. Johann had mentioned earlier that the assassins were the one link to the mastermind targeting Prince Eric. Now that the assassins were gone, the trail had gone cold. We had captured so many assassins and yet we still weren't any closer to finding the mastermind...and Prince Eric had to have felt terribly bitter about that.

"Would I be correct in saying that the reduced assassination attempts might indicate that our mastermind has given up?"

I asked the question to ease the clouds of worry that were forming on the prince's face. The mastermind had failed despite sending so many assassins. It was impressive that they left no evidence, but that long succession of failures must have stung.

We felt frustrated, but surely this mastermind was as frustrated, if not more so. Rather than acting rashly and screwing up, it made sense for them to lay low for a while. If they were caught, it'd all be over.

"I don't think we can reach that conclusion yet. We should interpret this to mean that this mastermind is proceeding with extreme caution now. They may have stopped recklessly sending assassins, but you can bet they're formulating a new plan."

"A new plan... That's alarming. Not only do we need to continue being vigilant for assassins, but we need to keep our eyes peeled for some new scheme."

He was right. After so many botched assassinations, most masterminds would try to salvage the situation. After all, they had already invested so much time and money on their mission. It was imprudent of me to assume the mastermind had just given up.

Following that line of logic, our mastermind would probably use a different tactic—something more direct. I still couldn't imagine what form that sort of plan would take, but I could tell that life was about to get incredibly

bothersome.

“Having said that, I have you to thank, for the decrease in attacks, Leia.”

“Me? Oh, but that can’t be, Your Highness. I only guard you for two hours each day.”

I found it hard to believe that I was the reason Prince Eric’s assassins had tapered off. I barely spent any time guarding him; compared to Lingsha and Johann, my contributions were insignificant.

“But right around the time you became my bodyguard, it got much easier to catch the assassins. The time it takes you to incapacitate an assassin after sensing him is incomparably faster than anyone else. This is intimidating to assassins.”

One of the basic requirements for becoming a saint was the ability to suppress a monster attack even while erecting magical barriers. In addition, we were trained in healing magic. Since I had become a saint, I could still sense a living being’s presence and cast a spell on it, even with both hands tied behind my back.

*I never dreamed that all my training would eventually help me protect Prince Eric as his bodyguard.*

If my presence was a deterrent to the assassins, that made my coming here all worth it.

“Our enemy might have falsely assumed that you would eventually slip up as my bodyguard. That alone shows just how much of an impact having a saint as a bodyguard is.”

“Is that really how it works, Your Highness?”

Prince Eric leaned in closer and whispered, “It is. I really am glad I have you, Leia.”

I was a little embarrassed. As I started to lose myself in his soft gaze, I caught my breath and averted my eyes.

I liked to think that the day would come when Prince Eric's days could be filled with laughter and joy, even without me. It was just tragic that he felt a sense of unease when assassins *weren't* trying to kill him.

Since I started working for Prince Eric, that had become my secret wish.

Prince Eric was doing the right thing, and *because* he was doing the right thing, his life was in danger. That was why I wanted to give him his peaceful life back, and in doing so, prove that Prince Eric Elshaid was just.

"Don't worry, Prince Eric. If one of our battles is over, then we must move onward. And if new sparks of war should come our way, as long as we don't forget to keep pushing forward, our efforts will bear fruit—I'll see to it that they do."

Rejoicing over the progress we had made was an important first step. If we kept our eyes on the past, our morale would drop. But most importantly, I wasn't the only one in this fight. Johann and Lingsha were fighting alongside me, so I hoped that Prince Eric could put his trust in his allies.

"Goodness...I struggle to understand why Philip broke off his engagement with you."

"You think something's wrong with him?" I asked, doubting my ears.

"Er, no," he smiled evasively. "I only meant to say that you are an incredible woman."

The way he laughed it off only made me more curious as to what he meant... but maybe I was overthinking it.

I didn't want quiet peaceful nights like this to be seen as undesirable forever. As I looked out the window at the full moon, I offered a silent prayer.

*Dear God...please make peaceful nights like this the norm for him.*

**-Eric's Perspective-**

“YOU ARE A DISGRACE!”

When I yelled those words at my friend that day, my sense of shame had probably fallen into a deep slumber. But whenever I looked back on that moment now, I felt embarrassed.

Over a month had passed since Saint Leia Westoria had become my bodyguard. When she arrived, there were patches of snow here and there, but they had since melted, and the great outdoors basked in the warm glow of springtime and the budding of overflowing greenery.

At first, she was as demure as a domesticated cat, but as time went on, she loosened up and began to act as her true self—a woman who worked hard, thought hard, and laughed hard.

She was good friends with Johann and Lingsha now. I would often catch glimpses of her conversing merrily with them in my study.

“Does something hurt, sir?”

“Yeah, I banged up my knee real good. Can’t move it none.”

“Oh dear, well, I’ll fix that right away. *O Saintly Light, bring healing!*”

“Whoaaa! The town healer couldn’t fix my knee, but would ya look at that! I feel spry again!”

Once a week, without fail, Leia could be found at the town church just outside the royal capital, healing the wounded with magic. Her healing spells were most notable for their precision and prized as much as her barrier spells. Even using the same magic, the efficacy of her spells exceeded that of the average mage.

“That healing spell you just used...how does it work? The healer of this town isn’t necessarily negligent, from what I’ve heard.”

“Good question. I’ve devised a way to focus my magic energy on the affected area of a patient, so the spell will target it directly. A spell can be drastically

more effective if it is focused. However, focusing a spell requires a delicate hand with the arcane energy, so it's a difficult trick to master."

That made sense. A slow river's current could be made much swifter and stronger if channeled through a smaller opening. Leia's magic worked on the same principle: By focusing the magic into a small area, its effects were amplified.

She needed powerful magic energy to become a saint in the first place, an energy so powerful nobody else could come close to equaling it. And yet she did not rest on her laurels. She kept up her training and had developed new methods to achieve even greater results.

I had never met a harder worker than her.

Only yesterday, she had achieved the feat of healing a wasteland while erecting barriers. As a saint, she was not only satisfactory—she exceeded expectations.

The tarnished image I'd had of Leia from Philip's testimony over a month ago was utter hogwash. I knew that now...

But I felt so wretched. I was in no position to scold Philip either.

Here this woman tirelessly worked with such devotion to help Elshaid, and I took idle gossip as truth and judged her. Was a man such as I truly worthy of waxing poetic about justice?

I felt so ashamed. I had lectured Philip on morality, yet could I say my treatment of Leia was entirely moral?

She didn't blame me, of course. She even seemed to forgive me for unfairly passing judgment on her. She had likely forgiven me not because I was the crown prince but out of mercy and her own compassion. But as the days passed, the more I watched her work with such devotion, the harder it was for me to bear.

"You've been more than satisfactory as a saint. Why do you continue your training further?"

She had finished her saintly duties for the day and was in my study, guarding me. Everyone recognized Leia Westoria's genius. And as it was the church who had chosen her to be a saint, they surely knew even better than me that her saintly abilities were extraordinary. And yet, she silently and devotedly kept her eyes on the path ahead. This fascinated me to no end.

"I'm not doing this for the glory. I think... I think I do this because I love the kingdom of Elshaid. Hard work is no burden if you're doing it for something you love."

"You love Elshaid, Leia?"

"Of course, I do. With its beautiful greenery, its historical buildings, and its smiling townspeople... Just looking at it all, you can't help but find it wonderful. Maybe that's why...why no matter how uncomfortable I felt at home, mysteriously enough, I never felt the desire to leave this kingdom."

It was then that I discovered the source of the devout light in her strong gaze.

Leia did not *want* to look back. She worked hard for what she loved *because* she loved it. It was a simple, yet powerful motivation. It was unclear whether it was out of egoism or altruism, but when she said she was happy to work hard for the things she loved, I couldn't bring myself to question her further.

*What an unbelievable woman I have as my bodyguard. No wonder she was undaunted by my initial condemnation of her.*

It was only natural that you were so easily able to refute anything I said to you then. You had overwhelming faith in yourself. You had faith in the path you had chosen, so you had no hesitations.

"Why all the questions, Your Highness? Is something troubling you?"

"Oh, no, it's not that. I was just laughing at myself, wondering why I picked a fight with someone with a heart so much bigger than my own."

Looking back on how I acted, it was so funny it hurt. When I realized I was wrong, I should have given her a proper apology then and there.

*Leia, you may have forgiven me, but I still haven't forgiven myself.*

But I couldn't bring myself to tell her, because this was all brought about by my own fragility. I alone had to shoulder the burden of my mistake. I had to keep carrying it until, at the very least, I could proudly say that I served my kingdom well as the crown prince. This was my own path to atonement.

"Everyone makes mistakes, Your Highness, even me. But when we admit we were wrong and make amends, that's how we grow."

"Leia...?"

"I know you regret how you treated me that day. After all the time we've spent together, I'd like to think I understand you at least a little. And from the look in your eyes and the things you say sometimes, I can easily imagine that you believe my forgiveness is not enough—you haven't forgiven yourself."

Ah, she saw right through me.

We'd barely known each other for a month, yet I felt truly seen by her. Our positions had reversed—I'd wanted to observe her yet here she was, reading me like a book.

Perhaps I was a bit conceited. I didn't understand or appreciate how much more I had to grow.

"But now, we can have casual conversations like this. I would love it if the assassins would keep on behaving for some time."

"You can say that again. You know, it's been a while since I've felt so at peace."

*These moments with you, chatting about nothing in particular... I don't think I could put into words just how much they mean to me.*

I never thought much about what it meant to be happy, but this warm, light feeling in my heart might've been it. The understanding came naturally to me.

### **-Jill's Perspective-**

**M**Y SISTER LEIA is truly a hateful person.

Only yesterday, she pretended to be returning home for good only so she could make a fool of me—her true nature became *quite* clear to me then. My sister *hated* me and had treated me with cruelty this whole time. I couldn't believe I used to trust her. How I used to force a smile on my face and convince Mother that I was all right and that Leia could not be capable of such viciousness.

But this was just *too* cruel.

The rumors were spreading faster than I could breathe:

“I heard Prince Eric is quite taken with Saint Leia.”

“Yes, they’re inseparable.”

“So Prince Eric is ready to settle down at last. What great news!”

“Hey, what if that broken engagement was fate’s way of joining her with Prince Eric?!”

“Oh, how sweet! I never imagined a broken engagement could lead to such romance.”

Apparently, as Leia worked diligently as a saint at the palace, Prince Eric never left her side, and he wouldn’t let anyone else have her. Why did the world seem to revolve around Leia? She only pretended her heart was broken when her engagement ended so she could get closer to *my* dream man, then she used her schemes and wiles to *steal* his heart! Even the evilest of witches would be shocked by my sister’s cunning.

If her conniving ploys were to be lauded as piety, then this world and everyone in it was simply outrageous!

My insidious sister had all the luck while I suffered every possible loss. For example, she *forced herself* on Prince Eric while I had to live in fear because I bore witness to her chilling true nature.

*Oh, Prince Eric, why my sister? Is it because I failed to become a saint? My God, I suppose this is the punishment I incur for falling out of your favor.*

If only God loved me like he loved my sister, then I could have at least had a taste of a life of splendor. Truly, what a mad world, that such an honest and moral woman as I would be forced to lead a life of rejection. Life was a tragedy—so tragic that nothing would ever again brighten my day.

Ohh...why did things have to turn out this way?

“...Jill? Hey, Jill, are you listening to me?”

“Ohh? Why, Lord Philip! Um... Were you saying something?”

Oh, he gave me a fright! I was caught in a little private reverie when Lord Philip’s keen eye took notice, and he scolded me for having the temerity to be absorbed in thought—for the fourth time today, no less. I wished he wouldn’t growl at me so! It made me want to cry.

I was having dinner with my fiancé, Lord Philip, to appease my father. Yet I felt such tragic, tragic sorrow that food tasted like ash in my mouth.

Lord Philip was more prone to mood swings these days, and there was no delight in being in his company. I once read in a book that a proper man should dutifully ensure that his lady enjoyed herself at the dinner table. Lord Philip used to make an effort to entertain me with good conversation, but all traces of that man were now gone, and I was forced to endure his tiresome conversation.

Right now, he was talking about something I didn’t understand too well, but he had a severe, terrifying look in his eyes that made me not want to listen.

*Please, dear Philip, don’t scowl at me so. When you look at me like that, my body trembles, and I can’t move.*

“Jill, I don’t like your attitude. I’m carrying this burden too, you know.”

“B-burden? Lord Philip, what is this burden of which you speak?”

I hadn’t the faintest idea what he meant. He was the heir to a duke, so I always figured he was blessed with a life of ease and luxury and that he wanted for nothing.

I was the only one carrying a burden. I was forced to be with the odious Lord Philip. And I had no escape.

Lord Philip should’ve *worshipped* me and showered me with praise, yet he did nothing but complain. Was this an example of that so-called “psychological abuse” I had recently learned about? Yes, that had to be it. House Westoria was nowhere near the status of House Gilbert. I was sure he intended to escalate his abuse of me once I married into his house! Just the thought of it sickened me so...

“The burden of marrying you, of course.”

“What?! M-marrying me is a *burden* to you? How can you say something so *cruuuel*?”

I had done nothing wrong. And besides, our marriage was Lord Philip’s idea—he had no right to speak to me that way.

“What are you going on about? Isn’t it a burden for you too? Marrying me is so upsetting to you that you won’t even listen to a word I’m saying.”

“O-oh, how could you say such a thing? I haven’t said anything of the sort! Do you really see marrying me as a burden? That’s just too cruel. Oh-oh...”

“See, there you go, always crying! I should be the one crying, you know. Damn it all!”

Lord Philip’s harsh declaration—that he was forced into marrying me—made me so sad the tears flooded out of me. And I’d treated him with such kindness this whole time, sparing him the truth that my heart belonged to Prince Eric!

*Yes, this simply has to be psychological abuse. He’s trying to damage my psyche by saying such unfair things. I remember reading about it in a book once.*

*I know I'm right.*

"Oh, Lord Philip, just *what* has happened to you? You used to be so kind, listening to me even when I cried, but now it's like you're a different person. What grudge do you bear against me?"

"*Grudge?* Come, now, Jill. I'm just frustrated. What's wrong with you? Do you think that as long as a man doesn't complain, everything's fine and dandy with him? Every time you see my face, you groan. Every time Prince Eric comes up in conversation, you sigh. Whenever I say anything, you're immediately lost off in your own little world and give me the most perfunctory responses. I'm not stupid, you know. I know you don't want to marry me."

Why did he have to be so awful?

He spoke of the feelings in my heart as if he knew what they were. I was only thinking to myself a little, and he concocted this absurd delusion in his mind—he had to have been crazy!

The way he spoke, it was like he regarded me as a wicked shrew with a constant sneer of disgust on her face—like I was some sort of *villainess*!

Lord Philip was such an ogre. I couldn't believe that my father commanded me to marry such a horrid man. Was my life truly written to be one big tragedy?

Ohh! If only I had a beautiful, rosy life like my sister—how happy would I have been!

*Dear God...have I sinned? I only want a quaint, happy life. Why does living an unselfish and devout life bring me nothing but abuse?*

"Ohh, ohh... Why me? Why must I and I alone endure such cruelty? Oh, oh... Why, God, why does my sister get all your blessings? Oh! Ohh!"

"Damn it, again with the waterworks. You always pull that stunt when things don't go your way. My dad pretty much told me that marrying you to demonstrate my loyalty to Prince Eric was a precondition for remaining his heir. If he only knew what an insufferable banshee you were, then I could've married

Leia and lived happily ever after.”

Lord Philip’s slander was relentless. He broke off his engagement to my sister without her input, then proposed to me, then broke it off with me, and then begged me to take him back—fine words after everything he’d done!

He had some nerve, saying he would never be happy if he married me. Could he *be* any more self-centered?

“Lord Philip, what a horrible thing to say after you jilted my sister! Waaah! Why me? Why must all these horrible things happen only to *me*? And my sister...why does my sister get *all* the happiness?”

*My sister always finds happiness. I’m sure her life is more fun than she can handle.*

Leia had everything handed to her. Meanwhile, I had to struggle for everything in my life. I thought that once she left home, it wouldn’t bother me anymore, but just the thought of her living at the palace made my heart ache as though it were being crushed... It was the worst feeling.

“Well, you’re better off staying away from Prince Eric. He’s under constant attack by assassins. And while Leia is strong enough to handle it, you’re practically a magnet for danger.”

“Assassins, you say?”

I didn’t know that Prince Eric was the target of assassins.

Was that why my sister became his bodyguard? That meant...the worst might still happen to her.

*Oh dear. No, I mustn’t indulge in such macabre fantasies.*

I had wished just now that Leia would be assassinated, which meant they would then hold the saint’s exams once more and I could become a saint.

I could get back everything that my sister stole from me.

But it was wrong of me. I didn’t want to be the sort of person who wished

someone dead. It was evil.

Leia was cunning, and she'd attained far more happiness than I had, but she hadn't done anything deserving of death.

However, in light of my miserable condition, was there any justification for my sister's actions? *No...don't think such thoughts. It's wrong.*

"As I was saying, we must both grin and bear the burden of this engagement so our parents can save face. We'll need to have children eventually, so you'd better do some growing up. I'm only telling ya for your own good."

Lord Philip...did you just say "ya"? Such a rough, careless form of address saddened me so! Your psychological abuse had no limits!

The thought of bearing children with this man made me feel dirty, and I doubted that I could honestly love our children—especially not children with his unkempt red hair and weaselly eyes.

Oh, what cursed star was I born under?

"Hey! Are ya even listening to me?! If ya keep this up, I'm gonna complain to your pathetic count of a father!"

"Eeeeep! Please don't shout at me so!"

My tears would not stop. How many times did I have to grovel before him to not shout at me before he understood? He was tormenting me on purpose; that had to be it. He sought to break me and turn me into a mindless woman who obeyed his every whim. *I know it—I read about it in a book once!*

Why was I the sole victim of all these horrors?

*Dear God, am I in a sort of purgatory? If I were to overcome it, will good things come to me? You wouldn't let poor Jill live a life of only hardship and loss, would you?*

At this rate, I would die of psychological trauma. Lord Philip and Leia were practically trying to *murder* me.

Wah! I felt sick, so sick I could vomit.

These dinners with Lord Philip were always so overbearing. The tragedy of being forced into marriage with such a man felt like a knife plunged into my heart. My only recourse was to sit and let time pass me by. My dinners with Lord Philip became a brutal sort of training—training to deaden my emotions.

But then, there was a little knock at the door.

“Lord Philip, you have a visitor who insists on seeing you. May I let him in?”

“Who is it? Well, no matter. Let him in.”

“Philip! Long time no see, old chum. When I heard you were at this restaurant, I thought I’d pop in to say hello.”

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Duke Berklein. I don’t see you here often.”

Jade Berklein, a duke and member of the Great Four, stepped into our private room at the restaurant. He was still only in his twenties—he had taken over the house after his father died young. That, coupled with his chiseled face, made him nearly as popular with the ladies as Prince Eric.

He had been a bachelor ever since his fiancée died of an illness right before he gained the title of duke, which is why I hadn’t heard any strange rumors about him.

I heard that he only made brief appearances in social functions and rarely set foot in the royal capital, so I was also quite surprised by his presence here.

“Ha! Ha ha! I thought it would be a nice change of pace to sample the delights of the capital. Are you saying a country bumpkin like me is out of place in a city restaurant like this?”

“Of course not! You know I’d never mock you. Your distrust hurts me, Your Grace.”

“Ha ha ha! Do forgive me. My wit tends to be dry. Well! So, this is your fiancée! You’re Count Westoria’s daughter, correct?”

"Yes, I'm Jill Westoria. I am honored that you remember me, though we've only met once."

*Would you believe it—Duke Berklein recognizes me!*

I figured he must've found my maturity alluring. Unlike the always-irate Lord Philip, this man was a living, breathing Adonis. His beautiful black hair and the enchanting way his eyes sparkled behind his glasses made me swoon on the spot.

"I never forget a pretty face. After all, I am a bachelor. Plus, I'm starved for good company. Oh, Philip, I do envy you, old chum."

"Th-there's no need to be envious, *trust* me."

*Lord Philip, perhaps it is because you just denigrated me, but you seem to have a hard time accepting Duke Berklein's compliment with grace, I thought. By showing contempt for me, you've signaled that there is no love between us—I can tell without you saying so.*

Duke Berklein was so mature and masculine in comparison to Philip. Ooh, how I wished I was engaged to a fine man like him instead. He called me pretty and practically said he wanted to marry me. If only a wealthy and influential man like him were my fiancé, then I wouldn't need to fret over my sister so.

"Duke Berklein, as we've just finished our dinner, would you mind if we excused ourselves?"

"What, leaving already? And here I thought we could catch up."

"I'm so terribly sorry, but I have plans after this. Jill. Come."

About two hours had passed since we had sat down to dinner. I supposed that Lord Philip felt stifled from having to spend so much time with me. He also seemed uncomfortable around Duke Berklein, to the point of rushing through the end of our dinner. If you asked me, I was grateful to put that agonizing - dinner punctuated by Lord Philip's cruel jeers behind me...

"Too bad. Well, see you later, old chum. Next time we meet, let's have a nice,

long chat.”

“Y-yes, of course. I’ll take you to the best restaurant the capital has to offer. Ha ha ha ha!” Philip leaned forward and presented his hand for a handshake, his face contorted with discomfort.

Seeing the two men side by side made Lord Philip appear even seedier than usual. My eyes couldn’t help but wander to Duke Berklein, smiling with his perfect white teeth.

“Lady Westoria, may we meet again.”

“Y-yes, my lord!”

Duke Berklein gazed right into my eyes and extended his hand, which I naturally took. His hand was big and strong and...*wait, what’s this?*

There was something in his hand. Could it be...a secret letter for me?

*How—how romantic! Look at me, receiving a secret letter from a handsome gentleman like Duke Berklein!*

“.....ill! Jill!”

“Yes?! Lord Philip, you were saying?”

“Don’t give me that! Why is your head *still* in the clouds? We’re *leaving*. Damn it all...”

Lord Philip’s short fuse was so terrifying and awful! But I was eager to read my secret letter as soon as possible, so I obeyed.

“Well, see you later. I’ll be waiting,” Duke Berklein whispered, with a smile and a wave. I had to stop myself from answering him.

“Hey. What are you doing? Forgive my fiancé, Duke Berklein.”

“Eek?!”

Then Lord Philip dragged me out of the restaurant. As soon as we were outside, he climbed into the Gilbert carriage as if finishing a chore and drove off. He didn’t even offer me a ride home! That could only mean he was

patronizing me.

Why did I have to return from dinner with my fiancé alone in my own house's carriage? If this was the treatment I had to endure, I wished that I could have stayed longer to chat with Duke Berklein.

*Oh, that's right, the letter from Duke Berklein!*

I still had his secret letter. I began to read.

*"Would you rendezvous with me at the house of your friend, Baroness Almer?"*

*What is the meaning of this?*

Carol, daughter of Baron Almer, was a friend I made when we went to school at the Royal Academy. Why did Duke Berklein want to meet me at her home?

It made no sense whatsoever. However...

"Lady Jill, do you wish to return straight home? Or is there someplace else you'd like to stop first?"

"I wish to visit my friend Carol. Make haste! To Carol's house!"

And so, my carriage made for Carol's house. I did not understand why Duke Berklein wanted to meet me there, but I simply couldn't ignore the request.

After thirty minutes in the carriage, I arrived at Almer Manor, where Carol lived.

"Ooh, hello there, Jill. So good you came, just as he said you would. Come on in."

Carol seemed to be expecting me. Her mother and father both welcomed me into their home with wide grins on their faces. After paying my respects to them, I entered Carol's room.

"Last time we spoke was at the graduation ceremony from the Royal Academy. Have you already spoken with the esteemed Lord Jade?"

“Not yet. Are you on a first name basis with the duke?” That was another surprise; Carol seemed to have quite a close relationship with the duke, since she referred to him by name. As this thought came to mind, a knock resounded from the door.

“May I come in?”

“Come on in, Lord Jade.”

It was Duke Berklein. I’d had my doubts when the letter requested that I meet him here, but here he was...

“Wh-what, pray tell, is Duke Berklein doing here?”

“Lord Jade has helped our house a great deal, Jill. That’s why whenever he has business in the royal capital, we always give him a warm welcome at Almer Manor. And since you would be in town today as well, he asked if he could borrow our house, so of course, we obliged.”

“There you have it. Sorry I startled you.”

I didn’t know the circumstances, but Carol’s family seemed to be terribly indebted to Duke Berklein.

“Carol, so sorry to do this barely after I’ve entered your room, but could you give me and Jill some privacy?”

“Aww, what a pity... But I will graciously obey, Lord Jade.”

“Thank you. Tell your father I will thank him in turn later.”

“Yes, my lord! I will go tell him that straight away!”

Duke Berklein had only just entered the room and he’d already sent Carol away.

Carol should’ve been ashamed of the vulgar expression on her face. Though I had to admit, a glance from Duke Berklein was enough to make any lady hot and bothered.

She obediently left the room, leaving me alone with Duke Berklein.

“May I sit beside you?”

“Y-yes, my lord.”

When he smiled at me with his perfect white teeth, I forgot to breathe. I never knew such beauty existed.

“Ah, right, being from the country, I often borrow the house of Baron Almer or any of my other acolytes for my own private use. The Berklein house has many friends among the nobility, and this family in particular is happy to obey me, so I feel quite at home here.”

“R-really, my lord?”

I didn’t understand what Baron Almer being an “ackolite” meant, but it seemed the two houses were very friendly. He was also friendly with many other noble houses, though he didn’t associate with House Westoria. Oh, how jealous I was.

But if he went through the trouble of borrowing Carol’s room so that he and I could be alone... Duke Berklein surely had a personal interest in me.

“Jill, you are so beautiful.”

“Huh?!”

“Oh—er, forgive me. I didn’t mean to say that out loud.”

He called me beautiful. *Duke Berklein* called me beautiful.

My heart was all aflutter.

“D-Duke Berklein?”

“Won’t you call me Jade? Please...I need it. I need to hear your sweet little voice calling my name.”

“A-all right...Lord Jade.”

His face moved closer to mine...his breath was on my lips...I couldn’t look at him straight anymore. Could it be that Lord Jade had feelings for me? If that were so, then I could understand why he wanted us to be alone.

“Thank you for calling me Jade. I know I said I remembered you from meeting you at a party, but I wasn’t being entirely honest... I asked the church to show me your scores on the saint exams. You received such high marks at the magic academy, yet you weren’t chosen to be a saint, and that just didn’t seem right to me. I wanted to tell you that.”

I gasped!

“In other words, I’ve always harbored suspicions as to why your unremarkable sister was chosen to be a saint over you.”

“Lord Jade...are you saying you believe me to be more gifted than my sister?”

His black eyes gazed into mine...and he slowly leaned in closer. Then he rested a gentle hand on my head.

“Yes, that’s precisely what I’m saying. You are a treasure. I see the value in your abilities—particularly your natural affinity for Arc Poison. I have connections within the church, so I put in a good word for you to be chosen as a saint...”

“You did, my lord?”

“Yes. But sadly, your sister was chosen to be the third saint. And according to Elshaid law, there can only be three saints, so you won’t have another opportunity until a saint retires...or dies.”

W-wow, I didn’t know. I had no idea how diligently Lord Jade was pulling for me.

So I was right. If Leia wasn’t chosen, I would be a saint right now.

*If only Leia were out of the picture...*

*Then I wouldn’t have to suffer in such despair.*

“If only... If only Saint Leia were out of the picture.”

“Huh?!”

It was as if he’d read my mind. Lord Jade kept caressing the top of my head as

he gently whispered in my ear, “Forgive me... I was just thinking out loud. I'd love to get to know you better. Won't you tell me about yourself? I want to know everything.”



“Mm...!”

Lord Jade pressed his lips against mine, and...my memory after that was a blur.

*Lord Jade sees me for who I really am. And he accepts me.*

It was then and there that I surrendered myself to Lord Jade, body and soul.

## Chapter 3: A Disquieting Shadow

**A**BOUT A MONTH AND A HALF had passed since I became Prince Eric's bodyguard. The twittering of the birds and the balmy spring air felt so good that I almost fell back asleep on my morning off.

However, even though I had no obligation to get up early today, my head was clear. Rather, it hurt. The reason: a short letter. The sender: my stepmother, Catherine.

She wanted to meet me in private. Naturally, this was the first time she'd ever requested such a thing of me.

*What in the world could she possibly want? I have a bad feeling about this... like I'm about to get roped into something unsavory.*

Prince Eric, perhaps afflicted by the same bad feeling, had a serious expression when I told him I was going to go visit my stepmother.

"You're going to visit your stepmother? You shouldn't go out of your way to visit somebody you dislike."

"Fair point, but she said she needed my advice, so I must go. A saint ignoring a plea from her own mother—don't you think that would be just a bit too heartless of me?"

Prince Eric didn't seem to understand why I would visit my stepmother, which was understandable. I didn't think he would go out of his way to visit someone he didn't want to.

If I had to be honest, I didn't like Catherine and I didn't want to see her. But since I deemed a request for advice from my own family was something a saint such as myself simply couldn't ignore, I promised I would visit her on my day off, which was today.

I would've liked to think she wouldn't request advice from me as a pretext to gripe at me, but this was Catherine. I needed to keep my wits about me, so I braced myself for at least one scornful remark.

"Hmm... So she wants your advice, eh? I didn't take her for the type to ask you for advice. Don't you think she has an ulterior motive?"

That was Prince Eric for you. Even though he hardly knew her, he understood quite well what kind of person Catherine was. And he was right: Catherine would sooner die than show any weakness to me.

Because of her intense pride and her hostility toward me, Catherine would never normally ask me for advice. That had to be why Prince Eric was suspicious when he heard otherwise.

"Exactly, Your Highness. That's why I'm concerned—curious, rather. It makes me wonder what has made my stepmother so desperate that she would ask for my help. I think something bad might be happening to House Westoria."

It would take a crisis of high magnitude to inspire Catherine to take such desperate measures. And since, worst-case scenario, it might be a matter of serious concern for House Westoria, I had a duty to find out what was wrong.

To be honest, I was anxious because I couldn't understand it. And I feared if I ignored it, the problem would only worsen.

"All right, as long as you're skeptical. I think you have nothing to fear, Leia, but you should still be careful. Shall I send Lingsha along as a bodyguard?"

"Ooh, yes! Lingsha will gladly *blast* away anybody for you!" Lingsha whirled her arms and bared her white teeth in a menacing grin.

*Uh-oh. If Catherine says something disagreeable, I can just see Lingsha flinging her straight into the sun... That will only get Lingsha in trouble. I should probably decline the offer.*

"I'll be fine on my own, but thanks for the kind offer."

I could handle myself, so her protection wasn't necessary. It would also be

problematic if Lingsha's presence aggravated Catherine to the point where she would no longer speak openly with me. And so, I went alone to visit my stepmother. How long had it been since I spoke with her? Years, probably. Since I couldn't remember, it had to have been very long ago.

And so, with a strange sort of tension in my chest, I set out for a chat with my stepmother.

"Leia! So good to see you."

"So good to see you again too, Mother."

Before Catherine arrived, I had been standing in front of a popular restaurant in the capital waiting for her to show up for our meeting. She looked a bit thin, and the thorny exterior she usually wore also felt a bit subdued.

*She seems...meek?*

I couldn't help but suspect that it was part of some ploy to gain my sympathy. She had to be scheming something. As I watched my stepmother force a smile, I started to feel like I made a mistake coming here. Bluntly put, there was something foreboding about this.

"Ahem. Well, I think you know what I need advice about. It's Jill."

"Did something happen to her?"

*She wants my advice about Jill?*

This was making less and less sense. Catherine had convinced herself I was abusing Jill. What did Catherine expect *me* to do to help her?

"I think...your little sister might be having an affair."

"Mmf?! W-wait a minute, Mother... If that's true, we shouldn't be discussing it out here. Let's go inside first."

"Y-yes...quite right. We can't discuss this in public. How careless of me."

Careless didn't even begin to describe it. She had just dropped a bomb on me.

Maybe she was messing with me... No, that couldn't be it. Catherine would never joke about Jill having an affair. But what if it was true? I couldn't even begin to imagine. My mind swam in a sea of confusion as I followed Catherine into the restaurant.

We had arrived at the restaurant a little before noon, so it was not at all crowded. Once we were seated in a private room and I had calmed myself with a few sips of tea, I reopened the conversation.

"Um... Is Jill really having an affair? It's so out of the blue, I find it hard to believe."

I thought there had to be some mistake. Lord Philip was a ducal heir—Jill would never cast him aside for someone else. Her standards were way too high.

"I don't want to believe it either, but it's the truth, so I have no choice."

If Catherine insisted it was true, I had to believe her. The cup in her hand was shaking, and she was consulting *me* about this matter.

*I wonder who he is? Knowing Jill, it has to be someone who's either incredibly handsome or incredibly rich.*

Considering he had to be at least equal to Philip in those categories, he was either royalty or a nobleman of high rank. That was why this didn't make any sense to me.

"The other man...it's Duke Berklein. My private investigator told me so."

"D-Duke Berklein? Wait... Surely not?!"

Jade Berklein became a duke in his twenties after his father died young. I couldn't believe that the young duke was having an affair with Jill. Most of the nobility loved gossiping about affairs and such, but this was just so shocking that it was unreal to me.

Duke Berklein did have a reputation with the ladies for being handsome...and he was also available since his fiancée had died. From Jill's perspective, he

would've been quite a catch. But there was one other matter I needed to ask about first.

"Um, Mother... Did you really hire a private investigator to follow Jill around? Why would you do so over just a rumor?"

I was shocked that Catherine would hire someone to spy on Jill. That meant that Jill was acting suspicious in some way.

"Oh, it's not what you think. I originally hired him to gather proof that you were abusing Jill when nobody was around to see and to protect Jill if anything were to happen. I paid in advance, so after you moved to the palace, I kept him on as a bodyguard."

Come to think of it, I had gotten the sense there was somebody lurking around Jill the last time I saw her. So that was a detective. I picked up on his presence immediately with my ability to sense auras, but his identity was always a mystery to me.

*I never dreamed Catherine would hire someone to stalk her own daughter.*

Wouldn't that have clued her in to the fact that I wasn't tormenting Jill? No, *Leia, let's drop that for now. What's most important now is dealing with Jill's affair.*

"So...how exactly did Duke Berklein and Jill's affair start? I didn't know they'd ever even met."

Duke Berklein lived in a remote area and managed his lands from there. I heard he rarely set foot in the royal capital, so I wondered how they had managed to form a relationship.

"She bumped into him while she was out to dinner with Lord Philip. Ever since then, she's been sneaking out of the house at night to visit him."

*She met him during a dinner date with Lord Philip? Was that really enough to initiate an affair? It seems contrived.*

The more I heard from my stepmother, the more suspicious I became. I

needed to hear more details.

“So, did you confront Jill about it?”

“I could never do that! If Jill confirmed it and the affair went public, our family would never be able to face the House of Gilbert again!”

Just as I thought. If news of the affair were to get out, Duke Gilbert would not forgive our house, despite the way I had been wronged by Philip. Then our house would be disgraced. Catherine wanted to avoid that at any cost—that much was clear.

*Still, though, Duke Berklein?*

I was still in shock over the unexpectedly big name Catherine had dropped. He was definitely Jill’s type, but I didn’t take her for the cheating type. *I know she’s my sister, but her naivete drives me crazy sometimes.*

“Please, Leia...you have influence with Prince Eric, could you please get him to help you drive Jill away from Duke Berklein in secret? I want His Highness to mediate, to force Duke Berklein to promise to keep his hands off her.”

The way Catherine worded the request bothered me. It took two to tango. Jill had a hand in the affair as well. She couldn’t be absolved of all the blame.

And there was no way I could ask Prince Eric for help.

A righteous man like him would never approve of such an underhanded plot. He would laugh, declare that adultery is absurd, and turn the request down on the spot. I wondered why Catherine didn’t seem to grasp this.

“Why aren’t you saying anything? She’s your precious little *sister* for God’s sake. Don’t you want to help her?”

*Jill. My precious little sister.* While I couldn’t use those words to describe her in earnest, it was true that if she grew too obsessed with Duke Berklein, she was as good as disgraced. Then the Westoria family’s reputation would be tarnished, and even Prince Eric’s name could get dragged through the mud for having employed me as his bodyguard.

*This is a real fix we're in... An amicable resolution would be ideal, of course.*

*However...*

No. Why would somebody who's engaged—to the heir of a duke, no less—have an affair? Wasn't this situation all just a little too odd?

I had to bare my soul and be honest with her, even if it meant jeopardizing my position as royal bodyguard. But if I was honest with Catherine, she would lash out in anger, and that filled me with a sense of dread.

"Um, Mother...I have something to say about Jill's affair—"

"So you *will* tell Prince Eric! That's my Leia. I always had faith in you. Now Jill is safe and sound."

Why did she cut me off mid-sentence? It was a real problem that she always assumed whatever reality suited her best.

"Mother, please, Prince Eric is a moral and just man—he would never forgive an affair. If I told him your proposal, he would get very angry."

It was simply impossible, so I needed to make sure she wasn't getting her hopes up.

"Oh, I'm well aware of that. Under normal circumstances, Prince Eric would never forgive our house for having an infidelity scandal."

"If you understand, then why are you seeking his help?"

I couldn't comprehend why she would do something so reckless when she knew what the prince was like. The whole thing was utterly illogical.

What in the world was Catherine expecting from me? The further the conversation progressed, the more we talked past each other. That all-too-familiar miserable feeling started to creep back.

I knew that look. It was the look Catherine got in her eye when she was going to force an impossible demand on me.

"That's why I've come to *you* for help. Tell him he *owes* you for saving his life

and that he can repay you by helping Jill.”

The words that spilled out of her mouth did not betray my bad feeling.

*This is hopeless. Catherine doesn’t understand anything.*

Prince Eric would never commit an unrighteous act in order to repay a debt. His gratitude for my protection and Jill’s affair were different matters entirely. The mere act of asking for his help was pointless.

“It’s impossible, Mother. All that would do is anger Prince Eric and send House Westoria into further disgrace.”

“*What?* How do you know? You haven’t even asked him yet. I didn’t realize you were so *heartless*. Does the idea of helping Jill really sicken you so?”

I was trying to warn her that if we waited until after asking for his help to find out how Prince Eric would react, it would be too late. But she didn’t understand it at all. *That* was why I didn’t want to tell her.

“Mother. Believe me, I am *not at all* saying that the idea of helping Jill sickens me.”

“Then help your poor little sister! She’s the only one you’ve got.”

“I would love to help her if I could. But if Jill really is having an affair, telling Prince Eric would only make things worse.”

“Well, it’s *your* job to convince him to see it our way!”

*This is hopeless. We’re right back at square one.*

Prince Eric’s sense of justice was beyond the norm. I kept trying to tell her there was no convincing him, but she just wouldn’t believe me. This wasn’t even the sort of problem you should ask a prince for help with anyway.

Catherine, after clumsily broaching the subject, had worked herself up. She had probably assumed I was going to easily agree to her plan, and now she was angry for being so naive.

In spite of everything, I still wasn’t about to abandon Jill. Even though there

was discord between us, she was still my family. But the fact that she, a betrothed woman, was seeing another man? It was insane to compare her sense of ethics to mine, let alone to Prince Eric's.

There was no way she would be acquitted of her misdeeds. Catherine should take the severity of her daughter's actions more seriously.

"Don't you think Jill should be confronted about this? While being careful to ensure the scandal doesn't go public, of course. And consult the Berklein house in secret as well. If Jill really has committed adultery and you *don't* punish her, that's just bad parenting."

First, we needed to get Jill to repent. I had never seen Catherine scold Jill before, but she would have to if anything were to change. If Jill started to own up to her mistakes, then whatever she did next would actually mean something.

"But I could never punish her! Jill is very *sensitive*; she's not like you. If I accused her of infidelity out of nowhere, she would be heartbroken and tormented with guilt. And if that happens...she just might kill herself!"

Catherine was going to be soft on Jill until the bitter end. I doubted that a girl who would sneak off in the middle of the night to have an affair would kill herself over being asked a few personal questions.

To truly resolve the scandal, we would need both parties to talk to each other. Even if we did get Prince Eric to mediate, he would definitely condemn the infidelity. Jill had to own up to her mistake—that was the critical first step.

"Even if Prince Eric were to mediate, Jill *is* one of the parties involved in the scandal. It's impossible for her to come out of this unscathed."

"No, Prince Eric can approach Duke Berklein in complete secrecy and convince him to break things off with Jill—and tactfully too, to spare her feelings."

*Uhh...what makes you think Prince Eric would go to such lengths for you? I'm the one trying to be tactful here...*

Catherine was more naive than I thought possible. My head hurt so bad I

could scream. Even in a damning situation like this, Catherine still prioritized coddling Jill's feelings.

Put bluntly, her wish was impossible to grant. Absolutely impossible. How could I make her understand? After all my explaining, she still didn't get it.

Catherine was making me start to think I should just give up on the idea of helping Jill altogether. We were talking past each other—Catherine just said one ignorant thing after another, and it was starting to break me.

"Since Jill was one of the cheaters, it's impossible for her to come out of this without getting hurt. Why don't you understand that? If you really care about her, you need to get her to own up to her mistake at least a little."

"What sort of monster are you? Jill is a *good* girl! I'm sure Duke Berklein coerced her into making this mistake. She's pure and *innocent*! She can't possibly understand a thing she's doing!"

*There she goes again.* Catherine was always like this, and she'd never change. She built her entire outlook on life on the premise that Jill was an angel. Her unwavering faith in Jill was the trait that complicated everything. If her darling daughter ever made a mistake, she decided that someone else was entirely to blame.

Catherine was the root cause of Jill's rotten personality. She affirmed everything Jill said and did and forced Jill's servants to treat her accordingly.

"An affair can't be committed by just one person. Jill is also at fault. If you really want to help your daughter, then you must make her take responsibility for her actions."

"How *dare* you?! You think you're so special just because you work at the palace now?! Don't get all high and mighty with me just because I made the *slightest* mistake! I've had enough! I won't ask for your help *ever* again!"

When Catherine determined that I wasn't going to agree to her plan, she chewed me out and stormed out of the restaurant.

Her temper was short as ever... Why didn't she calmly listen to what I had to say? To make matters worse, I was now in a tricky situation. I couldn't, in good conscience, pretend I didn't hear that Jill was having an affair with Duke Berklein. I had to try to put a stop to it.

But I had no idea what I should do. Catherine was...Catherine. And Jill wasn't going to politely hear me out either. I really was in a bind. Excluding Prince Eric, I had no one I could confide in about this.

"Countess Westoria seems to have stormed out on you..."

"Yes. Her request was just unreasonable; it was a line I simply couldn't cross."

"Ah, I see. What sort of request was it?"

"Well, you see, it was—huh?! P-Prince Eric?! What are you doing here?!"

*Why is His Highness here?*

His tone was so casual that I started to answer without thinking. I turned around and saw that Prince Eric was in the private room with me for some reason. His arms were crossed in thought.

"Sorry I startled you. I just couldn't help but worry, so I followed you here. I've been keeping watch from the neighboring private room, though I couldn't hear what you were saying, of course."

"I want to eat these pancake thingies!" Lingsha said.

"Hmm, I think I'll order a rice bowl," Johann added.

I never dreamed they would follow me here. But Prince Eric was right there, wearing a peasant disguise, with Lingsha and Johann in tow, both in similar disguises as the prince. They were both ordering from the menu like normal customers.

"Please, you scared me half to death."

"I didn't think it would scare you *that* badly."

"Oh, it did. I never thought you would be caught dead in a restaurant like this,

Your Highness.”

He seemed to genuinely believe what he had done wasn’t so shocking, but I assure you, *anybody* would be scared to death.

“So, what did the countess have to say? From what I know about her, I discerned that she met with you because she wanted you to manipulate me into doing something for her.”

He was sharp as ever. Of course, he hadn’t figured out the part where Jill was having an affair, but nobody would have guessed that.

*What should I do... Should I tell him the truth or evade the question?*

In my fruitless struggle to find an answer, I sank into the vortex of my thoughts: *I should tell Prince Eric now to avoid troubling him later, but as this was my own family’s dirty laundry, perhaps I should be the one to wash it.* I felt Prince Eric’s gaze as time ticked by.

“Well... Let’s move to the private room next door—it’s bigger. This room is too small for four people, and we’ll likely draw attention here.”

Noticing my hesitation to answer, Prince Eric suggested we move to another room. He was so kind for not condemning my silence outright. That was probably because he still felt guilty about what had happened between us early on. Either that, or he just trusted me now. Either way, I could tell he was being tactful regarding my feelings.

*That’s settled. I can’t keep secrets from him. I’ll put my trust in Prince Eric and tell him everything.*

And with that, we moved over to the private room Prince Eric had rented.

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“Your Highness, it’s been a while since you’ve dined at a restaurant of the common man.”

“I used to come to places like this all the time, Johann, back when I trained at your fencing school.”

Before my eyes was Crown Prince Eric, sitting down at a commoner's restaurant. Since the staff wouldn't dream of Prince Eric visiting their restaurant incognito, they had acted perfectly normal when taking his order. And it was only natural that they didn't recognize him—this was not the sort of establishment that expected a royal visit.

"Leia, you didn't order anything. Did you eat earlier?"

"No, Your Highness, I'm just not hungry..."

"Ugh!" Johann grunted. "That won't do. Do you feel ill?"

"Um, not exactly."

"Ooh, I wonder what it feels like to not be hungry! I always thought that only happened in fairy tales, you see."

"Er, well...is that so, Miss Lin?"

*Everyone seems concerned about my not ordering anything. What should I do? I never feel like eating when I get like this.*

"You should look at the menu and find something you can eat. If you're not ill, you probably just temporarily forgot what hunger feels like."

Prince Eric handed me a menu. My matter was set aside so that we could sate our appetites first. The food started to arrive.

*Wow...look at Lingsha go to town on that giant parfait.*

"So, about what my stepmother wanted..."

"Yes, we'll get to that, but we don't want the meal getting cold, do we?"

Prince Eric waved his hand dismissively. He had a point; the food wouldn't taste as good if it got cold, but I had been on edge ever since I sat down at the table. I watched Prince Eric take a bite of cheap steak as I waited, committed to swallowing my pride and telling him everything.

*Johann and Lingsha are eating too... I guess I'll just have to wait a bit longer.*

"Leia, you aren't thinking clearly right now. It's okay. Take some time to settle down before talking."

"Prince Eric?"

"You need to order something. If you fill your belly, you'll feel at peace."

Prince Eric gently suggested I order something to eat—and he was probably right. My argument with Catherine had made me unable to think straight.

"All right, then... I'll order a rice omelet."

"Good, focus on having a nice lunch first."

Prince Eric ordered me a rice omelet, and in no time, it was brought to me.

"My gardeners are very accommodating, but I still don't understand plants much. When I left it to my gardeners' discretion, they took care of everything."

Then we talked about nothing. Nobody asked about Catherine. Instead, we discussed the trivial matter of what we should plant in the palace gardens. As we chatted the way we always did back in his study, I started to relax.

*You know...I might actually like talking to the prince. How strange. At first, I was too nervous to even think about whether or not I enjoyed it.*

Johann and Lingsha's banter further contributed to the calm and peaceful atmosphere. The noxious air from the past several minutes started to feel like a bad dream.

"So, what did Countess Westoria come to see you about? As I said earlier, I assume she wanted you to request my help with something. But since she stormed out in a huff, it was likely an unreasonable request in your eyes, correct?"

Having noticed that my nerves had calmed, Prince Eric finally brought up the matter of Catherine. It was the moment of truth. Time to brace myself for the storm.

"Your perceptiveness astounds me, Your Highness. And well, if I don't tell you

now, I'm sure you'll find out in time what was said... Prince Eric, can you promise you won't breathe a word of this to anyone else?"

"Of course. Clearly, it's a delicate subject, and I wouldn't want to add to your troubles."

It could've been an empty promise, but I was still grateful for his concern and his respect for my secrets. I was sure that even if I didn't tell Prince Eric what had happened, he would be able to get a general idea of what it was. With a little digging, it would be easy for him to learn the whole truth himself, so it was much more constructive to tell him now. Besides, I didn't want to keep secrets from him, but I had my own practical reasons as well. Anyway, it was time to tell Prince Eric everything my stepmother had said to me.

"So it's about my sister Jill..."

I told the prince about the conversation with my stepmother, that Jill was having an affair and her secret lover was the young duke, Jade Berklein. I took no pleasure in airing my family's dirty laundry in front of the prince, but it simply couldn't be avoided in this instance.

*How strange... I just assumed that morally righteous Prince Eric wouldn't be able to listen quietly at the news of his friend being cheated on, but he's just sitting there, nodding in silence. Isn't he going to get angry, like he did with Lord Philip?*

"Hmm... Are you sure she's actually having an affair?"

"Huh?!"

Prince Eric patiently listened to my entire story before replying, so when he finally spoke up, it took me by surprise.

*Isn't it an affair?*

If she was sneaking out at night to visit a gentleman, how could that be anything else? I think most people would agree that was cheating, but Prince Eric didn't seem convinced.

"I've met and spoken with Duke Berklein many times. His eyes have always gleamed with raw ambition."

"Ambition, you say?"

I had met Duke Berklein as well, but while I had the impression he was a meek and timid man, Prince Eric had seen ambition in his eyes. The prince was a good judge of character, so maybe he was able to see a facet of Duke Berklein's personality that others overlooked.

"First off, Duke Berklein would never risk making an enemy of Duke Gilbert just to have an affair with your little sister."

"Yes, but the fact remains: Jill is meeting Duke Berklein in secret. My stepmother would never tell such a brazenly scandalous lie to me, so I know it's true."

Prince Eric doubted the affair on the grounds of Duke Berklein's personality. But the fact remained that they were meeting at night in secret. And Catherine would never tell a lie that would destroy her beloved daughter's reputation, so I had to believe her.

Besides, just because somebody wasn't the cheating type didn't mean they were incapable of it. So while I could sympathize with the prince thinking it was unlikely, it was difficult for me to doubt the story on that point alone.

"I understand what you're trying to say," Prince Eric continued. "There's ample circumstantial evidence. You're saying, there aren't just vague implications of an affair but that an affair is actually happening. Correct?"

"Yes, Your Highness. Exactly that."

"But what strikes me as odd is *the circumstances that led up to it*. Your stepmother said the affair began after Duke Berklein happened upon Jill and Philip having dinner. Now, if that's true, how do you think Duke Berklein seduced your sister with Philip sitting right there?"

"Huh?! Oh, w-well..."

*Come to think of it, how did Duke Berklein seduce her?*

I could understand him bumping into her and then seducing her, but he would never do that with her fiancé, Philip, sitting right there. He must have seduced her in secret.

“He might have, say, handed her a note.”

“Yes, but he wouldn’t have had time to write such a note. There would’ve been no chance to get a pen and paper.”

He could have easily passed her a letter through a handshake or something, but if it was a chance encounter, he couldn’t have written her a letter then and there. My stepmother’s private investigator would have caught him doing that.

“Then, what if he wrote the letter in advance?”

“Huh?! But how—”

“Don’t you think it’s possible Duke Berklein already had a plan in place to use Jill for some scheme, then he pretended to bump into her by chance? That’s my theory.”

*He’s using Jill? But whatever for...*

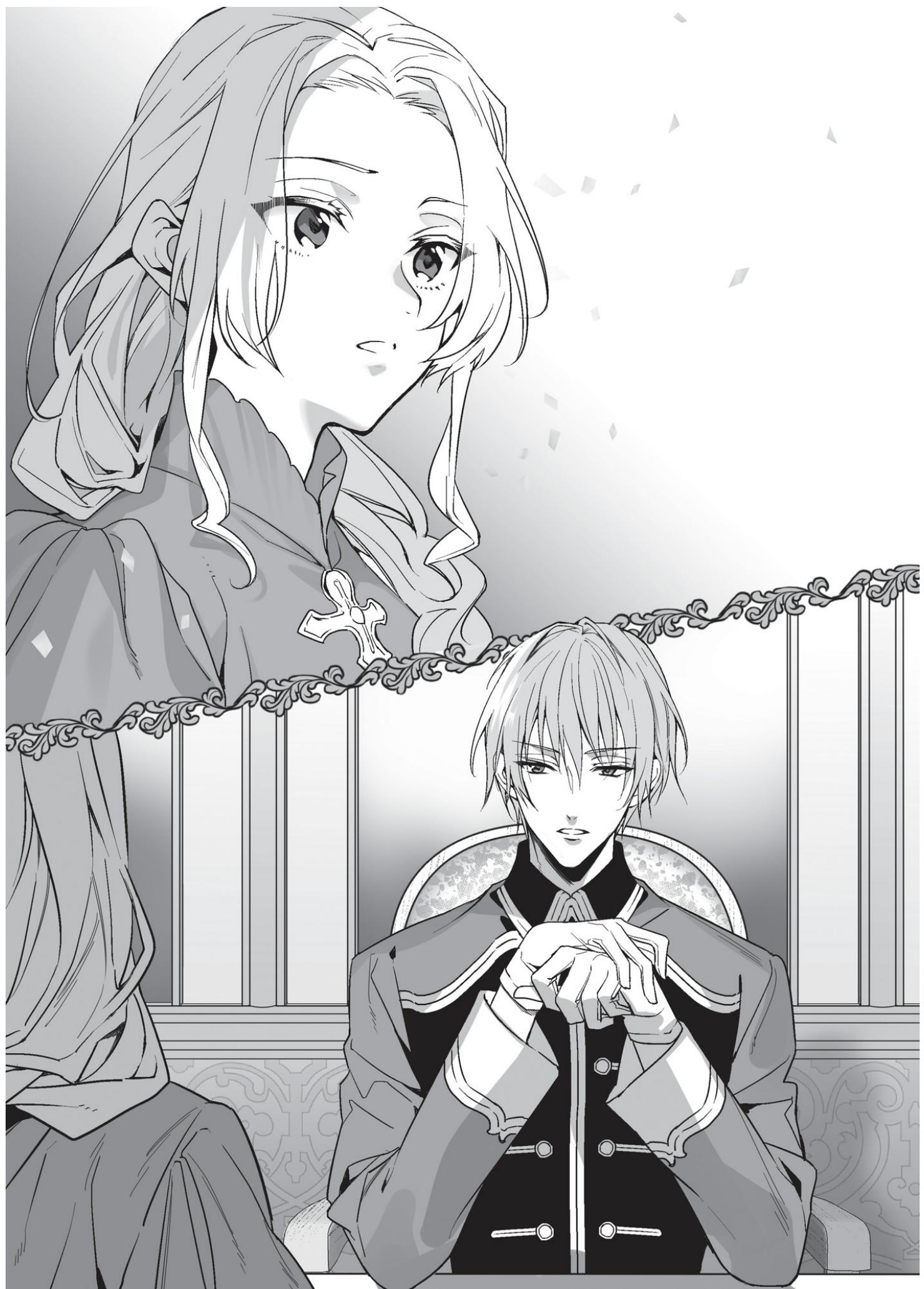
No matter what his motives were, if his affair with someone else’s fiancé went public, the reputations of both houses would be tarnished. In other words, his motive was something so important to him that he was willing to risk making an enemy of House Gilbert and losing his good standing in high society over it.

Could an absurd scenario such as that actually be true? Even if Prince Eric was right and Duke Berklein was ruthlessly ambitious, the plan still seemed anything but reasonable to me. This whole situation was completely beyond my comprehension.

“I find that very difficult to believe, Your Highness. What could he possibly stand to gain by using Jill?”

My voice came out in a meek croak. Such a theory implied that the Duke

Berklein had approached Jill with some outrageous, nefarious motive. I knew it was all just Prince Eric's conjecture, but the more I heard, the more worried I felt.



“From the information we have now, there’s no way we can know for certain. Duke Berklein is a rather troublesome fellow. Two of the corrupt officials I caught earlier were his allies, and the day after I accused them, they both committed suicide.”

“Do you mean—”

“Yes, they were killed before they could speak. Naturally, to the public, it seemed as though they were atoning for their crimes. By paying for their crimes with their deaths, my pursuit of the case would come to an end. Without any evidence of murder, the only conclusion one can draw is that they killed themselves.”

An icy chill ran down my spine. The prince had spun a dark, brutal tale. I could read between the lines: Duke Berklein was a ruthless man who used people until they were no longer useful and then disposed of them. That meant Jill was in danger.

“If he’s using Jill for some scheme...does that mean he’ll discard her once she’s served her purpose?”

“It’s highly likely, yes. If he’s taking advantage of her romantic feelings for him, that will eventually be an obstacle for him.”

Eric confirmed my worst fears. If eliminating obstacles was Berklein’s modus operandi, Jill would be no exception to the rule. I felt like I was being crushed under a heavy weight, worse than what I felt when Catherine came to me for advice. What in the world was I supposed to do about this? What I had assumed was just a common case of infatuation had turned into a much more dangerous situation.

“Anyway, our next move is clear: Find out Duke Berklein’s endgame. I’m sorry, I’m sure this is weighing heavily on your heart.”

*Prince Eric is right. We need to find out what Duke Berklein is after.*

I understood that intellectually, but my head was starting to ache from the

realization that this scandal was a lot more complicated than I had thought.

Prince Eric had deduced that Duke Berklein was using Jill. If he was right—if my sister was getting trapped in a preposterous plot of absurd proportions—it was quite possible that if we didn't hurry to save her, we could miss our chance.

Worst-case scenario, she could even get murdered.

“Sorry if I scared you. This might be just a man and woman swayed by their own carnal desires. I only extrapolated all of this because I’m a skeptic at heart. Please, don’t take it too seriously.”

“It’s too late to try and comfort me now, Your Highness. The more you say, the more I believe your deductions are correct.”

“Oh... I’m sorry I’m like this. I didn’t want to burden you again.”

Prince Eric’s deductions were ruthlessly precise. There were no holes in his logic. But I didn’t want him to apologize for that. Thanks to him, I was now aware of the danger my sister was in. I could no longer consider Duke Berklein’s visits with my sister a common scandalous affair.

“Eric...what’s ‘carnal desires’?”

“Lady Lingsha! You should try these pancakes—they’re exquisite.”

Johann was trying to remain politely disinterested in my plight by chatting casually with Lingsha. I appreciated his tact and consideration.

But I still had no idea what to do about Jill. Prince Eric said he didn’t know what Duke Berklein’s motives were...but was that really the case? I couldn’t help but think that the wise prince had a theory or two. That’s just the kind of man he was.

“Prince Eric, do you really have no ideas on what Duke Berklein’s motives are? I feel like you would at least have some theories.”

“You think I have theories? I think you overestimate me.”

*Do I, though?*

Prince Eric insisted that he didn't have enough information to determine Duke Berklein's motives, but this man had already deduced he was using Jill for some scheme based solely off the story that they were having an affair. He should've had at least a vague idea of what motivated Berklein.

Of course, he couldn't be certain, but it seemed like he would have a hypothesis, at least. Unable to accept his response, I just stared critically at the prince in silence.

"Oh, dear... Please don't stare at me like that. Why do you think I'm hiding something?"

"Because you seem to be awfully well apprised of what sort of person Duke Berklein is. In other words, you've done your research on him. Am I wrong?"

Prince Eric saw through the plot holes in the affair narrative because he knew a great deal about Duke Berklein. And since the duke had behaved suspiciously, hearing about the affair with Jill had to have given him an epiphany. I must be right.

Meaning, he had to be thinking about Duke Berklein's scheme holistically.

"I won't deny it. That suicide scandal was what prompted me to start investigating him. He was squeaky clean, though. If I had discovered anything, I would of course inform you about it."

"Not if Duke Berklein's motives would be difficult for me to hear. You could be keeping quiet to spare my feelings."

Yes, that was why he wasn't telling me everything he knew—it was actually quite simple. It was something that would be difficult for me to hear. That was the only conclusion I could draw.

"Hmph... You're quite sharp yourself, Leia. If you've already deduced that much, why do you still want to hear it? Very odd."

"You may be right, but...won't you please tell me anyway? I can handle the truth. I've steeled myself."

"Steeled yourself... I see. Er, I mean, perhaps I'm the one who needs to steel myself." Prince Eric folded his arms.

"Why must you steel yourself, Your Highness?"

Why would he, the deliverer of the bad news, and not I, the recipient, need to steel himself? I supposed that when one had to deliver bad news, they would need to steel oneself to some extent, but still...

"This is...pure speculation. I have no proof. It's only a hypothesis. So please, keep this in mind when I tell you."

"Yes. Of course, Your Highness."

Finally, Prince Eric was ready to tell me everything he was thinking. Naturally, it was a mere guess based on circumstantial evidence; I knew that. But I still wanted to know. I wanted to know why Duke Berklein was using my sister.

"Duke Berklein's true target...is you, Leia."

"M-me?"

I never expected to hear that. How in the world did he come to that conclusion?

"What I'm about to say will soil Duke Berklein's good name, so it brings me no pleasure to say it, but if he is the mastermind who was plotting my assassination, he would want to eliminate you. Therefore, it's plausible that he made contact with your sister for that reason. I have no proof of this whatsoever, however. It's pure speculation."

*Berklein approached Jill to eliminate me...because he's the mastermind plotting to kill Prince Eric?*

Naturally, this was all Prince Eric's speculation. It was an outlandish theory, which he himself admitted had no proof. But hearing it out loud...it did make sense. It was definitely a possibility. Prince Eric was likely being targeted by a member of the Great Four, and I was his bodyguard. I hadn't been in his service long, but I was keeping him safe.

There was no mistaking it: Whoever conspired to kill Prince Eric saw me as an obstacle.

And the timing with which Duke Berklein, one of the Great Four, had approached my sister was a little too convenient. If his reason for approaching her was to eliminate me from the picture, a few things started to add up. Of course, there were also some wildly illogical components to the scenario, but overall, it was still plausible.

“Leia, I’m so sorry. Employing you as my bodyguard might have put your family in danger. It’s all my fault.”

Prince Eric bowed his head to me. But there was no way he could have foreseen the crass thought processes of a murderer.

“Please, don’t apologize to me, Your Highness. You said so yourself—we still don’t have proof you’re right.”

“Well, by the time we *get* proof, it might already be too late. I’ve relied too much on your brilliance, Leia. I thought you could easily thwart any assassin, but I didn’t consider the safety of your family.”

I thought it presumptuous to condemn someone based on pure speculation, but I could see what Prince Eric was trying to say. By the time his speculations were confirmed, I could be dead.

*The prince looks gloomier than before. He shouldn’t; this isn’t at all his fault...*

I felt nothing but pride and honor that he had chosen me to be his bodyguard because he trusted in my abilities. I didn’t want him to look so sad on my behalf. That look of insecurity in his eyes did not suit him.

“Well, I think this is a good thing.”

“Leia? How can this be a good thing? Your sister’s life may be in danger.”

“Nothing has happened yet, and that means we can stop the tragedy before it happens. Let’s rejoice in our luck: We’re empowered to protect ourselves preemptively. I can now see rather clearly that our mastermind has schemed to

use Jill as bait to take my life.”

I knew I’d survive this crisis. If anything, I was grateful for it. I was grateful to have the knowledge that I was a target before it was too late. Furthermore, now that I knew I needed to be wary of Duke Berklein, if he really did have a nefarious scheme, I could enact measures to thwart him before he even had the chance to put them in motion.

So there was no need to despair. Right now, what mattered most was that we apprised ourselves of Duke Berklein’s actions and made sure that he was unaware that we were wise to him.

“I am your bodyguard, Prince Eric. I am ready to put my life on the line to protect yours. We’ve finally reached a point where we might be able to catch the mastermind. Now is no time to hesitate. We must take action.”

If Berklein had a plot to use Jill to assassinate me, I had to consider this an opportunity to do something good. If I could bring his treachery to light, then I could determine once and for all that Duke Berklein was Eric’s assassin and stop him before he struck. Then Prince Eric would no longer be the target of assassination attempts, which would indicate that Eric’s dearest wish was finally coming true. So it was my job to make the preparations necessary to catch the fiend red-handed.

“This is a crucial moment, Your Highness.”

“Yes... You’re right. And when I see you look at me like that, I know I have no choice but to rise to the challenge.”

“Well, I’m just relieved to see you’ve regained your former vigor.”

“I came here to ease your worries, yet now it seems the opposite has happened. You’re right, we should be taking action now. I will protect you, Leia, and I will fight even harder in the name of justice.”

*That was the Prince Eric I knew. A pessimistic disposition definitely did not suit him.*

With steely determination in his gaze, Prince Eric declared that he would fight in the name of justice. This is the true form of the crown prince, who denounced dishonor with more fervor than anyone.

*And for your sake, I will do everything in my power to catch your enemies. I will fight by your side. When the two of us are together, nothing can scare me.*

But there was just one matter that still concerned me. If Berklein simply wanted Jill to be his hostage, he would have just kidnapped her rather than begin an affair. That would've been much more direct.

He must have had some reason for taking the time to foster a romance with her...and that reason had to be a key factor in his planned use for her. My heart filled with dread as an image flashed through my mind: Berklein manipulating Jill into murdering me.

*I'd like to think things won't escalate that far...*

After all, rocky history aside, we had never even come close to trying to kill each other. Jill wasn't even capable of murder. I shouldn't have been thinking about such a thing when we were trying to be positive. I decided to throw my whole heart into being Prince Eric's bodyguard—I needed to keep my mind focused only on that.

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Soon after, Prince Eric and I discussed our plan.

"First, we need to think of some ways to get proof. We need to do another review of Duke Berklein as well," he said.

I asked him if I should try to get more information from Catherine, but he stopped me.

"If Countess Westoria throws a fit, that will make our task more difficult. We don't want her behavior to tip off Duke Berklein either."

So, for the three days following my meeting with Catherine, we did nothing but wait. The stakes were naturally quite high. We finally had a chance to catch

the mastermind targeting us red-handed, even though he hadn't left behind a shred of evidence. Our deductions weren't based on concrete proof, but if our hunch was right, you could say we were incredibly close to catching the mastermind.

But three days...

Ordinarily, it wouldn't feel that unusual to accomplish nothing in three days, but a part of me was beginning to feel impatient.

"Leia, sorry to spring this on you when you've just arrived, but I'd like you to bring me some papers from the library."

"Oh, um, yes, Your Highness."

I'd entered Prince Eric's study after dinner like usual, but this time he had a mission ready for me. Since he had other bodyguards, he had taken to assigning me more errands lately. And since the assassins had stopped coming for him, this was the only way I could make myself useful.

That being said, it was still bad for me to spend too much time away from the person I was supposed to be guarding, so I hurried to the library and threw the door open.

"Oh... Hello there, Leia. We meet again."

"Prince Dale, you're utilizing the library too, I see. Sorry to intrude. I'll just wait outside until you've finished."

That startled me. I wasn't expecting to find Prince Dale in the library. I didn't want to get in his way, so I figured it would be best to give him priority.

"Oh, that's quite all right. It's not anything classified...unless you're searching for documents you'd rather keep secret, Leia?"

"Ha ha ha... Of course not."

"Heh heh. Only joking. Please, come on in."

*Prince Dale, you big tease.*

Seeing my flustered expression, he smirked and beckoned me into the library. It seemed I wasn't the only one looking for documents.

"Well, thank you, Your Highness."

"My brother and I both have been assigned several tasks by our father. We've been coming here just about every day because of that."

"Oh, really? That sounds like a lot of work."

"Ha ha ha! Not as much work as a saint like you has, Leia."

While they gave off different impressions at a glance, Prince Dale and Prince Eric looked quite similar when they smiled. As I watched him go back to the search for his own documents out of the corner of my eye, I began my own search for Prince Eric's. Since Elshaid's palace had quite the large volume of documents, finding something was always grueling.

*I'm sure it's on this shelf somewhere... Oh?! There it is!*

"Huh?!" Prince Dale and I exclaimed in unison.

Prince Dale and I had reached for the same document.

*Wait a minute, Prince Dale needs the same document as me? Isn't this a little too much of a coincidence?*

I ran through a number of theories in my mind. And how couldn't I? The document in question was about *that* incident.

"Pardon me, Your Highness. I didn't realize you were searching for the same document."

"Oh no, don't apologize. Still. I'm surprised that my brother is investigating that incident again. The Berklein devotees' deaths. I thought everyone was satisfied with the suicide verdict."

That's right, Prince Eric had tasked me with retrieving the documents about

Duke Berklein's two devotees who killed themselves when Prince Eric had unmasked their corruption. Prince Eric suspected that Duke Berklein had killed them both to keep them quiet, but since no evidence of this was found, their deaths were determined to be suicides. Prince Eric had instructed me to bring him the case files so he could reopen the investigation, thinking it could give him some clues into Jill's situation now.

*I never thought Prince Dale would be after the same documents.*

"Um, Prince Dale... Do you want these documents as well?"

"Yes, that's right. But my brother can borrow them first. I'm not in any hurry, and I've got other matters to tend to. I'll just borrow them after he's finished."

With a soft smile, Prince Dale offered the documents to me without skipping a beat. Feeling a warm friendliness from him, it was easy to understand why everyone loved him. I never got a bad feeling about him either.

But was it really okay of me to jump rank like this?

"But won't that inconvenience you, Your Highness?"

"It's no trouble at all. Remember, I told you my father assigned me many tasks. I can always handle one of the others first."

Come to think of it, he had said something to that effect. Dale's father—in other words, the king—had tasked his son with an assignment that had something to do with Duke Berklein's former subordinates. That in and of itself piqued my interest, but I wasn't sure what I should do. However, since Prince Dale insisted that I take the case files first, I felt like it would actually be rude to refuse him.

"All right, I'll take you up on your kind offer. Thank you for your generosity, Your Highness."

Having thanked him, I took the documents. Since we were in a race against time, I wanted to get them to Prince Eric as soon as possible.

"Don't worry about it. This is about the only thing I can do to help my

brother.”

“Huh?!”

Melancholy filled Prince Dale’s eyes. What burden did he bear?

“Oops—I’ve said too much. I still have more documents to look for. What about you, Leia?”

“Oh! Ummm... Well, this is all, really. Um, thank you again, truly. I’ll be sure to tell Prince Eric about your generosity.”

*That’s right. I got what I came for.* I needed to get back to Prince Eric. It was wrong of me to stand there, wondering why Prince Dale was sad.

Remembering my task at hand, I bowed to Prince Dale and turned to leave the library.

*That took longer than I thought. I need to hurry.*

“Leia!”

“Hm?!”

Prince Dale’s voice stopped me in my tracks. His voice was loud and sharp, not at all the sort of voice I would have expected from him.

I turned around and noticed that the prince looked just a little down. I wondered why.

“Er, it’s just, protecting my brother is important and all, but please do protect yourself as well. Also, give my brother my regards.”

“Y-yes, I will tell His Highness. Thank you.”

It was such a simple message that it gave me pause. It felt like that wasn’t the only thing he had wanted to tell me, like there was something else he needed me to know...

But I had no time to spend worrying about that. With another bow in Dale’s direction, I hurried back to Prince Eric’s study.

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“Your Highness, I’ve brought the documents you requested.”

“Thank you—ah, I’ve been assigning you all sorts of menial tasks lately. Sorry about that.”

He thanked me for the documents. His humility despite his position as crown prince was something he and Prince Dale had in common.

“Prince Dale was in the library searching for these same files under order of His Majesty. As he wasn’t in any hurry, he said you could have them, but perhaps we should return them as quickly as possible.”

“Dale wanted these documents? Hm. So His Majesty asked Dale...” He stroked his chin in contemplation.

*So it piqued his interest as well.*

It could’ve been sheer happenstance, but it was only natural to wonder why both princes were looking for the same case files at the same time. The fact that the king gave the order only deepened the mystery.

“Understood. Thanks,” Prince Eric said after about ten seconds of silence and returned to the papers on his desk.

He was intensely focused on his work. Whenever he got like this, I couldn’t talk to him unless it was something important. Prince Eric wasn’t a stranger to shooting the breeze now and then while he was at work, but whenever he needed to focus, he became impervious to everything else around him.

According to Johann, that was Prince Eric’s version of a work-life balance. Whenever he was focused on a task like this, he was more precise and efficient than humanly possible. For the following hour, he took notes, nodding and uttering an “aha” every once in a while, until he suddenly stood up.

It seemed that Prince Eric had found an answer.

“All right. I’ll shadow Jill Westoria.”

“Huh?! Why so sudden, Your Highness? And do you mean, *you* personally?”

Why was he being so impetuous? Regardless of his reasons, it was absurd for Eric to put himself in danger like that. The resolve in his eyes only made his absurd suggestion all the more shocking.

*No, wait, this is Prince Eric. He knows full well his plan is unconventional; he must have his reasons.*

He was certainly not the sort of person who would stalk someone only to satisfy personal curiosity. He had to have a good reason.

“Leia, get Johann and Lingsha.”

“Yes, Your Highness.”

Hesitant, I obediently marched out of his study to retrieve Johann and Lingsha from their patrol outside.

“Prince Eric, was there a reason you summoned us?”

“Did you get bored and wanna talk?”

Johann and Lingsha stood before Prince Eric. He would probably order them directly to follow Jill. I was sure Johann would object, though.

“I’m going to shadow Jill Westoria. I want to see for myself why she and Duke Berklein are meeting in secret.”

Just as I expected, Johann and Lingsha both gasped in surprise as I did earlier. The reaction was only natural—Prince Eric’s proposition was that absurd.

*I know Prince Eric has a plan, but wouldn’t most princes do what my stepmother did and hire a private investigator?*

“A conspiracy borne from Jill Westoria’s trysts with Duke Berklein,” Johann mused. “I understand, Your Highness. You wish to personally expose the duke’s high crimes.”

“That’s right. This is my fight. I want to catch Jade Berklein red-handed—and I want to do it myself.”

“I am well aware of that, Your Highness. But won’t you let me take care of it instead? I am your top confidant and have sworn my loyalty to you. Please, have faith in my loyalty and stay at the palace where you will be safe.”

Johann’s eyes were earnest as he begged Prince Eric to stay behind. But Prince Eric felt that as this was his fight, his duty to gather the evidence he needed to strike the final blow. Since Johann had aided Eric all this time, he understood the prince’s feelings on the matter, but as his bodyguard and vassal, he opposed the suggested plan. He didn’t want to put his prince in danger.

“Johann, I have never for one second doubted your loyalty. But it’s my duty to settle this matter with Duke Berklein myself. The deaths of those two officials were quite a bitter experience for me.”

In high society, the young duke Jade Berklein was ardently admired. When Prince Eric found out that there might be a cruel side to the man—that he might have killed his own men after they failed their mission to silence them forever—Eric was unable to let that go. Therefore, even though it was too late to avenge the men, Prince Eric wanted to at least settle the matter himself.

“But, Your Highness! It’s too dangerous out there!”

“Johann, as far as I’m concerned, I’m in more danger here at the palace, under constant threat of assassins. And while they have stopped coming recently, that might have been a ploy to make us lower our guard. If you stay here as my body double, couldn’t it be argued that I would be safer outside?”

He had a point. If we made our foes think Prince Eric was at the palace, he would actually be safer elsewhere. If Johann were his body double, that would preempt word of his absence leaking out.

“That is sheer sophistry, Your Highness!”

“That’s right, I’m being fallacious. But if anyone could pull off being my body

double, it would be you, the man I trust the most. Am I wrong?"

"Ugh, you never back down when you get like this. While I have my reservations, I accept the task. I will serve as your body double."

It would be more correct to say Johann gave up rather than that he was persuaded. As a longtime friend of Eric's, he knew the prince would not yield under any circumstances. If even Johann couldn't stop him, I knew it was no use complaining, but I still thought it was a bad idea for a crown prince to impulsively put himself in danger.

"Prince Eric, this scandal involves my own family. Please, let me accompany you."

I volunteered to help Prince Eric shadow Jill. I could protect him myself, and I would never let him venture out there alone.

"If you're caught, you'll be in danger too, seeing as you're his primary target."

"I am well aware of that, Your Highness, but I can look after myself. Besides, keeping you safe is my duty."

*That's right.* I would blast away any danger that came our way. I was Prince Eric's bodyguard, and I had no intention of running away from my responsibility.

"Hm. So we're at an impasse. I suppose it would be wrong of me if I was the only one who got their way. All right, Leia. Come with me."

"As you command, Your Highness."

At least he was aware he was being selfish—that meant a lot to me.

Thus, it was decided that I would accompany Prince Eric at night to shadow Jill.

"Eric is right here, oh yes. He definitely did *not* go outside," Lingsha recited. "There. I've got my lines down."

Johann and Lingsha remained in Prince Eric's study to make it look like he was

doing paperwork all night.

After we gathered our gear, Prince Eric and I sneaked out of the palace, heading for Westoria Manor. The moon was bright. Its light made it easier for us to see our target, but we would have to be careful not to be seen ourselves.

“All right...we should be safe to observe them from here, undetected.”

Prince Eric and I hid in the shrubs at Westoria Manor, my former home, and kept watch. I never dreamed the day would come when I would spy on my own home.

I scanned the vicinity for other presences and confirmed we were alone. Perhaps Catherine’s contract with her private investigator had expired already.

“Do you think Jill will actually come out, Your Highness? According to my stepmother, she only leaves once every few days.”

“I know. We’ll have to wait every night until she does. Anyway, it’s quite clear this is a race against time.”

“Yes, indeed. The further behind we fall, the harder it will be to find all the answers.”

We were already quite far behind. But the further behind we fell, the more likely it was that Duke Berklein would act before we could stop him. That was why we went to such extreme lengths over a mere conjecture.

“Luck might be turning in our favor. Look over there. Jill Westoria just came out.”

It was no less than providential. Getting results on the first day was ridiculously good fortune. Prince Eric whispered to me that I should watch the back of the house, so I turned my attention there.

*That’s really her... I can’t see all of her in the darkness, but that’s definitely Jill.*

“We’re following her—just don’t get too close. Always keep this much

distance from her."

"Understood."

While keeping an ample buffer between us, we trailed Jill close enough so as not to lose sight of her. Even without the moonlight to rely on, I could sense human presences with my magic, so we would be all right, as long as we didn't fall too far behind. We would not lose her.

We kept following Jill until she ducked into the forest.

*Aha...this is the perfect place to go for a nighttime tryst. There's no signs of human life anywhere.*

There was a lake in the forest. With the moon reflecting off the water, the area looked quite mystical. Under different circumstances, it would even feel romantic.

"Leia. Keep your eyes over there."

I looked where Prince Eric pointed just in time to see Jill approach something.

*That looks like a horse-drawn carriage... I think she's talking to somebody inside.*

"Your little sister must have said some password. There's Duke Berklein now."

"Looks like it, yes. Duke Berklein must be taking a number of precautions as well."

Thanks to the light of the moon, we could clearly see Duke Berklein and Jill in an embrace. I never thought I'd witness my little sister having an affair in the middle of a forest. I knew there was nothing to be done, but I still felt a little hurt.

I couldn't help but feel I was doing something vulgar. Then again, *they* were the ones who were really being vulgar...

"Too bad we can't hear what they're saying from this distance. Though I

suppose we'll have to make do; we can't get closer lest we risk them noticing us."

"No, I can actually read lips a little. I picked up the skill to better keep assassins at bay."

I was a bit surprised by the prince's revelation.

*I never knew he could read lips. Is there anything this man can't do?*

Prince Eric stared at Jill and Duke Berklein intently while he relayed their conversation to me:

"It frustrates me that we can only meet at night like this. I just want to be with you, Jill."

"Ohh, my sweet Jade, your Jill feels the same way. I cannot wait until the day where you and I can walk hand in hand along the same path."

It sounded like Jill was head over heels in love with Duke Berklein. Berklein kept dropping hints that they would marry so she would listen to anything he said. It was sickening to watch.

"By the way, Jill. About what we discussed last time... How did it go?"

"Very well. I've practiced a lot, and now I'm able to use Death Poison. When I heard it was taboo magic, I assumed it would be much more difficult than it turned out to be."

"Oh, how incredible! That's my Jill. It was easy for you to learn because you are a brilliant woman!"

"Ohh! My sweet Jade..."

*Death Poison?! Did she really learn taboo magic?*

Jill was playing with something even more dangerous than I thought.

"Leia...they're discussing using Death Poison..."

There were many different schools of magic; some were forbidden.

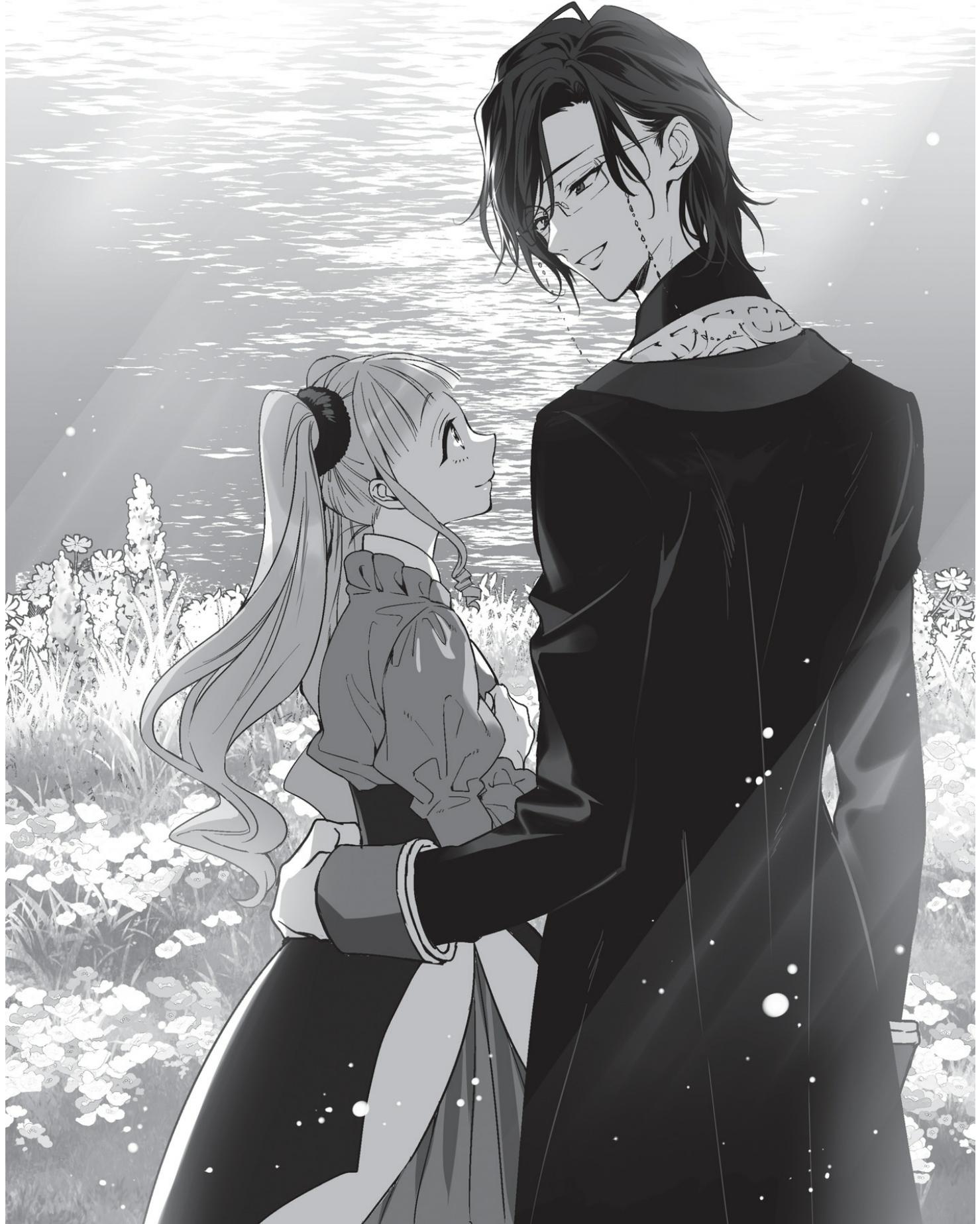
Arc Poison spells were among those, and Death Poison was one such spell that would allow a caster to easily kill someone without leaving any trace of poison. As such a spell could plunge the world into chaos, it was prohibited to use. In other words, Jill would be the perfect untraceable assassin and Duke Berklein was making her learn how to use this forbidden magic.

This was a problem that would not stop at just my family.

“Don’t worry, Jill. Just use the magic as I instruct you, then you can become a saint and my wife.”

“Ohh...the wife of my sweet Lord Jade... Oh, I can’t wait to be your wife, my love.”

“That is also my dearest wish. So please, keep practicing until you’ve mastered the spell. Become proficient enough that you can cast it from afar without detection.”



Duke Berklein was telling Jill what she wanted to hear to brainwash her. It was ridiculous—my death would not give him the right to appoint Jill as a saint.

“Okay, remember not to let anyone see what you’re doing. If we are found out, we can’t be together anymore.”

“I-I know that, my lord. I will be careful.”

“Good. I believe in you. But still, exercise caution. If you screw this up, I’ll have to make you disappear.”

“Jade?”

“Ha ha, sorry I scared you. I just love you so much, Jill, and I want to spend all my time with you, so I took that joke too far. Can you forgive me?”

“O-of course! It didn’t bother me. I want to share my future with you too! I’ll do anything to make that happen.”

Well, that cleared things up: Duke Berklein was plotting to use Jill to poison me to death. And once their plan was successful, he was going to murder Jill to silence her. Behind that handsome smile lay unspeakable cruelty.

*I never noticed before. I’ve met him at parties, but he never showed any sign of such evil.*

Seeing him acting maliciously before my very eyes, I learned for the first time how terrifying that man was.

For a while after that, Jill and Duke Berklein’s conversation turned into the sort typical of lovers, so Prince Eric and I kept an eye on them while we discussed the new intel.

“So...Death Poison. What a terrifying pair of words to bring up. Being taboo magic and all, is it an easy spell to learn?”

“No, it most certainly is not easy. The spell itself has been sealed, so nobody

knows how to use it anymore. However, if Duke Berklein has access to ancient texts containing it, that changes things.”

Not even I could use forbidden magic—rather, you could say I was incapable of using it. To be precise, I didn’t know the exact nature of it because there were no surviving documents describing how to cast those spells.

“Now it’s clear why Duke Berklein took a liking to Jill. It wasn’t because she was close to me, it was because she scored the highest in Arc Poison in the saint exams.”

“Now that makes sense. And I wouldn’t expect less from your sister.”

“Yes, Jill has never doubted her own arcane talents—that’s why she believes she is worthy of being a saint. And *that’s* why Duke Berklein is using her. He’s tantalizing her with the fantasy of sainthood to warp her good judgment.”

Jill had confidence in her own powers, and for good reason: The Westoria bloodline was blessed with magical aptitude. She was talented...so talented that, as long as she worked hard and didn’t let her genius consume her, she had the potential to become a saint.

But all of Catherine’s praise had spoiled her, and her overconfidence had made her detest magic training. That was why when I was chosen as a saint instead of her, she accused me of cheating and threw a crying fit, even though my scores in magic classes had been higher than hers for quite some time.

But she did have talent, that was undeniable. And if she was given the rules for using taboo magic, it wouldn’t take her too long to figure out how to cast it.

“Hm?! Something’s moving. Is that a puppy?”

We had observed the pair for thirty minutes when Duke Berklein took a large sack out of his carriage and set it beside the lake. A puppy poked its head out.

*Oh no... I know what they’re about to do. He’s probably going to...*

“He’s adding water to a dish,” Prince Eric said.

Berklein made the dog sit and filled a dish with water. Then Jill touched the

dish, just for a second. She had touched the dish so briefly that if I had blinked, I would've missed it.

And barely a moment after drinking from the dish, the puppy collapsed.

Then, Jill washed her hands in the lake while Duke Berklein patted her head.

"Impressive... Your little sister cast the Death Poison spell in less than a second."

"Talent aside, she would have needed to train hard to become that fast."

Prince Eric and I had just witnessed pure evil.

We never had a good relationship to begin with, but never in my life would I have wished to watch my little sister practicing to kill me...

There was nothing more tragic than becoming sworn enemies with your own flesh and blood.

*Seriously, what are you doing, Jill? You fool...*

## Final Chapter: The Conspirators' Last Days

“**A**LL RIGHT, it’s clear that Duke Berklein is plotting to assassinate you, and we know how he plans to do it.”

“Shall we return to the palace, then? There’s no use in staying here any longer.”

“Yes, it’s probably best we go back.”

We started off toward the palace. We had put Johann and Lingsha in charge, but they couldn’t keep up the act forever, and we had already gotten the information we needed.

My little sister Jill had easily killed a puppy. Knowing what that implied for the future made me shudder.

*That foolish girl... Is she really going to kill me?*

I didn’t want to believe she resented me to that degree. We’d shared a roof for years and had even been friends when we were younger. I once loved her.

That made the truth that much more shocking and tragic.

“Still, I was astonished that she could kill a victim that quickly with Arc Poison with a mere touch. Taboo magic is terrifying stuff.”

“It certainly is, Your Highness. I can use common Arc Poison spells, but they only paralyze monsters’ legs temporarily; the spells I use are not lethal.”

“I thought so.”

“Jill’s spell took effect with just a quick touch because she’s always had a talent for Arc Poison.”

During our saint exams, Jill was able to paralyze monsters faster and for longer than I could, so Jill had an undeniable potential for learning the Death

Poison spell.

“Duke Berklein probably knew that your little sister was good at Arc Poison spells.”

“Yes, I have to draw the same conclusion.”

We were in agreement: Duke Berklein was having Jill learn the strongest and deadliest of the taboo spells, Death Poison, to turn her into the most horrible assassin. And he was doing so because he knew about her talent for Arc Poison spells.

“But it still doesn’t make sense to me. What we just witnessed appeared to be an experiment. Why would they experiment on a puppy out in the open like that? In the carriage, there would be no danger of prying eyes.”

“It is a consequence of Arc Poison magic,” I explained. “If you make a mistake casting the spell, you could get poison residue on your hands. That’s why you always wash them with plenty of water after an attempt.”

Arc Poison was invisible, so if you miscast and the poison stuck to your hands, you had no way of knowing. That was why Arc Poison spells were always practiced beside a lake or a stream, to prevent the caster from touching the wrong thing while the spell lingered on their hands. This was even more true for a lethal spell like Death Poison. Duke Berklein likely wanted to ensure his own safety as well.

“All right...that explains things.”

“However, it seems Jill has not yet mastered Death Poison. It will take her more time to perfect her casting technique.”

“Which means we still have time before they can act. That’s good news.”

The fact that Jill still needed to practice meant her Death Poison was not yet flawless—the use of a puppy was proof of that. We still had time—time to draw up a plan of our own. But how we spent that time was crucial, and we needed to work hard to find a way to stop Berklein’s evil plan.

I had to get started immediately. *So why do I feel so stuck...*

“I... I had no idea just how deeply she resented me. To go so far as to murder me, that is.” I said, choking on the words. The truth that Jill had clear intent to kill me was harder to accept than I thought it would be.

“It didn’t seem like resentment was why she’s willing to kill you... Rather, she wants to win Duke Berklein’s affection. She seems quite infatuated with the man. So please don’t let it get to you.”

“Does what you said really make any of this better?”

Telling me my sister wanted to kill me on Duke Berklein’s behalf rather than her own was an odd way to console me. Either way, she was trying to kill me. What was the prince trying to say?

“It makes it much better. If Jill’s affections for Berklein can be twisted into an intent to kill, who you are as a person has nothing to do with it. It’s easier to resign yourself to it that way.”

“You may be right. But resign myself to it? I can’t...”

Prince Eric’s observation might’ve been technically correct, but a part of me couldn’t accept it. My own sister was still trying to kill me—that fact hadn’t changed.

“I’m sorry... You can’t accept it, can you?”

“Of course I can’t! I’m only human; I can’t compartmentalize my feelings.”

Prince Eric could tell from the sadness in my eyes that I hadn’t accepted the facts. If this was about somebody else, I could have accepted it. But when it involved my own family, I couldn’t distance my feelings. I didn’t suppose Prince Eric understood that, though.

“All right, let me put it another way. In the state Jill’s in, if Berklein commanded her to love you, she would. If he commanded her to turn a blade on her parents, she would. She’s a puppet now, with no moral compass of her own. So, who is it *really* that wants to kill you? The puppet?”

“No...the puppet master. In other words, Duke Berklein.”

“Correct.”

Now that I finally grasped what Prince Eric meant by his words, my spirits lifted a little. He was right. That murderous wrath directed at me wasn’t coming from Jill. Duke Berklein had brainwashed Jill, whispering sweet lies into her ear. He had turned her into a puppet to murder me.

It wasn’t the puppet I needed to be focused on, but the one who pulled its strings.

“I promise I will always protect you, Leia. While my own assassination attempts infuriate me, it infuriates me even more when somebody I care about is in danger.”

“P-Prince Eric?”

The rasping deepness of his voice made me turn to look at him. His icy eyes gazed back at me, burning with hatred. I had never seen that look from him before, not even when assassins were coming after him day after day.

*I had no idea I was this important to him...*

I could see in Prince Eric’s eyes that I had become a big part of his life, and I was honored by that.

“Prince Eric... Until we can confirm they mean to kill me, I suggest we entice Jill and Berklein to make a move.”

“Entice them? Whatever for?”

“We need to get solid evidence they can’t talk their way out of. So I will act as bait, to lure them into action.”

I’d made up my mind. If they were trying to kill me, then I’d face their attack head-on. I decided to put my life on the line to help Prince Eric catch Duke Berklein by personally luring them out of the shadows to expose the truth.

I knew exactly who was after me and what their scheme was. I had a golden

opportunity. I needed to seize my moment and use it.

“No, isn’t that too dangerous?”

“You promised you would protect me, Your Highness. I take it you meant that?”

“Of course I did. I would swear that oath before God.”

Prince Eric had given his word that he would protect me, so I was going to wager my life on him.

Because Prince Eric was becoming an important part of my life too.

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“Prince Eric! Why didn’t you detain Duke Berklein?! He is a dangerous criminal, plotting high treason!”

It was the morning after we had shadowed Jill. I was stopping by Prince Eric’s study to tell him I was departing on my saintly duties when I caught Johann hounding the prince into a corner.

“It’s crystal-clear: Duke Berklein is making Jill use taboo magic to assassinate Lady Leia! Is it not our duty to stop him?!”

“Too close, Johann. And too loud; lower your voice a little,” Prince Eric gently admonished his enraged vassal.

“M-my humblest apologies.”

I appreciated Johann’s indignation, but it was not yet time to act. Of course, if we arrested Duke Berklein and Jill right away, we could easily stop their assassination plot.

“I’m afraid that at present, it is still mere conjecture. Duke Berklein is in the Great Four. His authority is second to the crown and his influence runs deep.”

“I am well aware of that, Your Highness, but didn’t you gather the evidence personally when you shadowed them?!”

“Hm. Fair point. I do have some proof, if reading the lips of a distant

conversation counts. But that isn't hard evidence, only testimony. It is insufficient to prove him guilty of high treason."

Unfortunately, the only action we could take at the moment would be to temporarily slow them down by making Jill's affair with Duke Berklein public. But that would serve no purpose. We needed objective, irrefutable evidence to close this matter for good.

"Then why don't we detain Lady Jill while we carry out an investigation? We could get her to confess Duke Berklein's scheme. If she confesses that she was pressured into assassinating Lady Leia, Duke Berklein could not possibly be deemed innocent."

"I have considered that but decided against it. Jill seems to be quite infatuated with Duke Berklein. If we were to capture her, there's a possibility that she may even use Death Poison on herself. Knowing our duke friend, he could have instructed her to do something of the sort."

*I'm not sure about that... Even I, her big sister, don't know if Jill is capable of such a thing.*

But in order to play the tragic heroine to the bitter end, I could easily imagine her tearfully gulping down poison out of love for Duke Berklein. She would think it better to die than burden the one she loves. That sounded right up Jill's alley. Then again, her love for herself would likely win—that scenario was equally easy to imagine.

Either way, humans were difficult to predict, so we had to be careful. Scariest of all was something unanticipated happening.

"Hmm... What a conundrum. As I understand it, even if we were to stop Lady Jill in the act of attempting to kill Lady Leia, she might kill herself then as well," Johann summarized.

He was right. That was why we had to delay arresting Jill for as long as possible. We had to wait until we had backed Duke Berklein into a corner that he couldn't weasel his way out of.

“Well said,” Prince Eric said. “At the very least, we need to determine when and where Duke Berklein plans on assassinating Leia.”

“But how do we figure that out? Hire a detective?”

“Too risky. Our plans might get leaked. No, if you want to catch your prey, use a trap—a long-established method. Let’s dangle a tasty-looking piece of bait in front of him.”

“A t-trap, Your Highness?”

If we discovered where and when they wanted to assassinate me, we could plan for all sorts of contingencies. We could have tried to seek the information out like Johann suggested, but this was easier. Though Prince Eric could have been more judicious with his words. Calling it a trap made us sound like the bad guys.

“That’s right. We’ll set the perfect stage for them. Like this,” Prince Eric said as he handed Johann a piece of paper.

Johann’s face contorted into a mask of horror as he read: “*Philip Gilbert Presents: An Engagement Party.*” Wh-what is the meaning of this?”

“I’ve set the stage: an event where Leia and I are guaranteed to be in attendance. I spoke to Duke Gilbert yesterday. I told him, what better way to secure the devotion of his son’s fiancée than to throw an engagement party for him? Naturally, Duke Berklein has also received an invitation.”

Rather than waiting for the enemy to strike, Prince Eric elected to welcome him with open arms. For this sort of strategy to succeed, we needed to take the initiative.

My former and Jill’s current fiancé was the heir of Duke Gilbert. Prince Eric had commanded that Duke Gilbert, one of the Great Four, hold an engagement party for his son. Ordinarily, this wasn’t a matter Prince Eric would concern himself with, but Philip was sabotaging his engagement to Jill—never mind that

he'd proposed to her only after ending his betrothal to me. He'd even dared to propose to me a second time.

Duke Gilbert was well aware that Philip had incurred the wrath of Prince Eric during this sequence of events. It was, after all, the prince's admonishment that had made the duke bow his head to the humble Westoria house and force his son to take Jill back.

To Duke Gilbert, who wished to impress upon Prince Eric that his son was behaving properly, an order to hold an engagement party for his son was something he could not refuse, even if he wanted to.

This engagement party was to be the bait to lure Duke Berklein into our trap. Prince Eric planned on waiting for him to expose his fangs, ready to bite, to make his arrest.

"This is an event where Prince Eric, Jill, Duke Berklein, and I will all be in one place. What's more, it will be a party with food and drink. It's the perfect opportunity to poison me."

"Lady Leia, you aren't going to be the bait, are you?!"

"Mark my words, Jill will approach me—to poison me. *That* is the best chance we'll have to expose Duke Berklein's scheme."

Jill approaching me with intent to kill *was* our best and only chance to expose him. We had put ourselves in Duke Berklein's shoes and thought through what would likely happen. There was no guarantee he would respond to our invitation, but psychologically speaking, he would want to witness Jill killing me with his own eyes rather than wait for word of the deed.

If he weren't there in person, he would neither be able to cover for her if she failed nor be able to dispose of any evidence. Therefore, we were not worried that Duke Berklein would skip the event.

"Lady Leia, you've made your commitment to the plan very clear. But let's say we do succeed in luring Duke Berklein to the party. How are we going to get

concrete proof of his conspiracy? After all, his weapon of choice is Arc Poison. We can't reveal that from a body search."

"Quite right, Johann," Prince Eric said. "That's why we'll manipulate Duke Berklein into willingly confessing his crimes."

"B-but is that even possible?" Johann stammered, aghast.

I was half-inclined to agree. Prince Eric had only told me that he had a plan, so I had my doubts about it. But I trusted Prince Eric would not be flippant about it. I knew we would be all right.

And thus, our final showdown with Duke Berklein was to take place at Philip's engagement party.

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Philip and Jill's engagement party was in one week. The air was tense and cool in sharp contrast to spring's cozy warmth. Prince Eric mentioned that he needed to make a few preparations, but I had no idea what they were.

I had a thought or two about Jill, for letting that man manipulate her into killing me, but Duke Berklein—the puppet master—was at the heart of this evil plot. He was the one I could never forgive. I was enraged by him—though not as furious as Prince Eric—for being so duplicitous that he used other people to keep his own hands clean.

"I have it all figured out now, our plan to get Duke Berklein to confess to his own crimes."

Prince Eric sent Johann away to reveal the plan to me alone.

*My, he's being extremely cautious. I doubt Johann or Lingsha would leak this plan to anyone...*

As though sensing my thoughts, Prince Eric said, "I don't suspect Johann and Lingsha, you know. It's just, the fewer people who know about our plan, the more likely it will be to succeed."

"What do you mean?"

“This plan requires acting. I want Johann and Lingsha to look as innocent as possible. Their ignorance will look more natural if it’s genuine.”

He was right; if they knew about the plan, it might show in their faces. But there was a new worry: I was not a good actress.

“Um... So why are you telling *me* the plan, then? Is it because I’m going to be the one Jill will poison?”

“That’s part of it, yes, but the most important reason is that you will be the one doing all the work, Leia. *You* are the star of the show.”

“M-me, Your Highness?”

Now it made sense. I didn’t have to think too hard to realize I would be the one who needed to make a move. How could I possibly avoid being poisoned by Jill and snare Duke Berklein in our trap if I didn’t know anything about the plan?

“That’s right. I’ll be asking a lot of you, so please let me know if it’s too much. I can think of another way.”

“It won’t be too much, Your Highness. This concerns my family, so I’m prepared to do whatever it takes to stop her. So, what am I to do?”

Since Jill’s life was also at stake, I couldn’t very well say no. I would do anything. I wouldn’t let Duke Berklein and Jill have their way.

“I’ll go over the plan in order... Can you use heat magic, Leia? Making objects hotter or colder, for example.”

“Heat magic? It’s not difficult, so of course I can use it. Is this the sort of thing you’re referring to, Your Highness?”

I spread my arms wide, generating a flame in my right hand and a ball of ice in my left.

This was merely a visually impressive feat. If I wanted to use heat magic only, that was much easier. Rather than generating fire and ice from thin air, it was far less difficult to inflict their effects on objects that already existed.

*But why does Prince Eric want to know about heat magic?*

“That’s my Leia. All right, I’ll explain the plan. First, we...”

Prince Eric filled me in on his plan. It was, how should I put it...a con. If Berklein fell for it, he would not be too pleased. Given how honest and righteous Prince Eric was, it was hard to believe he had come up with such a plan.

“Ordinarily, I’d like to be open and straight with this sort of thing, but I’m setting that aside just this once. That bastard is after you, so I’m stopping him—no matter what it takes.”

“Prince Eric, you can’t mean...”

“Hm? Yes, I mean what I said. Just—please don’t fret over it. It’s a decision I made on my own.”

His expression was so stoic and dignified that I was struck speechless. The way he’d acted when we first met now seemed like a false memory. From the look in his eyes, I knew that I could trust him to the moon and back. Prince Eric said not to fret over it, but everything he said and did today was already etched deeply in my memory.

“Well, let’s get straight to work then. You’ll need materials to make the items right? We’ll procure them from my friend’s magic shop.”

“The mechanics are simple, so as long as I have the material components, I should be able to make them with no problems.”

Prince Eric and I went straight out to the capital to go shopping. A variety of shops were there, but the prince and I were headed for the magic shop. They sold items imbued with magic energy that made our lives easier. These were everyday items that lit rooms or took body temperature, and also very large items that required a lot of magic energy—like life-sized mechanical dancing dolls.

But we weren’t looking for magic artifacts, we were after materials.

“Well, if it isn’t His Royal Highness! So good to see you again!”

“Likewise, old friend. Sorry to cut the pleasantries short, but we need these materials straight away. And please don’t ask what for.”

The shopkeeper sighed, “Yes, I can easily comply, but—those are components for children’s toys.”

One week from now, we would catch Duke Berklein.

After we made our purchases from the magic shop, we got right to work on our plan. It was easy to see just how crucial good acting skills would be to pull everything off. With the honor of playing such a big role came an intense amount of pressure, but I would do it with style. After all, my life depended on it.

Prince Eric had done so much to help me. I genuinely wanted to make him proud.

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After making all sorts of preparations with Prince Eric, the night of Philip’s engagement party finally arrived. As it was an opulent gala for a member of the Great Four, the carriages of Elshaid’s most influential families were lined up in front of the venue.

I set foot in the reception hall and was greeted by a sea of fashionable guests chatting gaily over the backdrop of a live orchestra. Naturally, many people wanted to pay their respects when they heard a noteworthy ducal heir was to be married—that alone was enough to make Philip’s engagement to Jill a high-profile event.

“Duke Berklein, it is an honor to have you at my son’s party.”

“Thank you for the invitation, Duke Gilbert. When I heard your son was to marry a beautiful young lady, it was only natural that I rushed here to feast my eyes upon her.”

“Ha ha ha! You dog! Surely you could have your pick of the ladies—isn’t it

about time you settled down yourself?"

"I would love to, but the bachelor life has become infatuated with me and won't let me go."

Needless to say, Duke Berklein was among the attendees. He cheerily conversed with Duke Gilbert in the center of the reception hall. As I kept their jovial banter in my periphery, I silently cheered that he had come. That made me a target of course, but our plan could not proceed without the duke's presence.

Trying my best to act natural, I forced myself to not look at him. As to be expected, he acted like he didn't know Jill.

"Philip! Hello there, old chum. Honored to be here. I haven't seen you since that day at the restaurant. Your father was just telling me I needed to hurry up and settle down myself. Know any nice ladies you could introduce me to?"

"Oh, you don't need my help to get the ladies flocking to you. No need to hurry."

"Oh, yes indeed, Jade. You are so handsome. You'll find a wife immediately."

The two men gaped.

Duke Berklein's cordial attempt to pay his respects to Philip—the man of the hour—had been interrupted by Jill. She cozied up to Duke Berklein, as if that were perfectly acceptable, and the two men's faces froze in the blink of an eye.

*Well...that's an unexpected turn of events. What in the world is she playing at?*

"Hmph?! Jill? Aren't you being a little cozy with the duke?"

"Well, yes. For sweet Jade has stolen my hea—"

"Ha! Ha ha! You two are the perfect pair! I mustn't get in your way, so I'll just leave you to enjoy this wonderful party!"

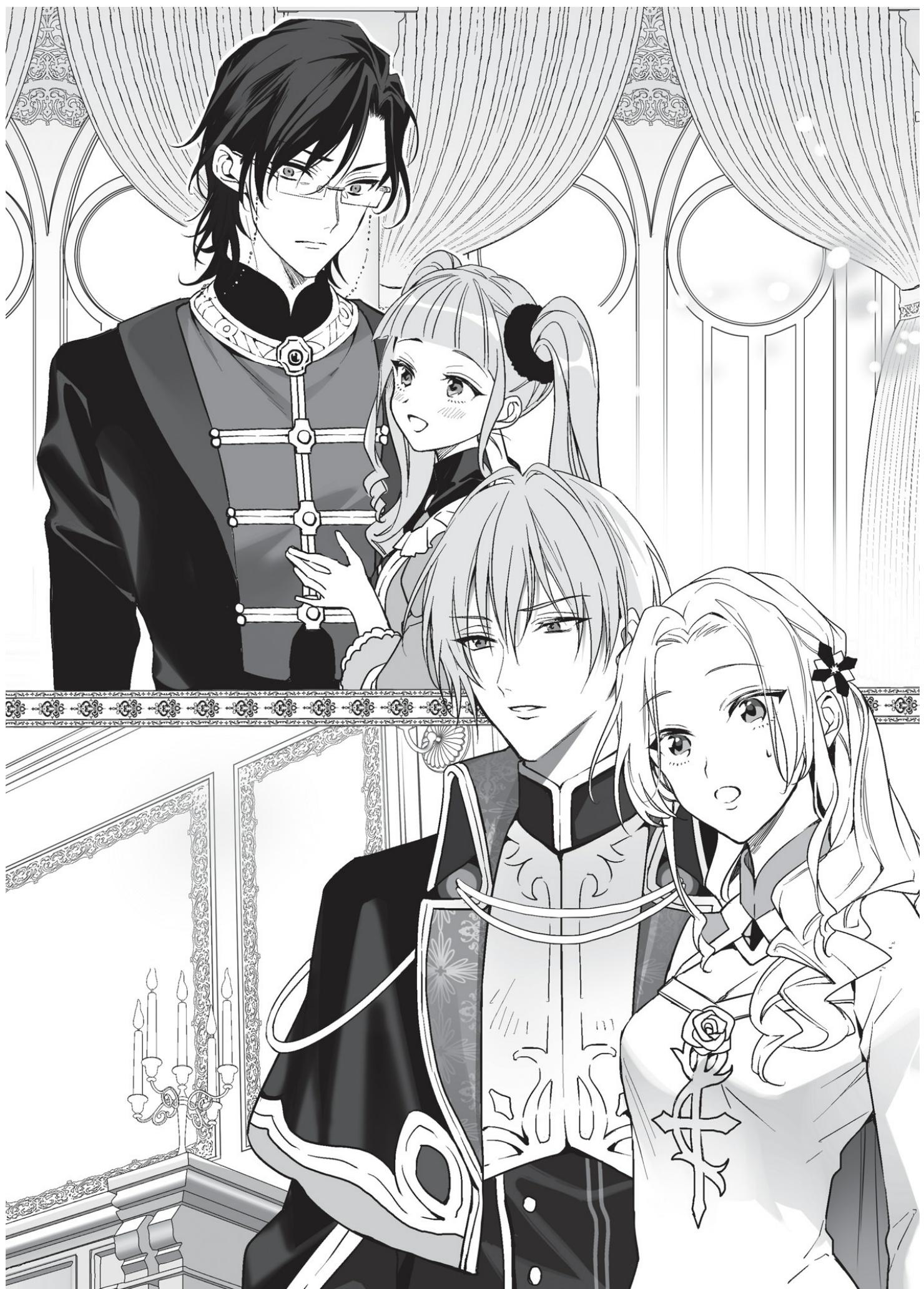
Berklein tried to play it off by laughing, but the mirth didn't reach his eyes.

Seeing his master plan crumble to ruins just like that had surely given him the fright of his life.

In that regard, Berklein had fatally misjudged Jill's nature—that girl was most definitely *not* good at keeping secrets. She had revealed her true colors many times before, but she was always able to cry her way out of any consequences.

Surely, Duke Berklein had ordered her to act in a way that would keep their relationship a secret. And Jill was of course well aware of how she should act, but Jill's one-track mind was preoccupied with the desire to flirt with the man she loved. His face tensed up, and he looked troubled beyond words.

It would seem he was aware of Jill's nature but not of its extent. Berklein wasn't the only one surprised—even Prince Eric and I, her own sister, had not fully taken Jill's true nature into consideration when we formulated our plans. In any situation, she always put herself first, no matter what.



"Leia...is your sister all right? I'm rather stunned." Prince Eric watched, mouth agape, as my little sister carried on.

What was a rather normal scene for me to witness was quite unusual in the prince's eyes; however, that base behavior *was* Jill Westoria's true nature.

"She's clearly more infatuated with Duke Berklein than we thought," I said. "She only has one thing on her mind right now: enticing her man."

"I'm not so sure. She's surely realized that if Duke Berklein's plan fails, she'll fall out of his favor."

*Fall out of his favor? Yes, I suppose most people would draw that conclusion.*

But Jill was not most people. Deep down, that girl saw herself as the main character of her story.

"No, Your Highness, Jill operates on the assumption that everybody loves her. And I'm afraid I've misjudged her as well. Jill is not the sort of person who would take her own life in penance. She believes that crying will absolve her of anything."

I suspected Jill believed I loved her too, despite all my supposed abuse. She had come to expect to be loved by everyone in life. The fear over my own life being in danger had caused me to forget, but now I remembered: Jill had used that side of herself to charm Philip into breaking off his engagement to me.

Duke Berklein was surely sweating right now. He likely regretted his mistake in thinking Jill was easy to control. Still, I shouldn't have been sympathizing with my would-be killer. If Duke Berklein aborted his plan now, Prince Eric and I would lose out more than anyone.

I never dreamed that Jill's antics would put our own plan in jeopardy. Honestly! What a bothersome girl she was.

"We're going in for the rescue, Leia."

"To...rescue him, Your Highness? Oh dear... I never dreamed we would be helping the villain with his plot to murder me."

Since Berklein calling off the plan would hurt us more than it would him, Eric and I rushed over to Philip's side. He was scrutinizing Jill hard, but when he saw Prince Eric approaching, he stood at attention.

"Congratulations on your engagement, Philip."

"P-Prince Eric, thank you so much for attending our party. L...Leia, you too. Thanks for coming. And sorry about everything."

"Thanks for the invitation," Prince Eric said.

"I harbor no resentment, Lord Philip. You needn't feel indebted to me."

Philip greeted us with an awkward smile. I felt a pang of guilt about using him for our plan. Once everything was settled, I would give him an apology. I just felt sorry for him.

As soon as Jill saw me greet Philip, she looked at me, smiled brightly, and said, "Oh, Leia! My *sweet* sister, I am *so happy* to see you here. The party just can't get started without you."

When I saw her usual, fairy-like smile, I felt conflicted. "Congratulations on your engagement, Jill. I imagine it's been stressful, getting ready for your new life with Lord Philip, but I hope you settle in soon."

"Thank you! I am so terribly excited to start my new life with Jade—er, I mean, *Lord Philip*."

We all stared at her, at a loss for words.

*This girl clearly has her head in the clouds, doesn't she?*

Berklein had probably promised her that they'd wed right after the deed was done and she couldn't stop thinking about it. But saying the wrong man's name? She couldn't possibly have had worse timing.

*What a fine mess we're in. I wonder how Duke Berklein feels right now.*

I felt awful. All our plans were crumbling before our very eyes.

"Hey, uh, Jill? Did... I mean, are you... What did... Did you just call me *Jade*?"

Philip's face was understandably stern. It was only natural for a man to get angry if his fiancée called him by another man's name.

*What do we do now? I can't exactly take Jill's side here. Well, no matter what I do, I need to keep her affair with Berklein a secret.*

Just as Philip opened his mouth to question her further, Prince Eric suddenly cut in from the side and scolded her loudly. "Jill Westoria! How *dare* you mess up your fiancé's name! You may be dissatisfied by your engagement to Philip, but acting that way in *public*? Dishonorable beyond words!"

"Eep!"

"I didn't like your attitude the first time we met either! Get it?! Do you even understand who this whole party is for in the first place?!"

*P-Prince Eric...what are you doing?*

The intense scene unfolding robbed us of the ability to speak. As for the berated Jill, she immediately burst into tears—and I was tempted to join her.

"Y-Your Highness! Prince Eric! Please, stop this! Jill is only nervous! Please, overlook her little mistakes!"

"Oh-oh-waaahh... Oh, Mother, Prince Eric—hic!—was so *cruel* to meeee..."

Catherine swooped in to rescue Jill from Prince Eric. Jill couldn't stop sobbing like a little child, and everyone around her began to gossip.

What an utter disaster. The eyes of everyone in the party hall were now drawn to the unfolding drama.

"Countess Westoria! I am angry on behalf of my friend Philip!" Prince Eric snapped at Catherine. "Isn't that right, Philip?! Jill's behavior is unforgivable, right?!" he asked, prompting Philip for support.

"Huh?! R-right... But Jill feels sorry about it, so I've decided to let it go."

*Of course.* Rather than pursue the cause of Jill's slip of the tongue further, he chose to mollify the crown prince instead. In other words, this was a calculated

maneuver. Prince Eric had made a scene on purpose so that Philip would come to Jill's defense.

"I never imagined pretending to be angry could get us through that little crisis," I said as we stepped away from the commotion.

"Huh? Oh, I didn't pretend. It was an unexpected wrench in the works that could have ruined everything."

So Prince Eric was angry after all. Did Jill's terror know no bounds? *Imagine, making Prince Eric lose his temper so quickly.*

Despite the unexpected snag, we needed to regroup and focus on backing Duke Berklein into a corner now. Prince Eric was right: If we didn't succeed, all our hard work to make this night happen would have been for naught.

### **-Jill's Perspective-**

**O** HO HO HO HO! Oh, how I'd *waited* for this day.

My sweet Jade was so smart, so handsome, and most importantly, so much more deeply in love with me than anyone else.

*If everything goes well today, he's promised to make me his wife! That alone has filled my heart with joy!*

I'm not quite sure why, but my Jade seemed to think Leia was a hindrance to our love, and he kindly told me that, ideally, I would be the saint instead of her. Indeed, as the harder worker, I was better suited to sainthood.

So I had to make my pest of a big sister disappear—to please my Jade, and to become a saint.

I'd worked diligently toward this goal. My sweet Jade assured me that my hard work would pay off and that had truly encouraged me. Thanks to all my efforts, I managed to master the Death Poison spell just as he promised I would. Now all that remained was to wait until he told me to use it.

But my excitement was interrupted by a summons from Lord Philip. When I went to see him, he informed me of an engagement party. I was most revolted by this. What a horrible idea for a party!

After all, my heart and body belonged to Jade.

I did *not* want to attend a party as the fiancée of a screaming, angry, hateful man like Lord Philip, but when I told my sweet Jade about the party, he said, “An engagement party! Ha ha ha ha ha! Excellent! That Philip is more innocent than he looks! And here I was, tearing my hair out trying to figure out how to get you close to Leia!”

He laughed boisterously, overjoyed by the news. It seemed that his worries had melted away. Jade patted my head and told me we now had a perfect date set for killing Leia.

*Ohh, you’re so beautiful, even when you’re scheming. Oh, how divinely valiant you are!*

Jade said that a party was an ideal place to slip poison into my sister’s food or drink without suspicion. I hadn’t even thought of that. *That’s my Jade—he’s so smart.*

Since the food and drink at parties was always tested for poison, the cause of my sister’s death would either remain unknown or House Gilbert would be blamed since they were the ones in charge of catering. Jade explained to me that everything would work out in our favor either way.

*Hee hee hee... And when our plan succeeds, I will be Lord Jade’s bride at last. I can hardly wait!*

When I saw Leia chatting and laughing with Prince Eric and Lord Philip before my very eyes, I could see clearly that the bright future that awaited me was fast approaching.

“Prince Eric, House Gilbert chose this wine especially for this day. Please do

have a taste. It is exquisite.”

Lord Philip offered Prince Eric and my sister glasses of wine. Jade, who had been observing everything from afar, left his post to approach them. He sent a brief glance my way as well, opening and closing his fist quickly. That was our secret signal.

*I understand, my precious. Now is our big chance!*

“Philip, old chum! I’m such a dunce when it comes to wine. Might I have a glass?”

The moment everyone’s eyes looked to Jade, I touched my sister’s glass. Everything was going to plan so far.

The Death Poison only needed an instant to take effect. Two to three minutes after drinking the wine, my sister’s breathing would become labored until it stopped altogether—I had turned her wine to poison.

An ideal poison would have been powerful enough to kill her on contact, but since I only had a second to touch her glass, my spell’s effect was limited. It was still a poison that would kill her in a couple of minutes, though! My sweet Jade had praised me for my brilliance, and I certainly did practice quite a lot to become skilled enough to use this spell.

*O ho ho! Oh, my sweet Leia. Don’t worry, I shall live happily ever after in your stead. Please don’t resent me for it.*

“Jill, would you also like some wine?”

“Yes. Lord Philip, might I please have a glass?”

My careless sister Leia finally noticed my presence and asked me if I wanted a drink of wine. Oh, *sweet* sister, you had *always* looked down on me, and *that* is why you failed to notice what was most important.

If only you had loved me more and not been a *conniving* woman who *robbed* your little sister of everything she’d ever desired, then your life wouldn’t have been cut short.

*I hope you'll reflect on your life's misdeeds as you die in agony from the poison.*

"Ah, you want some wine too, Jill? Very well."

And with that, Lord Philip poured me a glass.

*Oh, I'll gladly drink this wine! When my big sister dies, I must act distressed, act as if I were in danger as well—Jade told me so.*

"Well, I'll take a sip then." Jade took a sip of wine and sent me a signal. "Oh my... I wouldn't expect anything less from House Gilbert's special collection. This is delicious, old chum."

I also took a sip. "It is indeed delicious! Oh, my sweet sister, please *do* have a drink."

*All right, sweet sister, now it's your turn. Drink up. Drink the poisoned wine!*

"Right... I graciously accept the wine."

And with that, my sister put her lips to the wine as I commanded.

*O ho ho ho ho! Oh, you fool of a sister. I truly pity your stupidity! This is merely karma, for cheating your way through life. You deserve to die—my sweet Jade said so.*

Dearest sister...did you have the slightest clue how truly miserable you've made me? Hee hee! If you knew, you could have avoided your fate. *Too late for you now, but I hope you repent in the afterlife.*

*It's over now! My sweet Jade! I've done it!*

My sweet sister Leia! The sister who bested me at *everything* I'd ever tried! At last, I defeated her!

Farewell, my sweet sister. Now I'd relish in a joyful life. At last, I was the star of the story—a true heroine.

So it was true—those with the purest, noblest, and most beautiful lives *did*

prevail in the end. *O God, I thank thee for thy protection. Now I shall become a saint, and I shall offer my eternal prayers unto thee.*

“This wine is delicious. Lord Philip, no gift I give could ever compare to wine so opulent, but might I amuse you with a little magic trick?”

“A magic trick? Huh, I didn’t take you for the performing type, Leia. Well, since you’ve offered, I’d love to see your trick.”

*O ho ho! A magic trick? Sweet sister, you’d best hurry. You won’t be capable of any tricks much longer, for soon you shall die! In a matter of minutes!*

“As you can see, I have here a red ball and a black ball. Lord Philip, please hold on to the red ball.”

“The red ball...got it. Hmm, it feels cold.”

Leia had Lord Philip do something rather strange. I wondered why she made Lord Philip hold a red ball the size of a thumb.

Leia proceeded to show us the black ball in her own hand. “Now, look at the black ball in my hand.”

“H-huh? The color changed to red. How did you do that?”

“Lord Philip, could you open your hand to look at the red ball?”

“What’s this?! M-my ball became black. It’s as if the balls swapped places.”

Hmmm... The balls that Lord Philip and Leia held had swapped places.

*Yes, yes, what an amazing trick that was. It’s no wonder a woman who scammed her way to sainthood can do such sleight of hand.*

She was going to drop dead any moment now. *O ho ho ho.*

“I don’t get it. How did you do that?”

“Why, it’s very easy. I cast a Port spell. I switched the balls faster than you could detect it, Lord Philip.”

“Oh myyy... *Port*, you say! That spell switches the position of two items in the blink of an eye, right? I thought that magic existed only in legend! I didn’t spot it at all! You gave me a fright! Even squeezing it in my hand, I didn’t notice you’d switched the balls!”

*Yes, yes, very well done, sweet sister. What a pity we’re going to lose you. I’m sure you’re very proud that you can use old magic spells like *Port*, but pride goeth before the death. Some help your skills will be then...*

“I’m glad the spell was a success. You see, I was actually worried I wouldn’t succeed, so I practiced it once just a few moments ago.”

“You practiced?”

“Yes, I switched another two items as practice. After you poured the wine, I switched my wine glass with Duke Berklein’s—”

“MMF?!”

*Aha. I see. You still wish to boast about your magic. Goodness, sweet sister, you do nothing but brag—*

“BLEAGHH!!”

*Huh?! Oh?! Er, what’s going on?*

It was so sudden. The color drained from my sweet Jade’s face. Then he doubled over, made a most vulgar retching sound, and tried to eject something from his mouth.

What in the world was he doing? What a waste of a perfectly chiseled face.

### **-Leia’s Perspective-**

**B**EFORE MY VERY EYES, Duke Berklein doubled over, desperately trying to purge the wine from his stomach. Jill looked on, her mouth hanging open. She still didn’t comprehend what had happened.

Her supreme denseness frustrated me at times, but just this once, it didn't matter. My objective was to deliver the message to Duke Berklein, not her. And he received it well, so I'd count that as a win. My eyes looked down at the wretched young man crouched on the floor, ramming his fingers down his throat.

"BLEAGHH!! S-save me! Jill! The antidote! Anti-Poison—hurry!"

So my hunch was right: He'd also made Jill learn the Anti-Poison spell. Like its name implied, Anti-Poison countered the effects of Arc Poison spells. With an antidote, she had a valuable bargaining chip on top of the help it could offer them in case of an unforeseen predicament.

Duke Berklein had not betrayed my expectations; he was incredibly thorough. Although, from how he panicked, he hadn't considered any scenario where *he* wound up being poisoned.

Asking Jill for the antidote was a blunder on his part. He was so confused that he lacked good judgment.

*Sorry, but I'm not letting Jill near you.*

I reached out to grab Jill's right hand.

"Oh, Lord Jade... Anti-Poison, you say? But I put the poison in my *sister's* cup, not yours."

Jill outright confessed. Did she have any compunction at all for attempting to murder me? What's more, she had obviously still not grasped the situation.

"You *idiot!* Read the room! You stupid *bitch!* She just *said* she used Port to put the poison in *my* glass! BLEHHHH!"

"Ohhh, is *that* what happened? But sweet Lord Jade...how can you be so cruel, calling me a stupid bitch. *O-oh-waaahhh...*"

"AAARGGHH! Bloody hell! I d-don't care how you do it—just do it quick! The Anti-Poison!"

Prince Eric and I just stood there in shock as the pair made one confession

after another. A poisoned Berklein, who had completely lost his composure, and a very self-centered Jill were a match made in Hell. Only Jill would slip into her own little world at a time like this.

Berklein's fatal flaw was choosing somebody like Jill to be his pawn. Perhaps they would've failed without our intervention after all. I could've never dreamed their failure would be such a humiliating defeat.

Prince Eric used Jill's confession as a springboard to accuse her accomplice. "Duke Berklein, I cannot ignore the fact that you just said you poisoned Leia. Care to explain yourself?"

"What?! Eric...you bastard! You tricked me! How did you find out my plan?! How dare you switch the poison with Port! You cheats!"

It had taken him a while, but Duke Berklein finally realized he had been duped. If he had felt fine, he would've noticed right after I switched the balls, but he was so flummoxed that his brain probably refused to function.

"It's been a while since you drank that poison," Prince Eric said. "Must be hard to breathe."

"What?! Agh! Koff! Jill! The Anti-Poison! Hurry!"

"Oh waahh," Jill sobbed. "Don't shout! You're scaring meeee!"

Duke Berklein's face twisted with pain—Prince Eric mentioning the poison's effects had jogged his memory. But Jill was already lost in her own world, and she wasn't coming back. Johann stood behind her, ready to restrain her.

"Well, you see what state Jill is in, my lord. But I have an elixir right here. If you admit to using Jill to assassinate me, and if you admit to sending those assassins after Prince Eric, I'll let you have it."

A look of despair filled Duke Berklein's eyes when he realized Jill was incapacitated. But I had offered him a lifeline: an elixir—a legendary potion that cured any ailment. I showed him the tiny vial as I demanded that he confess his crimes.

“A-an elixir, you say?! Aghh! Guhh! I-I confess! I confess, all right! So hurry, give it here!”

He promptly confessed. So he *did* value his life.

“There you have it! A double confession: Jade Berklein conspired to assassinate me and to assassinate Saint Leia, protector of Elshaid at this very party! I want everyone gathered here today to bear witness to his confession!”

All this time, Duke Berklein had sent numerous assassins after Prince Eric. His wicked claws tried to extend all the way to my throat by way of my sister.

He confessed to his crimes at a major social event, under the watchful eye of quite a few lords and ladies of noble rank. In other words, *this* was the irrefutable objective evidence we had been searching for. Since Duke Berklein obediently wasted no time in confessing his crimes, I had a reward for him.

“Th-there! I admit it! I’ve confessed! So hurry, the elixir!”

“Here you go. Drink up.” I handed Berklein the little vial.

“Glug! Glug! Glug! Pffahhh...” He grabbed the vial and gulped it down with indescribable fervor. As he gasped, his thoughts cleared, and he hung his head and muttered, “Wha...what have I done?”

He had finally regained his composure. In doing so, the seriousness of his actions finally dawned on him.

“Jade Berklein, resign yourself to your fate. I’ve suspected you ever since the mysterious suicides of those two officials, and now I’ve finally caught you red-handed.”

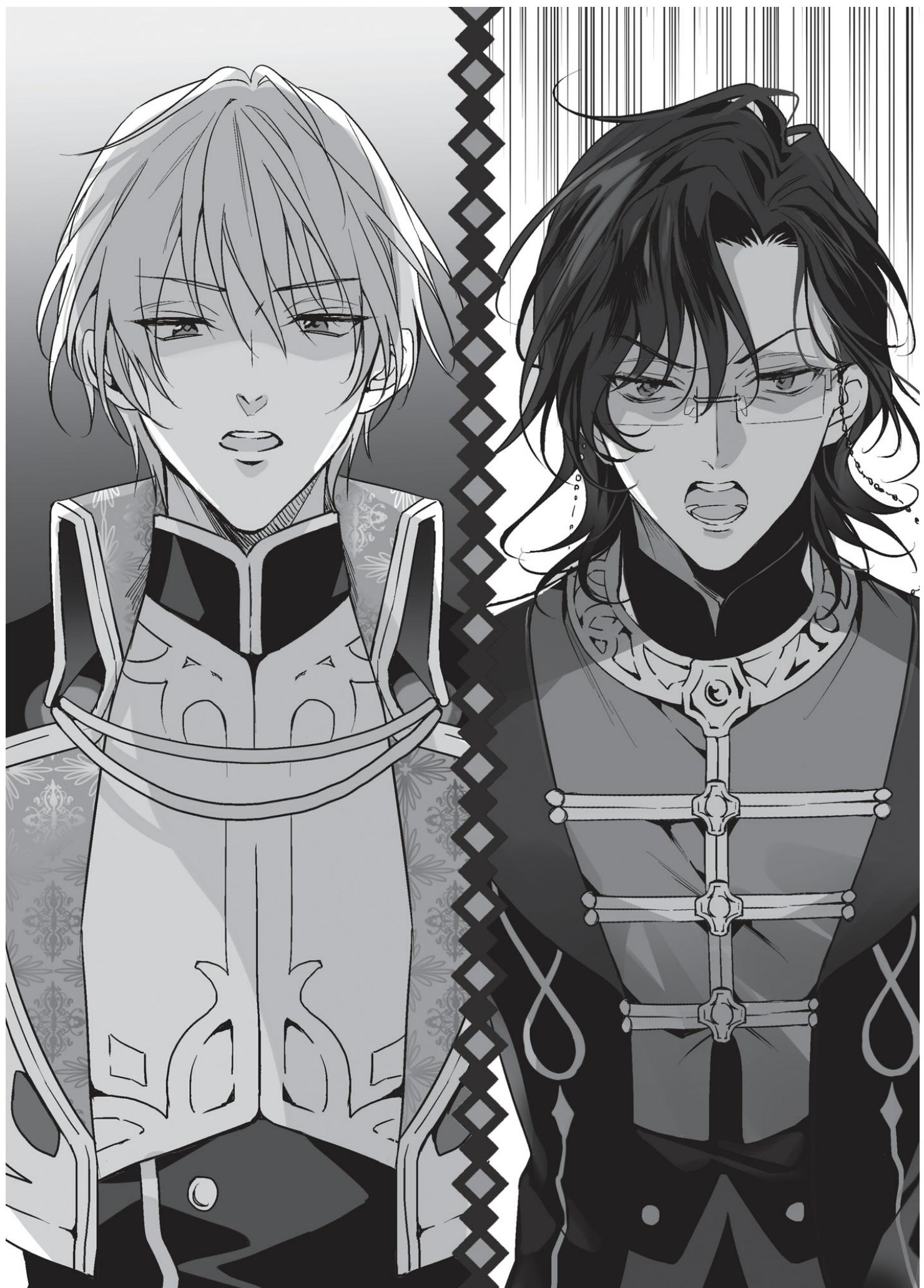
For a long time, Prince Eric had suspected Duke Berklein, but he was unable to take any action. But now he could finally put an end to the sordid affair for good.

“Silence, hypocrite! *You* were the one who killed them! I only bribed them to help some legislation go through! That legislation could have helped so many people!”

The prince said nothing.

“Listen well! Your egotistical sense of *justice* destroyed that legislation! If you hadn’t meddled, I wouldn’t have had what was most precious stolen from me! So I decided to follow my own sense of justice and destroy you! Taking what’s most precious from *you*!”

Berklein snapped at Prince Eric for condemning the two officials he had paid off. I figured they were the precious thing that was stolen from him. When Berklein declared he would steal from Prince Eric to make it right, his eyes were bloodshot. The usual soft-spoken facade was long gone.



Prince Eric cocked an eyebrow. “I don’t quite follow. Rather than protecting those officials, you killed them. I looked over the details of that case one more time, and the means by which they acquired the poison they supposedly used to kill themselves was unknown. Didn’t you use them for some experiment, the same way you used Jill Westoria to test Arc Poison?”

Eric had deduced that the two officials who had both died on the same day had been killed by the same taboo magic Jill used: a powerful Arc Poison spell. The government officials did have some knowledge in magic. They were likely not as proficient in the spell as Jill, but it was probably not all that difficult for them to cast the spell in some form.

But the truth was still unclear—the idea had merely come to him when he learned of the existence of taboo magic the night we shadowed Jill.

“They were *happy* to die for my ideals! They entrusted the future of Elshaid to me! Until their final day, they served me with pride! Goddamnit! If only you weren’t the crown prince! Goddamnit!”

Duke Berklein’s face twisted bitterly as he hurled his grievances at Prince Eric. He could’ve lived according to his own code of honor, but it was unacceptable for him to kill anybody who got in his way. Why had he failed to understand that?

“I’ll hear your grievances as much as you like later. Johann, arrest Jade Berklein and Jill Westoria at once!”

“Yes, sir!”

“Eric Elshaid! You ignorant *child*! You haven’t yet escaped the darkness that plagues this kingdom! You’ll be sorry!”

“Huh?! Er?! Wh-why am I being restrained? M-my sweet sister! Please save me! Oh, Leia!”

Johann commanded the guards on standby to cuff Berklein and Jill and take them away.

The last I saw of Jill was her pleading eyes gazing up at me as they marched her off. I was on the verge of pleading that somebody save me too. I was perplexed by her getting caught up in such a foolish plot.

And thus, with the unprecedeted arrest of Duke Berklein, one of Elshaid's Great Four noble families, the curtain fell on Philip's engagement party.

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The morning after the arrest at the party, I headed to Prince Eric's study as usual.

Duke Berklein was stripped of his title that very day for orchestrating the attempted assassination of Prince Eric. The investigation that followed found that Berklein had burned through all his personal funds to hire assassins from neighboring kingdoms and smuggle them into Elshaid through a special route.

However, my arrival at the palace as Prince Eric's bodyguard, and with it the capture of so many assassins, had forced him into a stalemate.

*It was inevitable, all right. Even nobles from the Great Four don't have an endless supply of wealth.*

Since his assassins were so easily caught, there was no point in sending them anymore. That was what had prompted Berklein to devise a plan to eliminate me. Without me around, he would've been able to have success with Prince Eric's assassination.

That led him to Jill—someone who had failed to become a saint but who had a natural talent for Arc Poison. He already had the ancient text that detailed how to cast forbidden magic, so he used it to teach Death Poison to Jill.

Duke Berklein was driven to desperation, which was why he had fallen into our trap so easily...

"Still, your Port spell was splendid, Lady Leia. You switched your wine glass with Duke Berklein's most impressively."

"Umm...Johann, sorry, but you're mistaken. The truth is: I cannot use the Port

spell that well. Or rather, I can't use the spell without anyone noticing."

"What?!"

Johann had praised my Port spell, but the truth was, it was all a ruse. I was not skilled enough to switch the glasses of someone so quick that they wouldn't notice. For that matter, I didn't know if the Port spell actually existed. Legends told of a powerful mage in the past who used it, nothing more.

"You see, those balls were magic toys I made—they change colors with temperature. They're red when cold, but they turn black when they're heated up. When Lord Philip held his ball, it turned black. Meanwhile, I used magic to chill my ball and turn it red. I merely made it appear as though we had switched balls."

"After seeing Philip's reaction and hearing Leia's lie about practicing the spell on his wine glass, he jumped to the conclusion that he had been poisoned."

In other words, Duke Berklein never drank the poison to begin with. In believing he had, he had exposed himself. It was a reaction only somebody who knew the true terror of Death Poison would make. Attempting to vomit made him short of breath, and since he was probably also mildly intoxicated from the wine, it would be difficult for him to discern if there were any other symptoms.

And Prince Eric had planned all of it. We learned from the documents of the two dead bureaucrats that victims of Death Poison died by suffocation.

"N-now I see. But wait, Lady Leia, wouldn't that mean you drank the poisoned wine?"

"No, I switched my wine glass with Prince Eric's the minute Jill took hers and everyone was focused on her."

Prince Eric chimed in, "I had broached the subject of wine to Duke Gilbert earlier, so I knew that he would have some on hand. I also knew that Jill Westoria and Duke Berklein would both rush to the wine to drink it as soon as it was produced. The former, so she could poison it, and the latter, so he could

evade suspicion.”

When Jill latched on to Lord Philip’s wine and when Duke Berklein’s lips touched his glass, the battle was already over.

The moment Duke Berklein thought he was victorious was the moment he was defeated.

“S-so, was the elixir also a lie, Lady Leia?”

“Of course. It was just water.”

“Leia’s a great actress, isn’t she? I was pleasantly surprised by her unexpected talent.”

Truth be told, I had put quite a lot of work into my acting. Prince Eric warned me that it would be crucial, so we had rehearsed—and he scolded me quite a lot along the way. Prince Eric was truly uncompromising. Since I wasn’t comfortable with lying to begin with, his overwhelming pressure only added to my anxiety.

After I revealed my tricks to Johann, I prepared to depart. I had an urgent matter: a report that I needed to deliver to my family. They needed to learn of Jill’s fate and what was to become of House Westoria moving forward.

Prince Eric told me I could send someone in my place, but it was my duty to deal with the matter myself.

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“Ooh, Leia! Welcome home! You are our only hope! Please save House Westoria! Please protect us!”

“Oh, Leia, you are the pride and joy of House Westoria, doing such a splendid job as Crown Prince Eric’s esteemed bodyguard—unlike Jill, who’s always been a disappointment to her parents.”

The moment I arrived at my family abode, my father, who never so much as

ventured to the front door, and my stepmother, who never discussed anything with me other than Jill, rushed to welcome me.

In the aftermath of Jill's attempt to poison me, a saint and Prince Eric's bodyguard, she was sent to the dungeon. This of course was only to be expected, but it still plunged our family into a crisis. That being said, since I, the target, was also a Westoria, our house narrowly escaped complete financial and social ruin.

Berklein had plotted high treason, whereas Jill's crime was merely attempted murder. Under strict interpretations of the law, Jill was guilty as Berklein's coconspirator, but Prince Eric had been more lenient with her for my sake.

When the guards took her away, Jill cried like a lost little girl. Until the very end, she still couldn't abandon her tragic heroine persona. She was a victim—a poor sweet girl who was unfairly accused.

"Waaahhh," she had whined. "If only Leia hadn't become a saint... Hic! Hic... If only she hadn't gotten so close to Prince Eric, then I could have had a *happy* ending. Hic! Oh, my sweet Jade...how *cruel* of you. You *promised* you would make me happy..."

Even after she was placed in her cell, Jill didn't stop crying. She blamed everything on others and was impossible to deal with during her interrogation. I wanted her to repent, but I didn't know what I could do to get her to understand.

Her trial wouldn't be held until after all of Berklein's further crimes were exposed, so it would likely be a while yet. It was my hope as her big sister that this would give her time to cool her head and come to terms with her wrongdoings.

"We understand about Jill, so please, put in a good word for us, Leia? Please make Prince Eric spare our family!"

"Prince Eric has surely taken a liking to you," my stepmother chimed in. "If he'll marry you, do it quick and seal the deal. Now that we've lost Duke Gilbert's

backing, this is the only way we can save our lands!"

My parents, who hadn't even bothered to visit Jill in her cell, were trying to curry favor with Prince Eric through me. I boiled with anger. It was their fault for raising Jill that way in the first place. Now, more than ever, shouldn't they be doing everything in their power to help her?

"But *you both* enabled Jill's selfish ways!"

"What?!" they gasped in unison.

"Jill wasn't always like that! Don't you feel *any* responsibility for her crimes?! And you call yourselves *parents*?!"

Before I realized it, I was shouting. I couldn't forgive them for being nothing but selfish.

"Leia! W-watch your mouth, young lady! You're blaming us?! How *dare* you lecture your own parents!"

"If you want me to treat you like parents, it's about time you start acting like parents. I'm ready to sever ties with you at a moment's notice."

"H-hey now! Leia! Don't go! F-forget I said that! The prince! Prince Eric—he doesn't need to hear about any of this!"

I let my father's flustered words hang in the air as I left the house.

*I don't know when I'll ever visit this house again. I might never come back.*

In the end, my parents never really loved me *or* Jill. If they had given their poor daughter even an ounce of proper guidance, this whole tragedy could've been averted.

As the early summer's sunbeams radiated down on me, I got in my carriage and left.

## Epilogue

THREE DAYS HAD PASSED since my visit home. I had snapped at my parents in a temper, but they showed no signs of retaliating. They also still hadn't gone to visit Jill; most likely, they decided to wash their hands of her.

I was on my break, drinking tea in the prince's study as per usual, while contemplating my parents' behavior. At that moment, Prince Eric spoke to me, saying something I never would have expected.

"Leia, His Majesty wants to see you."

"His Majesty wants to see me?"

An audience with the king of Elshaid—Sigfried Elshaid—came to me out of the blue. This would be my first time since arriving at the palace to be graced by his royal countenance.

Kings weren't people you could just go up and talk to on a whim. It was strange enough already that I spoke with Crown Prince Eric daily and saw Prince Dale from time to time as well. What could His Majesty the King possibly want from me?

*Is he planning to relieve me from my duty, since Prince Eric is no longer the target of assassins?*

That was quite feasible. It was already most out of the ordinary that I, a saint, was acting as Prince Eric's bodyguard. I told Prince Eric my theory to get his opinion.

"Hmm, relieving you of duty, eh? I doubt it. He hasn't relieved Lingsha of duty."

"Eric, hey! What is it that you mean by that? Your Lingsha works harder to serve you than the ocean is deep!"

Prince Eric used Lingsha as an example to prove that the king never

intervened regarding bodyguards. And Lingsha was indeed strong—she would have to be to escape the chaos in her country. Her keen sense of danger was also an invaluable asset as a bodyguard. Though her tendency to take things too far had put her on house arrest when I'd first arrived at the palace.

"My father told me to put my life in the hands of those I trust the most. Johann, Lingsha, and you, Leia—though I met you all through different means, you are all people I chose out of trust. I wouldn't let anyone speak ill of you, not even my father."

Prince Eric gently rested a hand on my shoulder, his kind words sinking into my heart. Why is it that Prince Eric's words were always so easy to trust?

"I suppose my worries were in vain. Sorry I asked such a strange question, Your Highness."

"Don't apologize. Then again, I must admit I was a little worried you might want to quit being my bodyguard. I need you, so please, stay with me."

"I don't deserve such praise..."

Prince Eric only kept bodyguards whom he trusted with his life, and I was one of them. He said he needed me...though I supposed he meant that he needed my saintly powers. Regardless of his reasons, I was still happy to hear it. Prince Eric's trust was a greater honor than any medal could ever bestow.

As we continued to talk, the time of my audience with the king grew closer, so Prince Eric and I departed together to go see His Majesty.

"Um, Your Highness, shouldn't we go to His Majesty's audience chamber?"

"I also assumed it would be there, but we'll be speaking to Father in his private quarters instead."

I was initially confused when Prince Eric started to take me downstairs to see His Majesty. I had never been down these stairs, and certainly not to the private quarters to which they led. I wondered what sort of room the king would be

waiting for us in.

“Father, I’ve brought Saint Leia Westoria to see you.”

There was a door at the foot of the staircase. Prince Eric knocked on it, then brought me inside.

“Ahh, no need to be so formal. Relax. Raise your heads.”

I looked up, and there was His Majesty the King. Naturally, Prince Eric and I were both kneeling. There were three seats around a round table. There was no other furniture in the tiny room. It was simple in every way.

I couldn’t believe this was the king’s private chamber. I was more nervous than I thought I would be, my heart racing so fast I found it difficult to breathe. I was nervous because I had assumed that, since His Majesty had sat by in silence while his son was the target of assassins, he had to be a rather strict gentleman.

But when he told me to raise my head, I had to obey. He had black hair, unlike Eric’s and Dale’s silver locks, but there was a distinct resemblance to the two princes in his facial features as he sat on his chair and looked at me. Seeing him in this light, he seemed a lot younger than his years.

“Lady Leia, your actions in this crisis were quite noble! You put your life on the line to lure Berklein into giving the irrefutable evidence we needed to catch him. We would not have been able to expose and stop his evil without your bravery. You did all of this while your own sister was threatening your life, knowing full well that this would bring disgrace upon your own family. I commend your incredible spirit!”

“Your Majesty, I was merely performing my duty as Prince Eric’s bodyguard. My actions were anything but commendable.”

His Majesty praised me, in particular my selfless devotion to obtaining evidence to arrest Berklein and my acceptance of my sister’s murderous intentions toward me in spite of how the problems directly jeopardized the reputation of House Westoria.

As far as I was concerned, my duty as a bodyguard came first, so I could see no other possible path. I was flattered by His Majesty's praise, but I did not deserve it.

"Well, enough ceremony. Now that I have you here, let's talk openly as friends. Lady Leia, I thank you deeply for protecting my son. I am so afraid of the chaos that Elshaid is falling into that I'm unable to match my son's spirit of righteousness!"

His Majesty rose from his chair and walked over to me. As I listened to him, his eyes filled with tears, I sensed a deep paternal love from him.

"Y-Your Majesty?"

"Lady Leia, please, keep taking care of my son—as a saint and as his bodyguard! All I can do is beg humbly, but please support Eric in his quest for good."

As the king took my hand, the tears rolled down his cheeks. His tears expressed a tenderness that words could not. I knew Prince Eric felt it too.

*His Majesty was Prince Eric's biggest believer.*

Learning this gave me new confidence. His Majesty's hand was so warm.

"Father, your praise flatters me, but this is rather unnatural—and why in front of Leia?"

This was a good question. According to Eric, His Majesty hadn't lifted a finger in response to all the assassination attempts on his son. There had to be some reason the exposure of Berklein's crimes made him able to speak freely, but what was it? That was what Prince Eric found perplexing. Why was his Majesty divulging all of this now? And why in front of me?

"We are about to punish Berklein, one of the Great Four. Elshaid will surely fall into chaos. I kept a quiet watch on you all this time, so I could determine your capabilities, but that is no longer necessary."

We waited for him to continue.

“I gathered that Lady Leia had become a very important part of your life, that’s why I brought her here. I wanted her to know everything I had to say, including the plan I’m about to describe.”

“What plan?”

His Majesty declared that there would be civil unrest after Duke Berklein was sentenced and that he no longer needed to remain silent to placate the Great Four.

*I suppose he’s right. Prince Eric no longer has a reason to stay silent either.*

The king had some sort of plan that he wanted me to know about. What was this *plan* that he had summoned me here for...?

“The special rights granted to the Great Four—I’m going to repeal them. In my name.”

The prince and I gasped. His Majesty the King was going to repeal all the special rights granted to the Great Four—in other words, all the dukes.

*I’m certain His Majesty understands the magnitude of what he suggests. If he follows through with his plan, he’ll incur the wrath of not just Duke Berklein but of all the other great noble houses as well.*

The special rights of dukes were the right to directly appoint government officials, the authority to establish unique laws in their own lands, and various tax exemptions that lower-level nobles did not receive.

Revocation of these rights was one of the goals Prince Eric had hoped to achieve because he believed it was those privileges that had led Elshaid astray.

Since the direct appointment of government officials could be conducted without exams—a simple approval from one of the Great Four being sufficient—it had become a hotbed for corruption. But there was only one entity in Elshaid who was capable of revoking those rights: His Majesty the King.

Prince Eric’s first order of business as king would’ve been to do just that, which was why he had become an enemy of the elite noble families. The

revocation of those special rights, which would've all but guaranteed rebellion, was about to be enacted by the king himself.

Even Prince Eric was taken by surprise. "Father...do you understand what you're proposing? If you do that, you'll all but guarantee—"

"Yes, assassins will surely come for me. Even if I decree the revocation of these special rights today, it will take a month before the change goes into effect. Then, once they've killed me, you would become their next target."

"So even with Duke Berklein imprisoned, you and I will still be in danger..."

"Dale is conducting a secret investigation. He's publicly playing the role of a prince friendly to the dukes. They haven't exposed themselves yet, but there is one other person besides Berklein who has been trying to kill you, and this person is likely the true mastermind."

Prince Eric and I gasped.

Not only Duke Berklein, but another duke was trying to kill Prince Eric as well. It was enough of an astonishing revelation on its own, but I couldn't believe that Prince Dale had been investigating it.

"D-Dale was doing all this for me...but why?! I was going to revoke the special rights after I became king and take responsibility for it then."

"*That's* why. When you become king, I don't want to leave you any hardship. This is my final wish."

I could see the steely resolve in the king's face. He had placed a wager on Prince Eric. If Prince Eric were successful in creating a stir among the upper nobility, the king was prepared to take care of everything else himself.

"Eric, you're a sharp man. I think you know what my revoking their special rights means," the king said.

Sadly, even I knew what it meant, and I knew why he had wanted me to hear his plan.

"You want to take this opportunity to remove all the malcontents—we have

one month to do this. This will without a doubt instill an urgency in them to kill you before that month ends. And you want me to arrest them all, not overlooking a single troublemaker...correct?"

"Exactly. Once you've accomplished that, not a soul will be able to object to you becoming king. You and Leia will purge this kingdom of all its rot! We will give hope to the next generation!"

The king's final wish was a spectacular notion: introducing hope to Elshaid's future.

The day my engagement was broken and Prince Eric first approached me, I never would have dreamed I would be included in such a noble goal.

After our audience with the king concluded, Prince Eric and I took a stroll around the palace garden. Roses of white and pink proudly decorated it. The gardeners here were quite remarkable at their jobs.

Without my noticing it, the seasons were changing. It seemed that only yesterday my skin tingled in the cold air, but now we stood beneath a clear blue sky. Eric's silver locks gleamed even brighter under the sun.

"I'm sorry I caused you so much turmoil," he said.

"Prince Eric..."

With a wistful smile on his lips, Prince Eric looked at me. I lost my breath in his deep, ocean-blue gaze as I waited for him to speak. What was on his mind?

"Leia Westoria!"

"Y-yes?!"

Prince Eric suddenly clasped my hand. And as I stammered, he said earnestly, "Forget what my father said, about you being with me as a saint or as a bodyguard. That's not what I want. I want *you* to be by my side of your own free will."

“M-my own free will...Your Highness?”

“You might find yourself in even greater danger in the coming days—I’m *certain* you will. But I have faith that you can change this kingdom, that you can make my dreams come true. So please...won’t you indulge my selfish little request?”

He really was being selfish, so I didn’t know how to answer him. I was ashamed of myself for getting my hopes up. Still, the prince confused me. I was going to be by his side regardless, be it as a saint or as his bodyguard, so why would he need to make that distinction?

Prince Eric sometimes let his own sense of justice control him until he was blind to everything else around him, and I just couldn’t abandon him.

“I will gladly stay by your side for a while longer. By my own free will too, of course. I’d stay even if you didn’t want me to.”

“Leia...”

“In exchange, I ask that you give me a front row seat. Let me watch your ideal world come to fruition.”

“It’s a promise. And I want you by my side when that day comes.”

The darkness writhing beneath the surface of Elshaid had not yet fully been revealed, but I had faith that this crown prince with his trademark sense of justice would soon shine light upon this kingdom.

As the sweet smell of roses embraced me, I was filled with the conviction that a bright future awaited me.

## Side Story 1: Lingsha and Johann Holding Down the Fort

“**L**ADY LINGSHA, while Prince Eric and Lady Leia are away on their spy mission, let’s do our best to hold down the fort.”

Eric and Leia went out “spying.” What a shame.

I had planned on playing cards with Leia, and I was now very bored. Oh, yes.

But I’d do my best at holding down the fort. Eric could rest easy.

“Of course. I’ll *blast* away any bad guys who show up, yes, I will! I’ll make Leia and Eric so happy.”

“Indeed. We shall dispose of any fiends who mistake us for Prince Eric—but in a way that will *not* reveal his absence.”

*I’ll just knock ‘em out before they notice. Problem solved!*

I knew the secret Whack of the Ren Empire, yes I did! One whack and all memories were blasted out of your head.

“Still, look at us, alone in Prince Eric’s study. It feels...abnormal... In a good way, though. Since we cannot leave this room, I’ll conduct my daily training in here.”

Johann started doing his one-armed push-ups, like he always did.

Whenever he had a free moment, he exercised. Every. Single. Day. He ate nothing but chicken for every meal too. I’d started to worry that he’d grow feathers one day and turn into a bird himself.

“Hurrumph! Hurrumph! Lady Lingsha! Would you! Please! Hop on! My back?!”

“I’m not the henpecking type—no sir! Be modest in all things, that’s my motto. Ask some other harlot instead.”

*Johann's a pervert, asking me to sit on his back out of nowhere!*

Johann had better look for somebody else to play deviant games with him after Eric returned. *Why'd ya have to ask me this exact moment?*

"It isn't what you think! I just want you to help with my training. I'll build bigger muscles with a heavy weight on my back."

So he wanted me as a weight, I see. *Oh dear, Lingsha, you've misjudged the poor man.*

But how rude of him to have called a young lady like me a heavy weight! Oh yes, Johann's lack of tact sometimes hurt.

"Yes, if I must."

*I'm bored anyway; I might as well help Johann with his training.*

By now, Johann was doing push-ups using only his middle finger. I jumped on his back—oh yes, it was a much smoother ride than I expected.

"Nngh! This is! A rather! Heavy! Weight! Lingsha! You may not look it! But you're actually—"

"If you say *heavy*, I'll cry, yes!"

"Yes, my lady! Do forgive me!"

Oh, I shot Johann a death glare before he could say something tactless again, yes, I did. That man just never learned. That was why he was still not married.

"Humph! Humph!"

Still, I admired his passion for strengthening himself every day to protect Eric, oh yes.

He was a good, hard worker. We had a saying in the Ren Empire: "A thousand years on a bed of nails." Strong endurance was a good thing, oh yes.

"Prince Eric! Do you have a minute? It's Schneider! Prince Eric!"

After three whole hours helping Johann with his training, there was a knock at the door and a man yelling.

Did a bad guy show up? Lingsha would take care of him, oh yes.

“Oh dear, Sir Schneider is here. He’s one of Gilbert’s officials...”

“That’s strange... There’s no answer. Are you unable to leave your study? Is everything all right? Should I just let myself in?”

Johann’s face blanched. I thought something bad was happening, oh yes.

*But don’t worry, you’ve got Lingsha on your side.*

“Um, Prince Eric! I’d like you to look over this bill for the dam repair! Er, what? Nobody’s—”

“You’re wide open, oh yes!”

“*Biff?!*”

“Lady Lingshaaa—”

When the suspicious man came in, I whacked the back of his neck. What a pathetic man—he was just begging to be attacked. *All the beheadings a girl could dream of, oh yes!*

“Wh-what have you done?! Schneider is not an assassin!”

“I know, I know. But Eric said not to let anybody notice he was gone, yes? So I knock out everyone who comes in. Problem solved.”

“Aghhh... Yes, I suppose that’s one way of doing it, but to incapacitate an official just doing his job? You’ve gone too far!”

*Johann. Don’t underestimate me. At a glance, I can tell this guy isn’t an assassin, oh no.*

But it was the only way to keep our promise to Eric.

“Nn-nng!”

“Ack! I didn’t whack hard enough. One more whack for you, okay?”

“Please, handle this without violence, for God’s sake!”

I would let him go. If I struck the final blow, Eric couldn’t rest at ease. *Johann, restrain that freakish strength of yours. He’s waking up, you see.*

“Ah! Wh-what am I doing here?!”

“Well, hello there, Schneider. Come to see me about something?”

“Prince Eric? Er, I’m not sure, really. I blacked out, and now I’m here.”

Eric and Leia had returned. Good thing they came through the window, oh yes. Now nobody noticed they were gone.

“L-Lady Lingsha, Schneider says he doesn’t remember how he got here. Did you do something to him?”

“Oh, I just used an ancient acupuncture technique from the Ren Empire. You *whack* the memory pressure point, and it erases all your recent memory, yes!”

“Urrk! The Ren Empire...a force to be feared...”

I had so much fun with everyone, yes, yes. So I’d keep protecting Eric.

*I’ll blast away all your enemies and keep my master’s teachings alive!*

## Side Story 2: Johann's Errand

“YOU WISH FOR ME to go to the capital to buy...sweets, Your Highness?”

“Yes, sorry for the sudden errand. Lingsha is suspended, so it has to be you.”

*Hmm...now what a troubling state of affairs. Lady Lingsha is usually the one who buys refreshments for company, but she's currently on house arrest for misbehaving.*

His Highness was quite careful when it came to anything he or his guests would consume. He always sent someone he trusted to buy them as swiftly as possible, but unfortunately, the only person who had this duty thus far was Lingsha.

“You look displeased. Don’t want to go?”

“Preposterous! Don’t suggest such a thing, Your Highness.”

*Oh dear, how careless of me, to let my true emotions show on my face. My training is far from complete.*

Lady Lingsha was in charge of sweets, and I preferred salty and spicy treats. *Still, one mustn’t underestimate the errand of buying sweets.* When it came to sweets, there was more than what met the eye.

For a start, everyone had their own unique tastes, so when selecting sweets for company, one had to make an effort to avoid *dislikes*. That alone would’ve been a daunting task, but when one added in the stipulation that we also had to cater to the many different preferences in the population, it became quite the ordeal. After all, many people in this world disliked sweets.

Lady Lingsha utilized her divine sense of smell to identify and purchase the highest quality goods. According to rumor, she had an information network of several friends in the city. But I had no such divine sense. In other words, if I

were to buy His Highness the quality of sweets to which he had grown accustomed...

“I shall have to hit the streets. I shall taste everything at random until I find a sweet that speaks to me.”

When I reached the royal capital market, I opted to sample the sweets from one end of the street to the other, until I found the perfect treat.

*Hmm... I believe this corner is where Lady Lingsha makes many purchases. An array of sweet smells assaulted my nostrils. I suppose I shall enter the first shop.*

“Well, hello there, Knight of the Order. What’ll it be today?”

Since the uniforms for Prince Eric’s bodyguards and the Order of Elshaid Knights looked quite similar, I did not blame the shopkeeper for making that mistake and felt no need to correct him. I was in a hurry.

“I wish to purchase sweets for company. Might you have anything basic which serves that purpose?”

“Company sweets, sir? Ah yes, well, madeleines are our specialty, might I recommend them?”

“*Ma-dull-inns?* Ah, you mean these shell-shaped cookies... Hmm... Aha! The rich aroma of butter stimulates the appetite.”

The shopkeeper recommended a treat called the madeleine. Upon closer observation, they were familiar to me. Lady Lingsha had bought these treats in the past. I had possibly found a winner on my very first try.

“Would you like to taste one, Sir Knight?”

“What?! Oh, well, thank you. I shall.”

I grabbed a madeleine and took a bite.

*Crunch! Fluff! Meeeelt.*

“Mmf?!”

It was an astonishing texture. Just as my teeth broke through the crisp

exterior, the fluffy cake interior filled my mouth with softness and the savory-sweet butter melted onto my tongue—in a mere instant, the textures and flavors laid siege to my palate.

If I had to make a comparison, it had the light crispness of a cookie and the moistness of a cake. It was like two swords of differing alloys had been thrust into my mouth.

The most notable quality was the butter. It was the scent of the butter that had taken my nose captive at the very start. Its aroma was so powerful that it made me wonder if butter was a madeleine's soulmate. In that moment, the vicissitudes of life had become indifferent to me.

It was not too sweet, and yet, it was by no means *not* sweet. It was truly a modest sweetness. An unsung hero that uplifted the flavor and texture.

*This confectionery very well may have changed my way of life as a bodyguard...*

“Sir Knight...are you crying?”

“Er, no... I am merely sweating from my eyes. I suffer from hyperhidrosis.”

“Aha...”

*Oh dear, oh dear, I've let my emotions carry me away on a sea of deliciousness. I suppose I shall buy this. No, no, I couldn't select the treat after visiting only one shop—far too careless!*

“Sir Knight...what do you think? How many boxes would you like?”

“I'd like ten, please.”

“T-ten whole boxes, Sir Knight?!”

*Oh dear. I accidentally purchased ten boxes! Perhaps I'm just not much for planning.*

But that just went to show how sensational those madeleines were.

It would be all right, I thought. These madeleines were top notch. I decided to

check out the other shops out of principle but doubted that I would find another sweet that surpassed it.

“What a divine flavor! This baked cheese tart...it is a sophisticated symphony of sweet and tangy! It has no parallel! I shall take ten boxes!”

“You have no idea the regret I feel, living my whole life having never tasted scones until today! I’ll take ten boxes! Ten boxes of those cookies as well!”

“Yum-yummy-yum!!! Th-these dark sugar buns...the combination of brown sugar and tea is so *heavenly* it cannot be denied! I’ll take ten boxes!”

*Oh dear, now I’ve done it. I’d let the allure of sweetness beguile me into buying a ridiculous plethora of confections. I had no idea such a beast lurked within me. I couldn’t let Prince Eric see evidence of my disgraceful behavior. What ever shall I do...*

I supposed that I had no alternative. I knew what I had to do.

I took the long way back to Prince Eric’s study.

“Johann, thanks for running that errand for me. Saint Leia loved the refreshments yesterday.”

“I don’t deserve such praise, Your Highness. I am your loyal servant. If you have a problem, I shall gladly overcome any obstacle to solve it for you.”

Thank goodness. I heard yesterday that Saint Leia would be joining his team of bodyguards. I had no idea those refreshments would be for her, but since she loved them, it made all that effort worthwhile.

“On a different note, Johann, there was one thing that I found curious.”

“Do tell, Your Highness?”

“I’m not sure why, but everyone I passed today smiled and said, ‘Thanks, it was delicious.’ Any idea why?”

I didn't say a word about what happened.

"I suspect it might be some new stratagem from the assassins."

I distributed the extra sweets I purchased to people at the palace. They were very well received, and since I paid for them with bodyguard funds, I'd told everyone they were a gift from Prince Eric...

*Oh dear. Now they've thanked His Highness personally for it.*

In the end, I broke my silence and confessed to the prince that I had purchased too many sweets in the capital. He laughed and forgave me, but I thought it better that Lady Lingsha handle the sweets from now on. Otherwise, I feared I would become quite plump.

## Side Story 3: Prince Eric's Fifth Birthday

I AM THE CROWN PRINCE. Since I was the firstborn son, my father, the king, promised that he would hand over the throne to me someday. Going forward, it was my duty to protect this kingdom. My father said the king was a protector of the kingdom, and so I had to be a very good boy. I had to study hard, make my body strong, and become a great grown-up so I could serve my kingdom as soon as possible.

When I told my father this, he was quite pleased. He tousled my hair and said, "I can't wait to see the great man you become, Eric."

"I guess I just *have* to grow up as quickly as possible, don't I? Then I'm gonna help my father. Hey, Johann, when am I gonna be a man? If I could become one in a week, that'd be a big help."

"Hmm... Being a child myself, I do not know the answer. In the Olbrun style of fencing, I cannot be considered a man until I best my father in a mock duel. As you have yet to best me in a duel, Your Highness, I'm afraid you won't become a man for quite some time."

*Ooh, Johann, you meanie!* He didn't have to make fun of me just because he was better with the sword than I was. *I'm gonna turn five years old in two days, you know. Then I'll only be three years younger than you. I'm gonna beat you in a duel—just you wait and see!*

"What makes a man? What do I have to do to become one?"

What *was* a grown-up anyway? When would I be one? I studied lots, and I could read difficult books now. I could multiply three-digit numbers too. And I was a good swordfighter! I couldn't beat Johann, but I'd defeated grown-up pupils before. I was strong!

"Come to think of it, my father was drinking a *premium* wine the other day.

He seemed to be enjoying it immensely, so I asked him for a sip, but he said no."

"What's that got to do with me?"

Johann, you braggart, why'd you hafta bring up wine out of nowhere? My father loved wine too. He even had a whole room for wine. But what'd that have to do with anything? Why did it matter if our fathers liked wine?

"Well, my father said that wine is a *grown-up* drink. In other words, he meant it was a drink meant for adults."

"Ooh!"

*Johann, you're the best! You gave me just the answer I was looking for.* Okay, so wine was the secret... If I drank wine, I'd become a man.

What a great secret I just learned! Logically, if I drank wine *now*, I could become a man right away.

"Johann, would you like to drink some wine?"

"Your Highness, were you not listening? Only grown-ups can drink wine."

"Yeah, and *I'm* saying I wanna be a grown-up. I'm gonna be five years old in two days. That's perfect! I'll become a grown-up on my fifth birthday. Johann, let us become men together."

"Ah, I see. So that's what you meant. In that case, I shall join you in this endeavor. My father told me I must obey every wish Your Highness commands."

I'd made up my mind: I was gonna drink wine and become a man. Just to be on the safe side, I would wait until I turned five. If I did it while I was still four, I could've had some traces of childhood left in me.

I couldn't wait until the day after tomorrow. I needed to be sure to steal the keys from my servant Jeffrey without getting caught...

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“Your Highness, don’t you think it’s wrong to steal keys from Sir Jeffrey?”

“Oh, poo! I’m gonna become a man and serve my kingdom. What’s wrong about wanting to grow up as soon as possible?”

If I drank wine, I’d be a grown-up. I was so happy to finally find a way to become a man, I couldn’t contain myself. I wanted to show my father how grown-up I was and surprise him. If it meant I had to get yelled at for stealing keys, so be it.

“Say, Johann, there’s a lot of wine in this room... Which one should we drink?”

“I’m not sure. However, this bottle resembles the *premium* wine my father was drinking.”

“*Premium* means something is good, right? Okay, Johann, I’ll drink that one. Gimme a boost.”

“Yes, Your Highness!”

Johann was very strong. He placed me on his shoulders with ease.

“Humph! Is this enough, Your Highness?”

“Hmm, a little more to the right? Oh, too far. A little to the left.”

“Nnngh... Prince Eric, please hurry, I can’t hold you much longer.”

“Sorry, a little to the right...right... Okay, stop!”

Johann’s efforts were rewarded; I got the *premium* wine. But how were you meant to open this thing?

“Say, Johann. I got the wine, but...”

“Prince Eric, I’ve brought the tool my father used to open the wine. Allow me to open it for you.”

“Gee, you’re so reliable. I hope you stay with me forever and ever.”

“I would gladly stay by your side regardless, Prince Eric. Urghh—ah! Your Highness, now we can drink the wine.”

Johann pulled the cork out of the bottle. He really was so amazing. He had my respect.

*I feel so much better knowing he'll become a man with me. Okay, let's drink! Chug it down! All riiight...*

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“To be honest, I don’t remember what happened immediately after that. But Johann and I both got a great scolding.”

“Oh dear, ha ha ha, I sympathize with poor Johann.”

“I’m so glad you understand, Lady Leia. I was a victim of Prince Eric’s mischief.”

“Hey, you’re older than me. You should have had the sense to stop me.”

I knew Leia would laugh at me. Though...I got to see her smile, so I couldn’t exactly say that was a bad thing.

Though Johann was right, he really had had his hands full with me all those years. I needed to give him some time off—enough time for him to take a nice leisurely vacation.

It wouldn’t be for a while, though. *I can’t achieve my goals without your constant support.*

## Afterword

**F**IRSTLY, THANK YOU for purchasing the first volume of this series. When you take my other web series into account, the order changes a little, but this marks my fourth series for commercial release. Given that, you'd think I would be comfortable writing afterwords by now, but I'm clueless as to what I should say...

Anyway, I'm just gonna be basic and tell you what my inspiration for this series was. My inspiration was the character of Jill. As a rule, I tend to think up characters I like and build the story around them, but this was the first time I wanted to write a story around a villainess who stole the heroine's fiancé. She's a shameful but cute little sister with pink hair who uses her tears as a weapon and interprets everything in a way that suits her. I had to see just how much she could annoy the readers, and how much I could change that annoyance to laughter in the climax. She was a thoroughly enjoyable character to write.

Since Jill was like that, I knew right away that I needed to make the heroine, Leia, earnest and determined with a strong sense of self. And I knew Eric needed to be strong to balance out Jill, so I made him a prince with an excessive sense of righteousness that made him a daily target of assassins.

Then there's the bodyguards, Lingsha and Johann. I just filled them both with everything I personally like to see in characters. I especially love Lingsha. After all, I am but a selfish creature who must have comic relief in my stories, no matter how serious they may be, so I had Lingsha take on that task all by herself.

Writing the side stories really made me like Johann. He's ruggedly kind, but a bit odd at times, and I think he's pretty easy to like.

I don't usually talk much about my characters, but this time I put a lot of thought into making my characters different and unique, so that's why I focused

this afterward on that. Anyway, let me wrap this up by saying I hope a lot of people pick up a copy of this book and read it. And once again, to my dear readers, thank you so much for reading. May we meet again!

**—KOKI FUYUTSUKI**



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