



Bibliophile Princess

7

**The Blue Sky Compass
and the Spring Bird**

Author: Yui
Illustrator: Satsuki Sheena



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Character Profiles

Christopher

Crown Prince of the Sauslind Kingdom. He's Elianna's betrothed and loves her dearly. His feelings are often so strong they rage out of control, but he is normally very noble and wise. He has a promising future ahead of him.

Elianna

Prince Christopher's fiancée and the daughter of a marquess. She loves books so much it has earned her the nickname "Bibliophile Princess." Years ago she was known as the "Library Ghost," so she actually much prefers this new one.

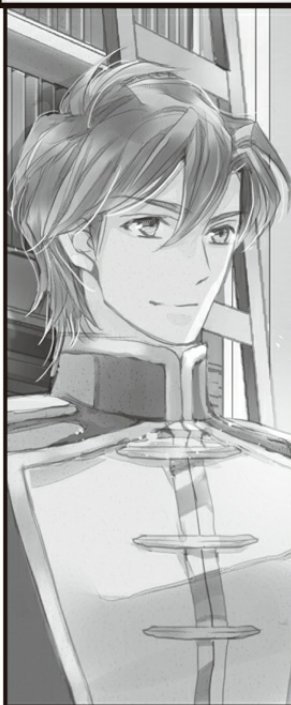


Alexei

Heir to an earldom and the prince's reliable right-hand man. He is equally frigid toward any women who approach, which has earned him the epithet "Ice Scion."

Glen

Part of the prince's inner circle. He's a knight in the imperial guard as well as the prince's bodyguard. Often finds himself the victim of the prince's misdirected frustration and anger.



Irvin

The fifth prince of the kingdom of Maldura. His mother was born in Sauslind, so his position is a complicated one.



Alan

Master court musician that serves the prince. Per His Highness's orders, he is secretly shadowing Elianna for her protection.

Lilia

Elianna's cousin. She currently works at the royal palace as Elianna's attendant.

Series Dictionary

Bernstein Family

A line famous for its generations of book lovers. Because of their lack of interest in political power, they are generally regarded as a weaker house, but they are secretly referred to as Sauslind's Brain. A very important family. When the family last appeared in the public eye and advised Sauslind's previous king's, the country flourished.

Maldura

A neighboring country of Sauslind. Known as a war-mongering state.

Miseral Dukedom

An ally to the southwest of Sauslind. Known as a maritime nation.

The Ashen Nightmare

An illness that is once again ravaging Sauslind. Currently, there is no cure for it.

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Arc 1: The Nightingale and a Northern Melody

Prelude

Once upon a time, there was a woman often likened to a bird that sang in the night, heralding the coming spring. It was like something right out of a stage play penned by a renowned playwright of the time. The story told of a lone bird that showered her beloved in single-minded affection and came to his rescue even after she'd been betrayed. The reality, however, was that the woman had met her end all alone, still estranged from the one she loved.

The play began in a port town, didn't it? I thought, my eyes cast heavenward as a light snow began to flutter from the overcast sky.

After we reached our destination, I'd occasionally hear talk of the woman who had saved the northern lands. Disease had spread, and the people had holed themselves up in their homes for fear of infection, trying to avoid days spent in the company of death. Amid all that, one woman had quelled the brewing violence and found a cure. Everyone claimed that she had brought spring to the snow-covered north.

Was it like this back then? I wondered as I reflected on the past. Nearly forty years ago, another woman had led these lands to restoration. It was said that, at the time, there had been no shortage of voices singing her praises. I'd only heard that part of the tale secondhand, but I could still vividly recall the sound of her voice.

"Theodore," she had once murmured, calling my name.

The cadence of her voice had been sweet and wholly gentle. She had meant the whole world to my younger self. She was kind and indulgent...but there had been an odd air of tension about her. Those memories of her still held me prisoner, and her voice still called to me from a box I'd pushed deep down inside me.

I huffed lightly. All the evidence I'd gathered had made it back to Chris in the

capital—and this was the inevitable outcome.

That nephew of mine would never cut corners when it came to hunting down his enemies. He would investigate the matter down to the last detail, gather irrefutable evidence, and convict those he'd deemed his foes without a shred of mercy. It mattered not if ties of kinship or lingering childhood affections were there; he would expose all their crimes and drive them into a corner. That was how he had been raised—all too aware of his responsibilities as the son of Sauslind's king. Thus, I'd known this future would come to pass. Still...

"You're too soft, Chris."

If anyone who knew me had heard the voice that just escaped my lips, it might very well have sent a chill down their spine. A sharp-witted fellow could discern the implicit rebuke in my words: *This isn't going to cut it. The rot still remains. Now that you've gotten to the bottom of the matter, you must eradicate every last trace of it. Even if the culprit is your own relative, show him neither mercy nor compassion.*

Sauslind had likely reached a transitional phase since the reforms brought about by the Hero King long ago. There would always come a time in a country's history that called for change, and the kingdom was in need of a catalyst. First had come the tensions with their neighboring countries and the state of the continental highways. Now, a much-needed wave had swept the Ars Continent and its principal countries.

By that, I referred to the Ashen Nightmare. The spread of the illness had left the kingdom primed for change. I'd calculated as much, so I'd made my move, yet here we still were.

My breath, white puffs in the cold air, melted into the snowfall. I'd emerged from the tranquility of the royal archive for a reason. Had my nephew, as kind as he still was, picked up on that?

I'd planned to take his side until the bitter end. I'd intended to stay the man he called his uncle, the one who had accepted all the familial love he had to give, yet I had hidden ambitions of my own. I'd long since sealed them away in a box and sunk it with a heavy stone before others could be any the wiser, and I'd thought I'd never open it for as long as I lived.

“Well then...”

Had the time come to open the lid, or had the time come to dispose of the box altogether? Had a desire even I couldn't fully grasp begun to stir within me?

Nothing was harder to handle than one's own emotions—not even a woman's heart. Who had been the first to say that? I put my feelings behind me as I pretended not to remember, turning on my heel as I heard my guards call out to me from behind.

There was a chance I would never make it back to those archives again. A cold wind began to blow with a cutting force, as if to sever my lingering ties.

Chapter 1: A Melody from the North

I heard the sound of snow crashing to the ground. A glance out the window revealed weak rays of light peeking through the overcast skies. The soft sunlight shining down must have caused a clump of snow to fall from the roof.

I was standing in the corridor of Sauslind's royal palace. Everyone hurried past as cold air crept into the halls. This was shaping up to be a harsh winter yet. Still, the sounds of spring were right around the corner.

The burdens of responsibility, and the documents to be signed, were piling up, but I had a soft light to brighten my heart. That is, until a certain boorish presence had to go and ruin it.

"Hold it, Chris. I know you want to get back to your office as soon as possible, but your next stop is the second conference room."

I clucked my tongue at the redhead as he pointed out that I was headed in the wrong direction.

A sense of urgency still pervaded Sauslind's royal palace. An unprecedented incident had unfolded not long ago, and various matters remained to be taken care of in the aftermath. Unfortunately, it was I—Christopher, the crown prince—who was caught in the middle of it all. I knew it had to be done, but that didn't lessen my frustrations.

The reason all these royal council meetings were still dragging on was that the culprit behind the incident had been a leading figure in our kingdom. The crimes of those who belonged to his faction were coming to light one after another, and those who feared comeuppance were busy pulling strings behind the scenes. It was proving a challenge just to get a full list of the criminals' names, never mind deciding on their sentence.

To make matters worse, seeing as the ousted man had been a major nobleman, a huge fuss had arisen as those seeking his privileges and position came forth to replace him. Until we appointed a new leader of his former

faction, things were bound to get noisy around the inner palace.

It was no surprise that my sighs were getting heavier and heavier. Most of the time, this was the point where I'd be taking those frustrations out on a certain someone.

"I have a job for you, Glen."

This came as an anticlimax to the man who'd been bracing himself for the inevitable, and the tension bled out of him. Said man was a platoon leader in my imperial guard, the redheaded knight known as Glen Eisenach.

After he made certain he'd heard me right, I nodded back solemnly and added that he was the only one I could ask, lending a greater gravity to the request.

"Earl Brandt is one of the members of Duke Odin's faction disputing the charges. He has a weakness, and I want you to uncover it."

Not a trace of my usual breeziness to be found, I declared that this would be the key to breaking through our current predicament. My dark voice and steady gaze drew an instinctive nod from Glen.

Just as I was about to start in on the next part of the request, however, he came to his senses and cut me off. "Hold it! I'm not falling for that one, Chris. I know your tricks. Let me guess: Countess Brandt is a cheater who enjoys playing with whips and candles? Or maybe she has a thing for man-on-man action? Whatever it is, I'm not doing it!"

I couldn't stop my exasperation from showing on my face. "Come now, Glen... You think I'd mess with you in a crisis like this?"

My irritation-laden earnestness changed Glen's tune. He was quick to apologize, to which I responded with a nod, my brow still knit into a frown.

I proceeded to finish what I'd attempted to say earlier. "What I need you to do is indulge the countess's cross-dressing fetish. It seems she has a predilection for reversing gender roles, dressing herself as a man and putting muscular men in pretty dresses."

"Not happening!"

I scowled, annoyed by how loud his shout sounded as it echoed through the

corridor. A pair of guards and a pair of civil officials took cover, almost as if they were accustomed to our exchanges—the crisis prevention skills of the court staff at work.

I could practically hear the vein popping out on Glen's forehead as he continued to berate me. Just as I was watching him with a snort, pondering what my next move ought to be, there came a shout.

“Your Highness!”

Glen and the guards were the first to react to the man calling to me from across the corridor, soon after which the civil officials recognized the face of one of their colleagues. Everyone's guard went up once they noted the air of tension about him. It seemed Sauslind wouldn't be returning to ordinary life just yet.

With a frown, I asked the man what had happened.

Wheezing as he caught his breath, the slow-footed civil official yelled back from the other end of the corridor, “Come quick! It's Lady Elianna!”

My hackles rose in an instant, and I took the liberty of closing the distance between us. The civil official looked ready to bolt, though I couldn't tell if it was the look on my face that had spooked him or the intensity with which Glen and his men rushed after me.

Whatever the case, he stood his ground, seeming to remember his mission at the last second. A strangled cry escaped his throat when I met his nervous stammering with murderous intent. Alas, I found it difficult to restrain myself.

“What happened to Eli?”

She was my spring melody, my one and only treasure I'd left behind in my office.

The civil official continued to stammer, shrinking in on himself, but he eventually found the courage to resume talking. “Erm, she'd seemed under the weather since around noon... That is, she was a bit unsteady on her feet... U-Um!”

Though cowed by the way my murderous aura grew with each word he spoke,

he managed to finish his report. Yet what he had to say raised my bloodlust to nothing short of an all-time high.

“We asked Doctor Harvey, the court physician, to take a look at her, and he said it was likely a symptom of overwork. The test results showed that it wasn’t anything contagious. However, upon hearing the diagnosis, her father, Marquess Bernstein, erm...absconded back home with Lady Elianna! He’s refusing all visitors for the time being! So ends my report!”

That day, the sprouts of spring vanished from the Sauslind royal palace. The future records of my close aides would tell tales of how it was transformed into a demon lord’s castle, a bitter ice and snow sweeping across its grounds.

Sauslind Kingdom was still abuzz over a major scandal that would leave its mark on history. A resurgence of the deadly disease known as the Ashen Nightmare had occurred, which had begun with a delegation from our long-standing enemy, the kingdom of Maldura. The king had fallen ill, and his subjects were soon to follow. Riots had broken out in the northern region far removed from the royal capital. Tensions in the regions that bordered Maldura had grown to the point where hostilities could break out at any moment.

There was disease and war. Dilemmas to the north and west. Casualties all over the kingdom. A mounting fear of infection. It was a large-scale crisis that had shaken Sauslind to its core.

Yet one woman’s efforts had brought the matter to a close. She had discovered and produced a cure for the illness. She had quelled both the disease and the impending war—an undertaking and achievement sure to go down in Sauslind’s history. Her name was Elianna Bernstein, the fiancée of Prince Christopher, first in line to the kingdom’s throne.

These accomplishments had made her into the woman of the hour, so it was only natural that she would be afforded the same protection as the royal family. So too was it a given that she would be confined to the royal palace, where security was tightest, in light of the ongoing unrest.

It soon became clear that two men didn’t approve of the current state of affairs—those being Marquess Bernstein, Elianna’s father, and Alfred Bernstein,

Elianna's older brother and the heir to the marquise.

As soon as I heard what had happened, Glen had to stop me from rushing straight to Elianna's side. Since her life wasn't in any sort of danger, he urged me to go to my next meeting instead.

It was there that I ran into Alfred, who informed me with a smile, "My sister has gone home to rest for a time. It was Doctor Harvey's diagnosis that too much stress pushed her past her limits, and our staff has been quite concerned for her well-being. We decided to bring her back with us."

With a crafty smile, he continued, "Oh, right. We're very grateful that the royal family and leading authorities have demonstrated such concern for Eli's safety. Given the circumstances, we also helped ourselves to the imperial guards assigned to watch over her."

Alfred insisted that security wouldn't be an issue, whether she was targeted by the remnants of Duke Odin's faction or by vengeful elements of the military, which was currently undergoing sweeping reforms and purges. Why? Because he trusted *me* to make the necessary arrangements to prevent that.

I felt a vein pop out on my forehead for the first time in a while. I heard his implicit request loud and clear. It went without saying that the girl who had rescued the kingdom from a national crisis ought to be given the tightest security possible—even if it meant the royal family had to lose a little face in the process.

This also explained how quickly Eli, who was supposed to be back in my office, had up and disappeared from the palace, bodyguards and all, and why the slow-footed civil official had rushed to bring me his breathless report. Once the Bernsteins decided to do something, they never left anything to chance.

"I believe she'd be safer here in the royal palace than anywhere else," I shot back, my face twitching.

Alfred replied with a smile still fixed on his face. "I disagree," he said, his amicable expression belying the finality in his tone. "Staying here would only serve to wear her down further. She wouldn't be able to get any rest at all. You of all people ought to realize that, Your Highness."



There was nothing I could say to that. Eli and I had both had our hands full dealing with the fallout since she'd returned to the palace, but I was constantly being whisked from council to council as the acting king, so I had little time to spend in my office. It soon came to my attention that Eli had been working through the pile of documents awaiting my action while I was away. I could tell because it was being whittled down as swiftly as if Alexei were around. She determined which matters should be brought up at the councils, which decisions required my personal attention, and which could be delegated to another minister.

Alex's subordinates were as competent as their boss. They were well trained and the cream of the crop. Still, many of the decisions that needed to be made at the moment required someone higher up, and Elianna was the one filling that role in Alex's place. Even before this, she had often been called upon to assist Alexei. His men had observed her in those instances and thus knew what she was capable of. This was the inevitable result.

Alfred seemed to be criticizing me for that. He was saying that as long as she stayed at the royal palace—as long as she remained by my side—she would never have the chance to rest. I chewed on my lip, swallowing down my own feelings of inadequacy.

Of course, I'd tried to stop her the moment I'd noticed. Eli had her own work to do; she had been put in charge of containing the infection, which meant overseeing the Pharmacy Lab's full-scale production of the cure, as well as handling the arrangements and final reviews of everything related to the disease, such as the doctors, the nurses, and the sick. Asking her to handle my workload on top of that would have been putting too much on her shoulders.

Yet she'd only smiled and said, *"We are in a crisis. Please allow me to do whatever I can to help, Your Highness."*

Allowing the cases coming before me to pile up would hamper my ability to govern, which would inevitably have consequences for the common folk. I could see that she was strongly determined not to let things come to that.

In the short time we were apart, Elianna had become so much stronger and more radiant. I wanted to ask her what all had happened, but I knew I had to

put my own affairs in order first.

Dragging myself out of my reverie with a small huff, I asked what had become of Eli's workload, only to hear that those resourceful Bernsteins had worked their magic; it had already been delegated to trustworthy officials. I instructed Alfred to leave the final reviews to me before heading into the room where the meeting was to be held.

I briefly considered arranging for Eli to rest somewhere in the royal palace, but I knew how she was. She wouldn't be able to relax on her own while the rest of us were toiling away. Though I told myself this was how things had to be for the time being, I still burned with the desire to run to her side and check on how she was feeling.

My next meeting was going to be about military reforms. Elements of the eastern defenses and the Black Wing Knights had played a part in the recent scandal. General Bakula, who had just returned from escorting the Malduran delegation around the palace, was present as their supervisor, along with the general of the imperial guard and several nobles from the pro-war faction. I couldn't afford to show any weakness.

Just as I had shifted mindsets, Alfred whispered in my ear from where he'd tagged along behind me. He told me he had one piece of good news.

"Things at the harbor are proceeding as planned."

He was reporting that one of the matters I'd been keeping an eye on was heading toward a resolution. Once that was settled, all my lingering worries would be put to rest—concerns for Elianna's safety being the most important among them.

I gave a small nod of acknowledgment before striding to my seat. All eyes in the room were focused on one place—the throne of the king of Sauslind, where all final decisions would be made.

...

To my dearest Miss Eli,

The Ralshen Region is still trapped in the bitter cold of the dead of winter, but I imagine you're beginning to see signs of spring in Saoura. I—Lilia—am doing

quite well for myself here in Modzth.

Ever since you left, gossip about the goings-on in the royal capital has spread like wildfire. By the sound of it, Prince Christopher trounced the villains with a countenance less that of a Hero King than a demon lord, you showed the false saint the error of her ways with a slap, and you beat an assassin with an oversized steel book until your manservant had to step in to stop you, calling you a madwoman... Please tell me it's all made up.

In any case, the rumors about you are simply outrageous. I've also heard that you and the prince received the blessing of King Karl, and now a mere glimpse of the two of you can make one go blind. Quite ironic, considering you've been mistaken for a ghost in the past... Ahem.

Oh, that's right! General Bakula was alive all along, wasn't he? You should have heard the cheers of the Black Wing Knights when they found out! I was afraid the whole town might explode. It took me by surprise too. Lord Alexei told me it was kept secret even from the other knights, so I'm assuming you had no idea either? I can just imagine the look on your face when you heard the news.

Whatever the case, it's wonderful that he made it out all right.

Now then. First things first—I'm sure you're most interested in hearing how things are going here in the Ralshen Region and the town of Modzth. No doubt Lord Alexei has been sending you extensive reports on the afflicted, so I won't bore you with too many details. Overall...well, I'd say things could be worse. Sadly, there are some whom the cure didn't help. Still, according to Gene and the doctors, the most likely explanation is that they had already grown too weak to be saved. I don't believe there was anything anyone could have done for them. Please don't blame yourself too much.

Modzth is slowly but surely becoming a happier place. Someone dies every day...but others get better. Everyone is doing their best to make a fresh start, while still mourning those they've lost and watching the columns of smoke rise to the snow clouds each day. They're all thinking, *"We can stop the spread of the disease. We won't let their deaths have been for nothing. We won't let anyone feel this despair ever again."* It's the same sort of determination you

once expressed to them.

I bet you're going to claim you don't remember saying that, but I've got it on record from the people who were there. Something tells me you blurted it out without even thinking about it. It sounded to me like just the sort of thing you'd say.

Oh, also! About that boulder of a man! Oops, that was a rude way to refer to him. Erm, I meant Raqqa Arkto. You know, the ringleader of the rebels. He's been drafted into working for the town, along with the rest of the rioters. Workers from Hersche and the neighboring areas have been flocking to Modzth in droves, but Raqqa and his men are the only ones who aren't being compensated for their labor. First, they're to do all they can to help rebuild the town. Then, once the snow has melted and it's deemed safe, they're going to do forced labor in the mines. That's the verdict Earl Ralshen and the town dignitaries decided on.

On the one hand, I suppose it's a fair punishment? But I really don't like how those men start roaring with laughter every time we hear one of those rumors about you—like how you slapped the saint or went on a rampage with a steel book! Okay, I'll admit I had a bit of a chuckle myself. Still, you're the crown prince's betrothed, our future queen. Wouldn't you say they're acting a little too familiar with you? They could give a little more thought to your majesty or social standing, or... Hmm. Even I can tell how silly that sounds, so I'll just drop it.

Um, what comes next? The second thing? No, we're on to the third one now.

Third is the preventive measure you came up with. Lord Alexei told me that the face masks are in such high demand that the manufacturers are struggling to keep up with the rush of orders. The hub town of Hersche is buzzing with activity as a result. It helps that you insisted the masks be distributed to the mining towns before anywhere else, but Hersche was also the first place to produce the cloth, remember? The same goes for the cure itself, of course. Thanks to that, the town is being inundated with a flood of people and cargo. It's forcing Earl Ralshen and Lord Alexei to make the trip back and forth between Hersche and Modzth just about every other day.

Lady Rachel, the earl's wife, has gone back to her manor for the time being. I also have reports about what's been going in the manor and who's been coming by to visit. I imagine Lord Alexei has already informed you, but Duchess Rosalia is lucid and on the road to recovery. It was such a relief to hear.

Also, remember the concerns you had about the red cloth and the cure? Well, I'm afraid counterfeits have already started popping up. Fortunately, we were able to identify them as fakes straight away. I had to stop myself from bursting out laughing. I can't *believe* you accounted for all the possibilities in the midst of your frantic departure!

"We ought to mark authentic red cloths and remedies with the royal crest." That alone wouldn't stop bad people from using the royal crest to their own ends...though it would constitute a serious crime. *"The government officials who distribute them and the merchants with whom they have contracts should apply the crest with glow-in-the-dark paint."*

That way, we'd know right away if it was a fake. The fluorescent paint unveiled at last year's Holy Night's Banquet was placed under the control of the royal family. Only a select few people know how to produce it. The materials used to make it are scarce as well, so it's not a resource that can be mass-produced willy-nilly.

You're incredible, Miss Eli. That idea of yours lent further legitimacy to the cure and red cloths we've made. Then again...Hersche has been placed under heightened security as a result, which had that innkeeper called Berndt screaming, "How am I supposed to keep my inn open for business?!"

Oh, on that note, Berndt's inn has been closed for business and turned into a production facility for the cure, managed by the regional lord. If I had to guess, I'd say it'll eventually go on to become a museum, since it *is* the place where the prototype for the cure that saved the Ars Continent from the plague was developed.

So as you can see, we haven't run into any problems regarding the preventive face masks or the cure. Still...a lot of the orders for the red cloth are coming from regions without mines. People seem to think that as long as they have a mask, they won't have to worry about getting sick. So...I imagine it's going to

take some time yet to get our people properly educated on the subject.

Anyhow, the citizens of Ralshen are more motivated than ever. If, by some chance, a fake cure or red cloth were to make the rounds, it would inevitably damage your and Gene's reputations as the original inventors, right? The whole town—no, the whole of Ralshen—is determined not to let things come to that.

After all, Ralshen may be perceived as the source of the outbreak, but it's also attracting attention as the birthplace of a breakthrough solution. It's so exhilarating to be in the middle of it all, Miss Eli. It really feels like I'm witnessing history being made. I definitely made the right choice in becoming your maid.

As for the fourth thing...

...

Just as I was about to turn to the next page of the letter, there came a knock on the door. I shot back a soft acknowledgment, upon which the head maid, Selma, and my personal attendant, Annie, graced the room. Their eyes narrowed the moment they caught sight of me sitting up in bed.

Breaking out into a cold sweat, I gently closed the book I'd been reading along with the letter inside. "Oh, Selma, Annie..."

Selma was the veteran head maid who had served our family since my mother's generation, and it would be no exaggeration to say she was the one running the House of Bernstein. She was a stern woman who showed occasional glimpses of motherly love through her strictness. Annie was the maid who'd served me ever since I came to the royal capital, and she often provided me with information on a wide range of topics, including gossip that would otherwise never have reached my ears.

"Milady." Selma was the first to speak. "I trust you have not been doing *work* in our absence?"

I, Elianna, met their searching looks with a hasty shake of my head.

A few days ago, when I'd begun to feel rather dizzy and unsteady on my feet while working in His Highness's office, I'd been immediately sent to see Doctor Harvey, the court physician. I'd begged everyone not to make such a fuss, but

my pleas had earned me little more than menacing looks from my maidservants and Lord Alexei's subordinates alike. Once I'd undergone an examination, I was whisked back to my father's estate before I could get in a word edgewise. There, I'd been placed on strict bed rest. I was forbidden from any work or activity until further notice.

I was surprised by this rare display of inflexibility from my father, but I took it as a sign that I'd given him too much cause for concern. Upon arriving back home, I'd found everyone in tears. Word of my various exploits had made its way back to the estate, and on reflection, it was quite the harrowing tale indeed—from my disappearance in the middle of official business, to the gossip in the capital about how the saint was the prince's true betrothed, to the subsequent turnabout. It wasn't difficult to imagine how much of a fright it must have given the staff, considering no one had told them the truth of the matter. Worse yet, I'd been in the throes of the same deadly plague that had once stolen my mother from us.

I regretted focusing too much on my own problems and agreed to recuperate at home, but I couldn't help worrying about all the responsibilities I'd abandoned and the amount of work His Highness must have back at the royal palace. He was the acting king of Sauslind, undoubtedly the most overworked man in the kingdom at the moment. The thought of his many burdens and heavy workload made it maddening to sit still.

Nevertheless, as I planted my feet on the floor, I tried to convince myself that resting my body would carry me to the next step.

After leaving to get some fresh air, I strolled around my family's library. Wandering around the familiar area with nothing but a bathrobe pulled over my nightgown, I picked out a few tomes I wanted to either read or reread, before returning to my room. The household chef had prepared me a nutritious meal, which I ate as I immersed myself in the books.

It was almost like I'd returned to life before the engagement. But now, I knew there was far more to the world than this.

Once I'd completed my daily routine, I was ushered back to bed. In an uncharacteristic move, I made a request for something other than books.

“Say...Selma. Could I step out for a bit?”

It had been three days since I'd returned home. I was eating well and getting plenty of sleep. I'd asked under the assumption that I was ready to be released, but Selma's response was as terse as ever. She told me no.

When I wore my discouragement plain on my face, Annie stifled a laugh and said, “The weather forecaster reported that this year's winter will be a long one, milady. It's not the right season for a walk through the gardens. Please be patient a little while longer.”

Annie flashed me a small smile, having taken my request to go outside at face value. Selma, on the other hand, had likely discerned the true meaning of my words and refused me on those very grounds.

I wanted to get out. I, who was known as the Bibliophile Princess for my all-consuming obsession with books, wanted to leave and hurry to the side of the man who was confronting a national crisis all on his own in the royal palace. That was my honest wish.

I wanted to stand by his side and be his support. Or...no.

I simply missed him. I wanted to be with him.

Chapter 2: The Nightingale

As dusk began to fall, I stopped writing long enough to turn on a light. My gaze flicked to the nightstand next to my bed, only to be drawn to the splash of color near the wall beyond. It was a vibrant flower known as an orchid. Long ago, someone had sent flora from a southern continent to a botanist, who had shown greater interest in the material it came packaged in and made an effort to cultivate it. The result had been an unbelievably beautiful flower. It had been given as a gift to the queen of the time, and from there, a variety of breeds had emerged. Soon the spring was adorned with such a diverse range of flowers that the offshoots weren't even recognizable as the original flower—one that bloomed only in select places during the winter.

These flowers, which had been delivered to me every other day, all came from the greenhouse of the royal palace. Each one arrived with a card bearing nothing but my name in a particular man's handwriting. The mere thought of him made me clutch my hands to my aching heart.

Six days had passed since I'd left the palace. I insisted that I was feeling fine at this point, but Selma and the other maids always dismissed my protests, claiming that the master of the house had yet to authorize my discharge. Unfortunately, both my father and brother had been sleeping at the royal palace for the duration of my stay, and neither was in a position to stop by home. Even my offers to go check on them were rebuffed on the grounds that the servants had already done so when they delivered their changes of clothes. After being sent back to bed and told to read my books one too many times, I was starting to feel frustrated.

As luck would have it, Grandpa Teddy was currently staying at the family estate, although he went to the royal palace each day as the representative and supervisor of the Black Wing Knights. He came to see me in the mornings and evenings on behalf of my father and brother, but he refused to tell me anything about what was going on at the royal palace. I'd assumed it was because he wanted me to rest...but I was beginning to suspect there might be another

reason. I racked my brains for what it could be, but when I failed to come up with an explanation, I put those thoughts aside and asked the maids to pass on written reports to me, if only a few at a time. I also said I wanted to write requests of my own.

Selma acquiesced, perhaps out of respect for my strong resolve. Documents began to arrive at my desk, albeit at a slow pace. Between those and my reply to Lilia's letter, I managed to jot down the many thoughts that had run through my head during my convalescence.

I wanted to read more than anything, but now wasn't the time. Not even I was sheltered enough to sit back with a book in a time of crisis, especially when I wasn't feeling particularly unwell. I'd be doing the greatest disservice of all to the books themselves. It wouldn't be right not to give them my full attention—though a handful had been riveting enough to draw me in despite the circumstances.

In any case, as the one tasked with combating the plague, I, Elianna, couldn't remain sick in bed forever. Then again, my brother had assured me that others were willing to take over my duties, and according to Lilia's letter, everyone's combined efforts had put the Ralshen Region on the road to recovery. I didn't have to shoulder all the responsibility alone—or do anything at all, really. The world would keep on turning without me...

I snapped back to my senses with a furious shake of my head. My thoughts had come dangerously close to veering in the wrong direction.

Leaving a mess of paperwork and unfinished writings on the bed, I took a deep breath and set my feet on the floor. Next to my slippers was a brand new sculpture of a waterfowl and the brazier that warmed the room, from which a vase had been placed at a safe distance. In it were the flowers a certain someone had sent me, but I believed the bouquet cards that came with them were meant to be the true gift. Nothing was on them except for my name—no letter, not even a message. The only exception was the one that had arrived shortly after I'd left the royal palace, which said only a few words: *"To Elianna, my dearest ladybird."*

I'd kept all the cards he'd sent me in a safe place—including those with only

my name. As the thought flashed across my mind, I felt my cheeks grow as hot as if they'd caught fire. I was his ladybird. That line reminded me of the night I'd been reunited with His Highness, and the memory sent me into my own little world of rapture.

The fragrance of the flowers soothed me, and I cradled the vase in my hands as if it were something precious. Just as I had picked it up and strode across the dimly lit room toward the window, I heard a noise. It sounded like a pebble striking the glass, so I opened the window and stepped out onto the small balcony. I shivered as a rush of cold air hit me, instinctively hugging the vase closer to my chest.

A blanket of snow still covered the Bernstein manor's gardens. In the spring, the flowers my brother and I had gathered from all over the kingdom painted the grounds in color, but those now lay dormant beneath the soil. Standing on the barren earth was a man who was clearly no gardener.

The moment my eyes met the ones staring up at me from under the hood of his cloak, I thought my heart might leap out of my chest. "Your Highness?!"

Without missing a beat, the man brought a finger to his lips; it seemed to be a signal to keep quiet. I was so surprised that I could only watch in astonishment as he deftly hopped onto a nearby tree branch and easily made his way across to the balcony. Between the golden hair hidden under his hood, those eyes like a clear blue sky, his well-toned physique, and that presence that couldn't belong to anyone else, there was no question as to his identity.

"Good evening, Eli."

"Your Highness..."

As I was struggling to find the question on the tip of my tongue, a cold wind blew past and I sneezed. The man ushered me back inside the room, and I followed his lead.

While I was still reeling, he—Prince Christopher—looked at me with a mischievous twinkle in his blue eyes. "Since I snuck in both unannounced and at my own discretion, I'm fortunate enough to have the sight all to myself...but that's quite a titillating state of dress, Eli."

As I snapped out of my reverie, I looked down at what I was wearing—nothing but a cardigan pulled over my nightgown. Blushing so hard and fast it was as if my face had caught fire, I hastily pushed the vase into His Highness's arms and ran off to throw on a bathrobe.

This was unbelievable. To think I'd encounter the prince, wearing nothing but my sleepwear...and in the middle of the afternoon, no less! Part of me wanted to call for Annie and get changed right away. But then again...

I stole a terribly embarrassed glance at His Highness, only to find him looking around my room with interest. In hindsight, I realized that the only times he had ever visited my home were to escort me to official functions or non-optional social events. I was fairly certain I'd never invited him over for an informal visit. That was, of course, because there was his position as crown prince to consider—and also because my father hadn't been too keen on the idea.

"Um...Your Highness? What are you doing here?"

Prince Christopher, whose eyes were in full view now that he had lowered his hood, chuckled at the sight of me bundled up in a bathrobe. "I heard you'd been placed on complete bed rest with a strict no-visitors policy, so I had no choice but to sneak in if I wanted to see you. I apologize for the unsolicited nature of the visit." He was careful to give me a wide berth—a show of restraint as the trespasser in this scenario.

I gave a swift shake of my head. Knowing how obstinate the servants were, it was unlikely we would have been able to see each other at all had he not snuck in like this.

One other matter was still weighing on me, though, so I asked, "Nothing bad has happened to the royal palace or the kingdom as a whole, has it?"

Could it be that, in light of my condition, I had been kept in the dark about anything that might cause me undue stress? Had His Highness snuck in to relay the news? I couldn't help considering all the possibilities, but His Highness merely blinked before brushing back his hair with a pensive expression.

"Oh, no... Nothing like that. I promise."

His deep, soft voice carried a note of faith in me. It told me that he trusted

me, as the crown prince's fiancée, to stand by his side and share the responsibility for the kingdom and the royal line for many years to come.

"It's just..." he went on, his voice dropping, "due to the nature of the issues, there are some matters and status reports that need to remain confidential...and some things I just can't talk about. I'm sorry."

There were things he couldn't tell me. If I had to guess, it had to do with the punishment of the criminals he couldn't make public. The royal family's Shadows, for instance, were bound to be disciplined for their role in the catastrophe. Sometimes, the situation would call for him to pass cold-blooded judgment even on those closest to him; the queen's brother, Duke Odin, was no exception. Nor was the head educator who had overseen the Shadows—not even if he happened to be His Highness's childhood tutor.

As our king, His Highness had to condemn them. His position forced him to make such calls all the time. There was no need for me to know about most of it either. Nevertheless, this rekindled my desire to be with His Highness in times of sorrow and distress—to stand by his side, support him, and share his struggles.

Just as I resolved myself to take another step forward, His Highness changed the subject, smiling faintly as he looked down at the vase in his hands. "So the flowers I sent you made it. Good. Also...I'm relieved to see you didn't use them for your medicinal research or anything."

Goodness! I took a little offense to that remark. I'd never use a gift someone gave me for an experiment. If it piqued my interest, I'd simply arrange to have a similar specimen sent to me. Besides, the servants had taught me better than to disregard a present from the crown prince himself.

As I defiantly lifted my chin, His Highness set the vase down on a nearby table before taking note of the papers strewn across my bed. Before I even had time to panic, he strode over and picked up one of the documents.

"So you *have* been doing work, Eli," he said, a dry mirth in his voice.

I pouted despite myself. "I'm feeling fine, truly."

"And what did the doctor say?"

I hesitated before answering, “He told me to keep resting for a while.”

Our longtime doctor was a good friend of my father’s, however, so I got the distinct sense that he’d been put up to saying as much. Ever since I’d come home, everyone had taken to fussing over me far too much.

As if he could tell how much time I’d spent deep in thought, His Highness regarded my writings with an admiring whistle. “To prevent this tragedy from happening again, you think we should station doctors at a temple in every region for the next four to five years—a way of ensuring that accurate knowledge of how to test for infection and contain the spread is disseminated among the people.” Sounding both impressed and dubious at once, he asked, “We’ve already circulated notices on how to avoid infection throughout the kingdom. Do you believe those won’t suffice, Eli?”

After some debate, I nodded. “I do. Remember those notices you issued about medicines that could slow the onset of the illness? Those reached the larger towns right away, but they never made it to the smaller hub towns. I’m sure the villages in the mountains never stood a chance. We can’t reach everyone by sending government officials around to spread the word, so how can we guarantee this knowledge takes firm root in the populace? That’s the question I was hoping to answer.”

I made use of the things I’d seen on my journey to Ralshen and reworked the measures that had never been formally implemented after the Ashen Nightmare outbreak fifteen years earlier. Remote villages had their own ways of doing things, and people who lived in the countryside were particularly religious.

“Many have gathered in the temples as we speak, but only to cure what ails them. If someone falls ill, the doctors can help them. A cure can be made. That’s not how we want the people to approach this. How can they avoid getting sick in the first place? I believe that’s the place where we ought to start.”

Poor villages, for example, feared disease a good deal more than the average citizen. One person falling ill could make it difficult for entire families to put food on the table. It would be a blow to their workforce, not to mention how expensive doctors and medicine were. To make matters worse, literacy rates

were low in such villages. Even if a government official came along with a notice, it was unlikely to register. Yet even the poor villages—no, all the more *because* they were poor—were filled with devout believers. They would always be sure to visit their local temples and Ryzanian prayer halls.

Every town had a doctor. However, they were rarely consulted unless someone became sick or there was an outbreak of some kind. Thus, my idea was to ask the temples and Ryzanian officials to station a doctor in their halls for a few years; the priests could then internalize their knowledge and disseminate proper preventive measures to their congregation.

Nothing would change if we approached things the same way we had fifteen years ago. My plan was to be thorough in distributing knowledge and precautions and put an end to the epidemic within the year.

This was my solution to the issue with the red cloth Lilia had raised in her letter. Instead of denying people face masks because they believed it would make them immune to the disease, we would continue to distribute them as the need arose. But at the same time, we would make sure to raise awareness about the disease.

“I see,” His Highness responded thoughtfully. “The infected are still being rounded up in the temples, but no doubt they’ll be back on their feet by summer. So this is a plan for what to do after that.” Following a contemplative hum, he nodded. “I think it’s a good idea. Still...it won’t be easy.”

“I know...”

Sauslind kept church and state separate for a reason. In the past, temple officials had become so deeply entrenched in politics as to shake up the whole kingdom. As a consequence of this oversight, the Sauslind royal family and nobility had spent a long time working to limit the power of the church and cut it off from the government.

One wrong step, and the policy I’d devised could end up restoring the church’s power. No doubt many would be opposed. Still...

His Highness agreed with my plan. “All the same, containing the epidemic is our topmost priority at the moment. Besides, I *did* make the call to gather the sick at the temples... This may well be the best possible time to form a united

front.” He also added that it would make sense to combine it with the idea I’d mentioned a while back about imparting women with medical knowledge.

Feeling buoyed, I nodded back at him. I was happy that he’d approved of my idea, of course, but it also filled me with confidence that he’d said all the same things I’d been thinking. It reassured me that the two of us were on the same page.

The thought of that brought me immense joy.

...

His Highness smiled softly, but soon his eyes landed on another page. “What is—”

With a start, I rushed over and clutched the offending paper to my chest. “Erm, you see...”

Even in the dim light of the room, it was easy to see the blush on my face—as well as His Highness’s small, teasing grin. I was so embarrassed to be caught in the act that I feared my face might truly combust. I began stammering out a string of excuses, claiming that I’d wanted to report to him on the progress of my work or that I had a request to make, only to jerk my head up when I felt him draw closer.

“Wh-What brings you here today, Your Highness?!” I blurted out, though it was a bit late to be asking that now.

His Highness stopped in his tracks, blinking in the semidarkness, and for a fleeting moment, the look in his eyes changed. His gaze seemed almost wistful.

“I just wanted to see you.”

The sound of his voice nearly called my heart to a stop. His blue eyes captured me in their sights and held me prisoner.

Then, without a word, he reached out and caressed a tuft of hair next to my braid—what was left of the lock I’d cut off at Hersche. When I saw a flash of anguish cross his eyes, it hit me that my maids in the royal capital had always been careful to style my hair so it was hidden from view. Annie, my personal attendant, would often gaze at the remains like she was struggling to conceal a

pang of regret.

Before His Highness could open his mouth to speak, I placed my hand over his and told him the hair would grow back soon enough. Still, I knew that wouldn't stop him from blaming himself. Knowing full well what a shameless act it was, I pressed his hand to my own cheek and changed the subject. "I missed you too, Prince Christopher."

"Eli..."

Since my return to the royal palace, His Highness and I had greeted each other every morning. He'd been so busy with meetings that he'd spent more time away from his office than in it, but I'd still had the sense that he was there with me. In contrast, despite this being the house where I was born and raised, I no longer felt like I quite belonged here. As for why that was...

His Highness cupped my cheek and brushed his thumb across it. As the ticklish sensation brought a tiny smile to my face, he put what I'd been thinking into words. "Having you around the royal palace has come to feel so natural... It's like there's something missing when you're gone. The palace suddenly feels like such a vast, cold space. At some point, I started taking it for granted that you'd always be by my side."

"Oh, Your Highness..."

"My heart almost stopped when I heard you'd fainted. I'm sorry for pushing you so hard, Eli. And I'm sorry I couldn't run to your side the moment you felt unwell."

When I hastily shook my head, the look in His Highness's eyes changed to something sweet and tender. His gaze had an almost seductive quality to it.

"I *was* planning to head back after I'd seen you and made sure you were all right...but when you're acting this cute, it's hard to hold myself back."

My pulse quickened as I picked up on his unspoken request for my permission. I assumed the so-called "cute" behavior he was referring to was my letter to him. As I clutched the paper to my chest, unsure of the correct response in this scenario, His Highness chuckled, lifted me up by my thighs, and pushed me down onto the bed right beside us.

“Y-Your Highness?!”

This unforeseen turn of events sent me into a tizzy. There was His Highness, his golden hair shimmering in the twilight and his blue eyes blazing with mischief and desire mere inches from mine. Furthermore, I could feel soft linens against my back. The moment it dawned on me that I’d been pinned to the bed, my heart began beating hard enough that I feared it might burst.

His Highness rained sweet nothings on me from above. “Oh, Eli... I want to eat you right up.”

“Y-Y-Y-You mustn’t! That would be cannibalism!”

In my panic, my mind conjured images of the rituals a certain tribe native to a southern continent performed for their god, which I’d read about in my books. For a moment, His Highness’s eyes went wide with surprise, but he soon turned his face to the side and bit back his laughter. As I realized he was toying with me, my distress grew to the point that I nearly broke down in tears.

Once he’d gotten his laughter under control—well, no, he still had a few chortles left in him—His Highness planted a kiss on my forehead with a chuckle. “Then perhaps I should get a taste before the meal.”

The plan to eat me was set in stone, it seemed. Before I could give my consent, he showered me with kisses in the name of a “taste test”—on my eyelids, my cheeks, the tip of my nose, and the corners of my eyes. Each time we locked gazes, close enough for our lashes to touch, he gave me yet another kiss that seemed to make time stand still. As I fought to calm my racing heart, which felt ready to leap out of my chest, I pondered something: the kisses he planted on my cheeks and fingers felt special, yes, but those couldn’t even compare to the ones he left on my lips. Why was that?

When I finally opened my eyes again, pining for the warmth that had gone, I found those blue eyes right before mine, shining with as much passion as ever. My hand instinctively reached out to caress His Highness’s cheek. I brushed my thumb over his skin, just as he had done to me, and his eyes glinted.

“Eli... Believe it or not, I’m doing all I can to keep myself in check. Could you please refrain from riling me up?”

I pulled my hand back in a fluster, but His Highness caught me by the wrist. He then placed his free hand next to me on the bed.

“Of course...you’re free to do more to stop me. Much like the nightingale who sings in my honor.”



“Goodness,” I said, giggling despite myself. He’d warned me not to provoke him, yet here he was dropping hints of what was to come, telling me I could stop him if I so desired. I sensed glimpses of his struggle between desire and reason.

I myself couldn’t decide whether to calm him or egg him on, so instead, I began to recount an old fairy tale. It was the same tale to which His Highness had alluded.

“Once upon a time, there was a bird that sang a beautiful song in the night. Her gorgeous singing voice saw her presented to the emperor of the time, and she went on chirping her tunes by his side. So too did the emperor cherish the bird. But one day, the nobility gifted him a rare, foreign bird that would keep singing for as long as one wound the key on its back, and it quickly became the object of everyone’s adoration. The original bird came to prefer singing in the wild, and she fled from the emperor’s side...”

“What a fool he was,” said the prince, managing to sound firm and angry, though his voice was barely above a whisper.

I went on, “The foolish man later fell gravely ill. No one knew how to save him, least of all the wind-up bird. His various misdeeds had come back to haunt him. The Reaper stood by his bedside. The one to save him was—”

His Highness’s voice abruptly grew sweet and soft. “The bird who sang by his side. She flew back to the man in the maw of death and saved him from the Reaper. Almost like you, Eli.” He then told me, without hesitation, that I had pulled him back from the brink of death.

Suppose, for argument’s sake, that I had declined to return to the capital and chosen to continue nursing the sick in the Ralshen Region. Perhaps the Saint, Lady Pharmia, would have taken my place by His Highness’s side. Perhaps I would have sought a new place to sing. Perhaps Duke Odin and his faction would still be in power now.

And all of that would have gone against His Highness’s wishes.

If that was how he felt, I was truly glad I had come back—no matter what sacrifices I’d had to make, no matter if it meant thwarting the dreams of one I’d

considered a friend. And all of my own free will.

“Your Highness...”

The Emperor and the Nightingale, penned by a very famous playwright, was a popular play performed at Saoura’s Royal Theater. Although I wasn’t much for love stories, even I had read it out of an interest in the language used in the classics. Thus, I had memorized a certain one of its lines.

I hesitated for a long time over whether to say it out loud. The line didn’t belong to the bird that had returned to the emperor, but rather used that bird in a metaphor to persuade a lover to stay. Either way, if I was ever going to say it, now was the time.

“That is the song of a nightingale, not a bird that sings at dawn. Do not leave this place yet, my love. Stay here with me.”

My whole body, cheeks and all, burned as I recited the line straight from the play. His Highness’s eyes went wide, but he answered me with a smile. It was one of the most gorgeous things I had ever seen.

“I know, my beloved. That is a bird that mimics the dawn. It shall not disturb our night together.”

Saying this, he stroked my cheek one more time. It felt tender more than it did ticklish. And as he did, he cast me an oh-so-affectionate glance.

“Eli,” he said in a voice overflowing with emotion. “Elianna... Without you, my nights would never turn to day...”

His Highness placed a quick kiss upon my lips before peering into my face with those sparkling blue eyes. He smiled back at me wordlessly as I stared at him, enchanted. Then he pressed his lips to mine once more—a deep, passionate kiss. Caught up in this unparalleled bliss, I finally understood. The lips were special because lovers could bring them together and, with each breath, exchange feelings too strong to express in words.

His breath felt hot against my face, and I soon realized that the breath escaping my own lips must have grown just as heated.

“Eli...”

My eyes snapped open as if beckoned by his warm breath, and my gray eyes almost seemed to intertwine with his blue. The sound of him feverishly whispering my name held me captive.

“I’m sorry. It’s too late to stop now...”

His half-lidded gaze and approaching breath invited me to close my eyes, my heart pounding in my chest—and that was when the door opened without warning, and in came a man making excuses for himself.

“M’lady? I’m guessin’ you’re asleep since the lights are out, but for security’s sake, I’m gonna close the curtain—”

All three of us reacted differently: the man froze in his tracks and went dead silent, I watched myself turn red as a beet in the prince’s irises, and His Highness scowled and donned a frightful aura.

My manservant, Jean, let out a panicked scream like he’d just stumbled across some unspeakable horror. “Why is the demon lord here?! Wait, no, that explains it. So *that’s* why Annie an’ Sheila got nabbed by the imperial guard...”

After hastily rationalizing the situation, he shouted an apology and fled the room in a fluster.

Now that the mood had been well and truly ruined, His Highness rose from the bed with no small amount of irritation, cursing under his breath. He tacked on a few disgruntled mutterings while he was at it. “Damn him... He better not have become one of the tanuki’s underlings.” Annoyed, he added that it had become much harder to punish him directly.

As for what had become of Jean after we returned to the capital... Unsurprisingly, he’d been put on full bed rest for some time, but he’d been able to return to the field much sooner than I had. He was still working on regaining his muscles and stamina, apparently, but his first assignment post-recovery had been to guard the perimeter after my homecoming. His Highness had sent a few imperial guards with me as well, so he’d been working with them.

Based on what I’d heard, after some discussion with my father, it was ultimately decided that nothing would change and Jean would remain by my side as my valet. I’d mentioned to him that the imperial guard was better paid,

to which he'd replied that this was the easier job. That manservant of mine was as lazy as ever.

Fighting back my shame, I followed His Highness's example and sat up. All the while, I lamented the number of things I'd been caught doing or wearing today that I wished I hadn't.

The sounds outside the room were slowly but surely getting noisier. His Highness took a deep breath and seemed to reset his emotional state. With a practiced hand, he lit the lantern next to the bed. The sun had long since set, and darkness had fallen over the room. Lighting a single corner made it feel as if the whole manor had sprung back to life.

His Highness called my name, and I forced myself to look up and meet his gaze. With a soft chuckle, he passed on a surprising bit of news. "For your information, my father—His Majesty the King—should be back on his feet soon."

With a gasp, I sprang off the bed. "Truly?"

"Yes. His health has been steadily improving, and given the current state of things, he's determined not to lie sick in bed forever. I plan to act as his aide, but I'll have to leave the capital for a bit after he takes the throne again."

"What?" My heart skipped a beat. "But...why? Where are you going?"

In the heat of the moment, I blurted out that I would accompany him.

His Highness shot me a rueful smile, then pacified me with a shake of his head. "This whole scandal has had widespread repercussions. We can leave the matter of trade with Maldura for later, but our ties to the Miseral Dukedom have to be strengthened. It's best that I be the one to go."

Duke Odin was considered the main culprit in the recent scandal—in the series of incidents that had shaken the kingdom. I'd heard he was recently stripped of his peerage, though, so perhaps I ought to be calling him the "former duke." Regardless, he'd been closely related to the Miseral Dukedom. His sister, the queen, was still under house arrest. House Odin had also presided over Kelk Harbor, Sauslind's western border, and thus enjoyed a thriving trade relationship with the maritime nation of the Miseral Dukedom.

No doubt Kelk Harbor had been thrown into a state of turmoil. Sending Sauslind's crown prince to quell the confusion was the surest way to maintain good relations with Miseral. Snubbing our ally or putting them on the back burner could potentially leave an opening for overseas forces to exploit. Sauslind was a wealthy nation; as a trade-off, other countries were always waiting for us to slip up.

I understood that on an intellectual level, but my heart knew no reason. It begged me not to let him go—not after we'd just been reunited. Not after we'd just remembered the priceless joy of being together.

"Take me with you."

"Eli..."

I couldn't stop myself from vocalizing my feelings, and His Highness stared back at me in dismay. I *knew* I had my own duties to attend to, as the prince had things that only one of his station and importance could do. It was wrong of me to be so selfish. But still...

Flinging myself into his chest like I had done once in the past, I cried out in protest. His Highness's surprised reaction was identical to the last time I had done this. However, the me of the present wanted more than anything to speak the words that could only be uttered within the magic of darkness.

"Don't go anywhere. Stay here with me. Don't leave."

The bliss I'd felt over His Highness's coming to see me had vanished into thin air; I felt even more heartbroken than I had before his visit. He gently hugged me back, as if to say he sympathized with what I was feeling. When he gave me a soothing pat on the head, I felt absolutely wretched.

That was when he said, "The truth is...I'd been planning to bring this up later, thinking it might put too much of a burden on you..."

I lifted my face to look up at him, and he offered me a small, subdued smile. It was then that I realized that this was something he was reluctant to talk about.

"I believe my father's haste to retake the throne was in part out of consideration for mother's position. You see...I'm fairly certain my mother is going to be forced to retire. Going forward, she will be making far fewer public

appearances. We're going to need a new leader—both in the inner palace and in high society.”

It took me a few moments to process the meaning of his words, and when I did, my emotions swung from one extreme to another. None of this was Queen Henrietta's fault; she had played no part in the conspiracy. Unfortunately, her blood ties wouldn't allow the matter to end there. Neither would high society or the central figures and political agendas of Sauslind. With respect to the queen's standing and personal feelings, this wasn't good news. Still, there was a chance that this might move up our wedding ceremony, which we'd expected to be postponed...although that would be very unorthodox.

As I stood there looking helpless, unsure of how to react, His Highness smiled at me. He ruffled my hair, and a flash of mischief crossed his face. “So, Eli, consider my time away a short reprieve. You aren't going to have another chance to catch your breath for a long time to come. Brace yourself.”

His smile was full of the fearless confidence that I had come to know him for. The sight of it finally brought a blush to my cheeks, and I blurted out my answer in my joy—an unflinching, affirmative reply.

Just then, the sound of a knock echoed through the room. Selma called out to me in that stern voice of hers.

“I noticed the imperial guards have been acting strangely. May I come in?”

Judging by her tone, she clearly assumed someone else was in the room. After I hastily shot back a request for her to wait a moment, I belatedly wondered aloud how His Highness had managed to sneak all the way here in the first place. He shut down that line of questioning with a smile...and that was all the answer I needed. There wasn't an imperial guard in the world who could disobey the crown prince.

He then captivated me with a devilish grin. “I have a request to make of you, Eli.”

I nodded back at him, taking the matter seriously. Was it something he wanted me to handle while he was away from the palace? Or something related to the epidemic? Or perhaps he had something else on his mind?

When he saw how earnest I looked in his arms, His Highness laughed with delight. “Make sure to send me that letter, Eli.”

“Oh!”

I forgot about that! I thought, reminded of the page I was still clutching to my chest. It was good and crumpled by now, so I’d have to start from scratch. And this time, I’d have to write something more personal than the business correspondence I’d started out with... I was embarrassed by the mere idea of it.

That was when His Highness made a proposal. “I’ll bring you back a souvenir in exchange.”

“What?”

“I’m going all the way to the harbor, so I might as well. I could scrape together foreign travel guides, logbooks both famous and obscure, novels popular with the housewives of Kelk, oh, or even exotic cookbooks.” He added that a book on craftsmen and their handiwork might do, or anything to do with plants, medicine, pharmaceuticals, religion, art, history—I just had to name it.

I couldn’t help but smile back at him. “I don’t need any books,” I said. Seeing his surprise, I explained that the royal archives alone were home to more books than I could ever hope to read.

The thought that there were so many books I’d yet to discover filled me with a sense of excitement and joy. However, in that moment, there was something I wanted more than any of those, and it was with that in mind that I made what was likely my first-ever request of His Highness. Part of me worried that since he was going there on an official job, it might be inappropriate of me to ask, or that I might be putting too much pressure on him, but I encouraged myself to follow my heart every now and then.

“I’d like you to bring me something from the harbor that strikes a chord with you.”

I wondered for a moment if I ought to change my request, realizing it sounded like something out of a foreign folk legend I’d read about a Moon Princess who made absurd requests of her suitors. Yet His Highness met my request with an immediate nod—and a vibrant smile.

“Certainly, my nightingale.”

...

Guess what, Miss Eli? I heard through the grapevine that Lord Alexei has been called back to the capital. I suppose it makes sense. He came along as your aide, but you’ve already returned to Saoura and reclaimed your rightful position; it raises the question of what he’s even still doing here.

The messenger who delivered the news was a real jerk. I guess there are plenty of people like that still stinking up the kingdom. It gives me a sense of how hard Prince Christopher and his men must work to keep everyone in line.

I mean, one of the victims of the epidemic was Lord Alexei’s own mother! He can’t leave until her condition improves—or he wouldn’t want to, anyway. Well, if nothing else, her prospects are looking good.

So, on that note, Miss Eli, back to my fourth bit of news!

Prince Theodore will be arriving at Ralshen within the next couple days. He’ll be assuming Lord Alexei’s duties of visiting the previous earl and handling other local affairs. Earl Ralshen has likewise agreed to all this.

Lord Alexei, Mabel, the Black Wing Knights, and I are all waiting for him to arrive before we set off. The Black Wing Knights’ original role was to escort your party, after all; they’ve done a lot for the people of Ralshen, but it seems they’re eager to get back to General Bakula.

In short, we’ll be heading back to the royal capital under the protection of the chivalric order. My time here has been exciting enough, but at the end of the day, I am your maid. Mabel seems more than ready to leave too.

It won’t be long now, Miss Eli. Soon I’ll be home with a bunch of souvenirs from Ralshen!

Love,

Arc 2: The Blue Sky Compass

Chapter 1: Glen's Counterattack

There was a sound that few had ever heard before, and its nature supposedly varied from person to person. For some, it was a rousing battle hymn. For others, it was a strong, furtive rhythm that pulsed from the silent depths of the earth. Sometimes, it could even sound like the roar of a raging sea.

How would it sound to me? I'd love to hear it one day.

When I said as much to the old sailor who had told me the story, he smiled back at me with a face full of wrinkles. He said that if I was lucky, maybe someday I would. Those were the sorts of chats we'd have each time he brought food and water to where I'd been chained to the bow of the ship.

I was the ship's resident slave. I'd been with the crew for as long as I could remember, and I had no memory of who my parents were or where I'd been born. All I'd ever done was survive from day to day, doing odd jobs to keep myself fed. That is, until one day I heard the wind whisper that a storm was brewing.

No one had heeded my warning, not even the ship's expert navigator. Yet I was right: a tempest did strike. It was a violent storm that came out of the blue. The ship took quite a beating, and many of the crew were swept away by the waves.

On the deck of the battered ship, someone pointed out that I had foretold the storm. From that moment onward, I became the crew's slave. It was my job to inform them of any changes in the weather—not that I knew the first thing about how to predict that. All I could do was pick up on the sounds of the sea, wind, sky, and the birds near the ports. The same went for the noises my fellow seafarers made; if someone sounded grumpy or irritated, I always made sure to give them a wide berth. Everyone did that sort of thing, though. It wasn't just me.

Yet *I* was the only one held captive at the bow, and if I ever failed to predict a storm, I was beaten. *Will I spend my whole life trapped here?* I often wondered. *Am I going to end up as a pile of bones on the deck of this ship?* Soon, I found myself wishing that the whole ship would sink to the bottom of the ocean.

And so, one day during our voyage, I decided to keep quiet. The weather was gorgeous; the sky was an endless expanse of clear blue, and the winds were steady. It was smooth sailing. Everyone was bright-eyed and jolly for the first time in ages.

Then, all of a sudden, thunderclouds came rolling in at a frightening pace. It truly came out of nowhere.

I'd simply chosen not to say anything about it—about the faint stirring I'd heard in the distant sky.

...

“Whaaat?!” a voice rang out from the crown prince's office in the royal palace of Sauslind, which was still gripped by a harsh winter. An awfully *loud* voice, at that. The indignant cries that followed were almost indistinguishable from a spoiled toddler's tantrum.

There was an unusual face in the room—Sieg Eisenach, captain of the imperial guard's first division, who had put in a personal appearance to get approval for his security arrangements. He was the eldest son of our family and a married man with a kid, but he was nonetheless inexplicably popular with the ladies. Once he was done going over the details with Chris, my brother had gone off to make small talk in a corner of the room, and that was when the shouting had started. A certain someone had taken great exception to the latest order he'd been given.

“You're a regular despot, Prince Chris! I'm a poor victim who had a brush with death only a few days ago—and who just so happened to be instrumental in preventing a major scandal that could have brought the kingdom to its knees! Not to mention that I'm injured! I'm on sick leave! It would take a monarch tyrannical enough to put a certain donkey-eared king to shame to put an invalid to work so soon!”

He said that he'd suspected Chris might be capable of such cruelty, but even

he had hoped the demon lord could squeeze out as much compassion as a lizard could sweat under the blazing sun.

As he carried on with his theatrical wailing, I, Glen Eisenach, felt the corner of my mouth twitch ever so slightly. The one skirting dangerously close to stomping on Chris's hot button was his direct subordinate, a man with honey-colored hair and emerald green eyes—Alan Ferrera, the court musician.

Chris being a tyrant was nothing new. My main concern was that I didn't want to get caught in the cross fire, but it wasn't like I didn't understand where Alan was coming from. He'd only just returned to the royal palace a few days ago, and already he was getting shipped off to another town. Of course he'd have a couple grievances. Hell, more than a couple.

Predictably, Chris looked up from his documents with a bloodshot glare the likes of which he'd never show to Lady Elianna. For his part, he'd been so busy working his way through mountains of paperwork and back-to-back meetings that he'd had no time to flirt with his sweetheart since her long-awaited return to the palace. Just when he'd finally found a spare moment to adjourn to his office, Lady Elianna had left to check on how Queen Henrietta was doing.

The two lovers were no longer separated by distance, yet still they kept missing each other and couldn't seem to find the time to be together. The demon lord was clearly reaching his limit. I could almost hear the unspoken wish of everyone in the room: *Please don't antagonize him any further.*

The demon lord—*ahem*, Chris—slowly opened his mouth to speak. "For an 'invalid,' you've been spending an awful lot of time gallivanting about the palace. And what's this I hear about you collecting gossip while I'm away? It seems you're particularly keen to find out if I've been up to anything scandalous."

A smile etched its way onto the prince's face, but it was entirely superficial. He asked Alan if he'd found any good blackmail material, a question that only the bravest of souls would dare to answer. It was clear that even if his subordinate *had* found something, he planned to silence him before he had a chance to share.

Unfortunately for Chris, he was up against one formidable foe. Alan hummed

in thought, undaunted by the silent pressure. With the utmost nonchalance and in all seriousness, he replied, “About that... For some reason, it was always Glen’s scandals that came up instead. His usual dalliances aside, some rather dubious gossip was making the rounds... From what I hear, he has a thing for whips and candles. Is that true, Glen? Did you pick up a new fetish while I was gone?”

He put me on the spot, grinning and telling me that if only I’d told him sooner, he could have shown me a good time.

I was taken aback. “Excuse me?!” I shouted, pitching forward in surprise and yelling at him to cut the crap. The only bell this rang was a single offhand joke Chris had made at my expense. How had *that* ended up spreading like wildfire?! Just as I started clamoring that this was vicious slander, Chris and my brother Sieg sighed in unison.

My brother spoke as if he’d seen this coming—by which I mean these orders that no doubt differed from those given to the imperial guard. “I heard talk of sending Wolfe into action down south. Then again, he’s got his eyes on the sea, so I doubt he’s going anywhere. Maybe it’ll be Randy... In fact, I’m sure he’s taking over for Prince Theodore as we speak.”

Hearing that gave me a start. I belonged to a family of military men commonly known as the Four Eisenach Brothers. My oldest brother, Sieg, belonged to the first division of the imperial guard. He was one of the royal family’s personal escorts and the top candidate to eventually succeed my father, the general of the guard. My second oldest brother, Wolfe, had been assigned to a naval division in the south since he was a teenager, and he rarely came home to the capital. The same went for the youngest of us, Randolph. As for me, the third son, I belonged to the imperial guard just like Sieg.

Once, long ago, I’d wrestled with that choice. I’d considered a path that could take me far from the trickery, power struggles, mind games, and obligations of the royal palace and high society. Chris had never tried to stop me either—not even when I left to gain experience in a countryside unit. He’d just sent me on my way with a simple “Off you go, then.”

Alan still hadn’t joined our ranks back then, and Alexei was off studying

abroad. Lady Elianna had yet to make her societal debut, so she wasn't living in the royal capital at the time. I was nervous about leaving Chris on his own, but I was equally thrilled at the prospect of putting my skills to the test in a region far from the royal capital, somewhere my father and family name held no power. I'd almost taken off in high spirits, but at the last second, it had occurred to me that some people would never get that sort of option. I recalled that Alexei had said something to that effect right before he left.

"I am proud to serve as His Highness's aide."

When I turned back, Chris had assured me he'd be fine with one less musclehead by his side, because he had his own wits to see him through. He added that my absence would give him a chance to better hone those skills, demonstrating zeal of a slightly different flavor than a knight's.

Nobody had asked me what I was planning to do. Not my father, not my mother, not my brothers, not Alexei—and not Chris. It was a decision I had to make for myself. All the same, I wanted to give him my answer. What was my real reason for going to the countryside? I gave the question a little more thought.

"I swear I'll come back, Chris. I'll return a skilled enough knight to dispel any rumors that you only hired me because I'm your childhood friend. Just wait here while I go to make a name for myself!"

Chris's response was the same back then as it would be now: he gave me a look like I was coming on too strong and held up a palm as a signal to get lost. Still, the smallest of smiles tugged at his lips. It held the tacit promise that he'd put me through my paces as soon as I came back home.

It was with some regret that I left Chris's side for the next four years. By the time I returned, he'd added an eccentric named Alan to his staff—someone who had been around for four years of Chris's life that I hadn't. The thought reminded me that my younger brother, Randy, had also served Chris during that period of time...

That was when the musician in question spoke up. "Randy's going to be there? Well, okay, maybe I *will* go."

His exceedingly flippant tone made me question how close the two of them

really were.

With a hum, Alan finally dropped his jester act, and the usual clever gleam came to his eyes. “So if I have this right, we’ll be doing some large-scale cleanup and arresting the last vestiges of the enemy faction? Hmm... I suppose it’s true that if we leave them at large, trouble is bound to keep pouring in from the western border. In particular, there’ll be a lot of scoundrels out to take revenge on Lady Elianna. Something tells me you’d rather avoid that, Your Highness.”

Continuing his analysis of the situation, he added, “Besides, I’m sure word has gotten out that the duke was arrested in the capital... Probably best to check on how things are going in his home turf. And there’s a limit to how well the navy can keep an eye on the western forces and the duke’s finances...”

After nodding to himself, he gave his final answer with a cheerfulness that belied the gravity of the situation. “Got it! You can count on Alan Ferrera here to arrive at the harbor one step ahead. It means I’ll be cutting my sick leave short, so I’m expecting double the compensation!”

In contrast to Chris, whose expression had gone stiff, I felt like Alan’s conjecture had answered a lot of my questions. If my second brother or Randy were being called to action, it meant there were either maritime incidents on the horizon or a fallout that required help from the navy. It also explained the need for Alan to infiltrate the region in advance. These were all Chris’s standard tactics.

I announced that I was on board, thrilled at the prospect of getting out of the palace for the first time in ages. Sitting on my hands for the latest series of events had clearly taken its toll on me.

Just as I was getting pumped to enter the fray for the first time in a while, my brother shared a bit of news as if it had just occurred to him. “Oh, Glen. Remember that request for vacation time you put in a while back? The imperial guard’s General Affairs Department said you’re free to take it any time within the next five days. Any later than that, and it won’t be feasible given our available man power and the urgency of the situation.”

Over the next five days, Alan would ride off on his horse, spend at least ten days traveling to Kelk Harbor, and lay the groundwork. Then would come the

long-awaited arrival of the crown prince.

I don't have a prayer! I lamented with a voiceless scream, while Chris gave a resigned nod.

"Glen. It's always torn me up that I push you so hard. If you're truly set on taking time off, so be it. You should concentrate on getting some rest. No matter—I'll head off to Kelk Harbor, where my life could very well be in danger, all on my own. I'll be fine without you to escort me, of course. It doesn't matter if I'm attacked under the cover of night or assaulted while I'm trying to get some rest. Just enjoy your vacation to the fullest."

I wasn't so stupid that I couldn't read between the lines of his oh-so-sweet smile. Fighting back the tears that threatened to spill from my eyes, I retracted my request for paid leave.

Sieg must have felt a pang of pity for me, as he followed up with a feeble attempt at consolation. "The truth is, if you *had* taken the time off, our mother was ready to throw you straight into a marriage meeting. Wolfe got married down south and never comes home, and Randy's prospects seem equally questionable... She's determined to set *you* up with a girl of her choosing, if no one else."

I replied to my sympathetic brother with a question right out of those Eastern Zen dialogues Lady Elianna had told me about: "What conclusion do we draw from this?"

Sieg solemnly answered, "I wouldn't advise taking vacation until mother loses interest again."

My heart-rending cries of anguish echoed through the office.

The comment that followed sounded almost awed. "You must've been born under an unlucky star, Glen," said Alan, clearly more amused than sympathetic.

"His own bad conduct is to blame. Take him as an example of what *not* to do with your life," said Chris. Documents in hand, he added that this could make for a good cautionary tale.

I finally flew off the handle, throwing all decorum and attempts at diplomacy to the wind. "You're the last two people I want to hear that from, Chris, Alan!

You're both the perfect examples of what I never want to be! I tell the women I like exactly how I feel. I operate on a 'go for broke' mentality. I'm not some idiot who would take my sweet time setting the stage for a girl to become my fiancée, only to have her almost run out on me in the end! Also! We imperial guards are the frequent victims of Chris's tyranny, yet we've never once demanded anything more than our standard pay. We're not like Alan, who's a total money-grubber underneath that cutesy act. No one puts up with more of Chris's nonsense than us imperial guards, and no one is more loyal! Not many people would take their job as seriously as we do! You guys could stand to learn a thing or two from our integrity!"

"Come again?" Chris fired back without missing a beat, shooting me the kind of look that could have made him famous in the backstreets. Alan likewise whined in protest. Still, just this once, I felt like I had to get a word in. Maybe it was a reaction to my recent run of bad luck.

"Don't expect me to be your chew toy *all* the time! If I have something to say, I'm gonna say it. I'm not about to let you stick me with the nickname 'Glen the Whipping Boy'!"

"Hold on, Glen!" Alan cut in. "I could come up with a much better nickname than that. You wouldn't be Glen the Whipping Boy...you'd be Glen the Sucker!"

I snapped that he was an idiot, meanwhile doing my best to withstand the chilling gaze and tone of the demon lo... *Ahem*, Chris. The prince said that he heard me loud and clear, I braced myself for the oncoming assault, and his next words set off another round of our verbal back-and-forth.

Over the incessant clamor that filled the room, no one could hear Sieg mutter under his breath with a sigh, "So this is what it's like when Alexei's not around..."



Chapter 2: Young Alan's Adventures

I was greeted by the cry of seagulls and a salty breeze.

The wrecked remains of the ship had been drifting at sea for several days when another merchant vessel just so happened to spot it. Almost the whole crew had been wiped out. Because I'd been chained to the bow, I wound up the sole survivor.

If the ship had sunk, I would have been dragged to the bottom of the sea along with it. I was just fortunate that it had been such a sturdy vessel. It was another stroke of luck that the merchant ship happened upon me before I withered in the sun.

I had lived to see another day.

Our destination turned out to be the Sauslind Kingdom. We arrived at Kelk Harbor, located within the Hoover Domain and the last stop along the highways of the Ars Continent. When I first laid eyes on the city, I thought I'd entered a dreamworld. There was a seawall big enough to accommodate several large ships, as well as a pier packed with medium-sized sailboats. What's more, the view of the city from the seawall was absolutely breathtaking. Rows of red-roofed, white-walled houses lined a gentle slope. The tapestry of color was dazzling, almost like a reflection of the blue of the sea.

I later learned that Kelk Harbor was known by a second name: The City of Housewives. The vast array of walls and roofs certainly made that believable. Walls had been built around the city, and an imposing fortress stood planted right in its center, but even that managed to look like a symbol of the power that protected the thriving port.

Most of all, I was blown away by the hustle and bustle of the harbor. The place had to be lively and vibrant enough to give the Miseral Dukedom, a renowned maritime nation, a run for its money. The merchants and crews of trading vessels boasted of their voyages across rough seas. Brokers dove into business negotiations. Sailors and laborers hefted cargo, and young children

lent them a hand for a small share of the profits.

The pier buzzed with a constant flow of people and cargo. All manner of foreign languages filled the air. Even the sheer number of squawking seagulls seemed like a testament to the harbor's prosperity. The medley of music drifting in from who-knows-where gave me a sense of the whole city's power. I was completely overwhelmed.

This was back when I was still just plain old "Alan."

"This place hasn't changed at all," I, Alan Ferrera, murmured, taking in the cool sea breeze from atop a small hill.

This was the western gateway to Sauslind: Kelk Harbor. It had taken me twelve days on horseback to get here. From where I was standing, the city looked the same as I'd left it. *If I recall, the Malduran delegation left here for home a few days ago*, I mused before amending that thought.

"Or, wait, didn't Irvin and his men set sail from the neighboring Tajnat Domain?"

Though it couldn't measure up to Kelk, the neighboring domain featured a seawall large enough for a medium-sized ship to dock. The change in plans made sense, seeing as the Hoover Domain was governed by Duke Odin—one of the key figures in the anti-diplomacy faction, whose schemes had included the potential assassination of the Malduran delegation. The duke had been stripped of his position, but there was no telling if his subordinates back in his domain shared his beliefs. We'd avoided war with Maldura by the skin of our teeth; it would have been a shame to see those efforts come to nothing now. In light of the risks, the crown prince had taken extra steps to prevent that outcome.

"Can't blame him."

As a matter of fact, though it wasn't public knowledge, Kelk Harbor had a powerful armed force to its name. The thriving port was a veritable treasure trove; it was a well-known fact among sailors that the place was teeming with a wide range of exotic goods that could fetch high prices, along with the merchants' hoards of gold, silver, and jewels. As a consequence, Kelk was a popular target for pirates and foreign raiders. One countermeasure was the

fortress, which kept a watchful eye on seafaring enemies from the center of town, and the majority of the Hoover Domain's regional army was stationed in the city. Its strength was incomparable to that of other territories. Furthermore, the city had its own mercenary force hired by the Maritime Merchants' Guild. In combination with the naval vessels at its disposal, Kelk's military might likely rivaled that of the Edea Domain.

I found myself imagining a scenario I'd rather not think about. What if Duke Odin hadn't sought to subjugate the prince and seize power in the capital, but had used his military forces to start a rebellion based in Kelk? Or what if he had proclaimed himself king and declared his independence from Sauslind? Divided into two factions, the borderlands would have been forced to look out for enemies from Maldura, the Hoover Domain, the north, and the south, and even the Guardian God of the West might have found himself in a tough spot. If that had happened, Sauslind would still be caught in a state of upheaval and crisis.

But Duke Odin *had* chosen to seize power in the capital, and Chris, whom the duke had long considered a thorn in his side, had stayed put in the royal palace and stood strong in opposition.

"I wonder if Prince Chris had the same thought."

As long as he stayed in the royal palace and pretended to have his back to the wall, the duke would likewise choose to remain in the capital. Similarly, Prince Theodore had left the region as soon as he had finished gathering evidence. Under normal circumstances, it would have been wise for him to stick around to clean up the mess and keep an eye on the army in light of the duke's downfall, but Prince Theodore had chosen not to do that. Based on what I'd heard, the moment Randy and the navy showed up, they'd taken over for him and he'd departed the harbor straight away. I had a feeling I knew the reason for that.

It was probably out of a concern that the pro-war faction in the royal palace might join forces with the remnants of the duke's faction to aggrandize Prince Theodore in this region. Some of the military hard-liners who had caused unrest in the royal capital were on trial, but not all of them. Among the nobility, there were a number of people who had backed Prince Theodore since Queen Amalia's time. The present situation was volatile. There was no telling what could happen.

There was a good chance that Prince Theodore's supporters might rally in Kelk and raise the flag of rebellion. His early departure had likely been an effort to avoid that outcome. He didn't want to be forced into a position that ran contrary to his own will.

When I tried to put myself in his shoes, a thoughtful hum escaped my lips.

"Still...you can never tell what a person's thinking underneath the surface."

Nowadays, my life was full of fun and joy, but in the past, I'd been miserable enough to wish misfortune on others. Nobody had only one side to them. People were multifaceted, and it was up to each of us to decide who we wanted to be. There was a front and a back to everything. Were those two separate things, or were they the same at their core? Prince Chris was the one who'd taught me the answer.

As I thought back on the past, a small smile rose to my face. Being in this city really brought back old memories. I drifted off into thought, my lips curling into an even bigger grin. I was in the sort of mood that would have Glen yelling that I looked like I was up to something.

"My first order of business is to say hi to the Master, this city's shadow boss. I hope the old granny's doing well."

The woman in question would have sent me to the pits of the earth if she'd heard me say that.

This was a story from a long time ago—back when I was still just plain old "Alan."

...

Cheers rang out from a corner of the harbor. There was a street where foreign dancers, bands, entertainers, singers, and musicians all competed to earn the most copper coins. Unlike the polite applause exchanged by the nobility, the ovations that followed each performance were known to be genuine.

I, Alan, answered the rain of applause and copper with the lute I held in one hand. My lips spun the words, "Thank you."

It was then that a well-dressed man approached me, handing me a shiny silver coin the likes of which I'd never seen before. What he had to say was this: he was the messenger of a certain house he hesitated to name. His master had taken an interest in a child who often sang on the harbor streets, and they wanted to invite me back to their mansion. They hoped to appreciate my singing voice in the comfort of their own home.

The messenger told me that it wasn't in my best interest to refuse. His master had absolute authority over every inch of the city, from the backstreets to the public squares. In exchange, if the Master took a liking to me, I could have anything I wanted at my fingertips. They could even grant me the power to rule over the entertainment district. We youngsters were always stuck taking a small cut of the grown-ups' profits; he said that I might just be able to turn the tables.

I didn't even have to think about my answer. I told him I'd be delighted.

Satisfied with my response, the messenger took his leave. I couldn't help but chuckle in amusement. So did the other kids who had begun to gather around me.

My ear-to-ear smile said, *I've been waiting for this.*

Three forces ruled over Kelk Harbor. One was, of course, the mayor of the city. He had been personally appointed by the duke—the regional lord—and was apparently also a steward of House Odin. Thus, although he was ostensibly a humble mayor, his true authority and influence were immense. All the more so when he was in charge of a port as large as Kelk Harbor.

Another force was the president of the Maritime Merchants' Guild. All manner of merchant ships entered and left the port of Kelk; some were owned by the guild itself, while others belonged to the Shipbuilders' Guild, which only engaged in the repair and manufacture of ships. However, as far as trade was concerned, no vessels other than fishing boats were allowed to set sail without a permit from the Maritime Merchants' Guild.

Pedestrian merchants braved much hardship and danger to bring their wares to Kelk Harbor, the last stop on the highway, where their cargo was then passed off to the seafaring merchants. Some of the larger trade guilds sailed their own ships abroad, while other merchants chose not to risk the high seas and instead

entrusted the sale of their goods to others. And thus were captains-and crews-for-hire born.

The Maritime Merchants' Guild oversaw the recruitment process. It was a natural outgrowth of the system. In the past, there had been a good deal of violent conflicts between merchants' guilds and hired captains over their share of the profits. The captains and crews braved great danger to convert the goods into gold and silver. Proud of their contribution, these sailors would demand a better cut of the profits, but the merchants often refused to budge, arguing that a hit to their earnings would threaten the future of their business. On occasion, this would escalate into a small-scale brawl, and so the guild was formed out of a need for regulation.

Kelk Harbor was run by those two big shots, but there was a third force in play that wasn't known to the public. That was Luwak Street, the slum where I, Alan, lived.

I was probably around seven or eight years old when I first arrived at the harbor. I was put straight into an orphanage, but it didn't take me long to escape. Now that I'd managed to survive against all odds, I wanted to live my life freely, without being beholden to anyone or exploited for labor.

As luck would have it, I'd apparently been blessed with decent looks. Back when I was on the ship, no one had ever spared me a second glance. Bathing wasn't an option on the high seas, after all; I was truly little more than a squalid child bedraggled by the ocean breeze. But lo, a merciless scrubbing at the orphanage had revealed honey-colored hair under the grime, and once my face had been wiped clean enough times, emerald eyes had peeked into view.

It was shocking to discover what I looked like. I'd only glimpsed my reflection in a mirror a few times before then. Even the one giving me a bath had looked surprised, and that gave me all the more confidence that I could strike out on my own. I had a weapon at my disposal that many others didn't.

"Are you really going, Alan?" asked the eleven-and twelve-year-olds who had flocked to my side.

These were my peers, the kids I'd bonded with ever since I'd started making a living in the harbor backstreets. Since we were all still young and small, we

helped each other out. We'd even welcome outsiders into our ranks once they'd stuck around long enough. That was how much of a threat our bugbear posed.

"That's the plan. It'd be a waste not to follow the trail right under our noses."

The younger children watched in fascination as I flicked the silver coin into the air. For us kids, getting our hands on silver was a one-in-a-million event.

"But, Alan," protested Marcus, who was about the same age as me, "the 'Master' that the messenger mentioned can't be the same Master we know. Ours would never hand out silver so freely."

I nodded in agreement. A nobody like me had never had the chance to meet them, but I found it hard to believe that the Master, the third big shot and ruler of Luwak Street, the slums of Kelk, would so easily tip their hand. And they certainly wouldn't do it with a silver coin like this, I added as I rolled said coin between my fingers. It would be a simple task for them to apprehend us without throwing money around. This clearly wasn't the Master we were dealing with. But who, then?

The boys peered at me with concern, and I flashed them a smile. "Whatever the case, I'm getting on board. It'll work out. You guys know how fast I can make a getaway, don't you?"

As the group's top earner, at some point, I'd become something of a leader to the naughty boys of the entertainment district. Granted, we were only one of several such gangs.

"Apparently, one of Carl's guys up and disappeared a while back. I heard it was Maurie's brother..."

Glancing over at one member of the gang, I found a boy with round, striking eyes tearing up. He nobly insisted, "*I am* worried about my brother, but I couldn't take it if you went missing too, Alan."

Just as I opened my mouth to comfort Maurie, a group of men called out to us the moment we set foot in a back alley.

"Hey there, Alan."

It was our aforementioned “bugbear.” Judging by the timing, they’d probably been spying on us, as per usual. They were the spitting image of animals who’d sniffed out a meal. These men were all twenty years old, give or take, with hulking bodies and big fists. Gruff in appearance, they often resorted to intimidation tactics to emphasize the difference in strength between us.

“Guido...”

In contrast, the man at their center, the one who had called my name, was on the short and skinny side. Between his narrow eyes and pockmarked face, he wasn’t what one would call attractive. Appearances aside, he was a force to be reckoned with in the backstreets, especially for kids our age—the reason being that he was related to the Master who ran Luwak Street. The bulky men surrounding him were his hangers-on, not the other way around.

A smirk playing at his lips, Guido taunted us in his typical manner. “You sure made out like a bandit today, Alan the Honeybee. Your singing voice and skill with a lute are truly a sound to behold. You can draw in an audience like bees to a flower. It’s such a waste to let your looks and skills languish in the slums.”

“If you realize as much, quit extorting us already, Guido the Sub-Honeybee.”

No sooner had I sniped back than the muscular man at Guido’s side grabbed me by the throat. My friends shouted my name, only to be held back by the rest of the thugs.

As I gasped in pain, Guido spoke in a voice laced with irritation. “Don’t get cocky, Alan. Need I remind you who’s kept you alive this long?”

Even as I suffocated, my pride wouldn’t let that stand. “*I’m* the one who’s kept me alive. I don’t owe you people anything!”

Guido gave an enraged cry, at which the thug tightened his grip. No longer able to speak or breathe, I realized I had screwed up. Just as it dawned on me that I was in serious trouble, there came a blithe voice.

“Ah... Aa-aah-ah...”

It was a dopey enough reaction to sound like a singer’s vocal exercises.

When I glanced over, wheezing for air, I saw a young man standing in a corner

of the alley, looking like he'd seen something he shouldn't have. He was a well-to-do young man of about sixteen or seventeen. As best I could tell, he'd gotten lost in the backstreets of an unfamiliar harbor, where he'd stumbled across a scene he'd rather not have witnessed. Predictably, Guido and his lackeys tried to scare him off, at which point I assumed he would turn tail and leave. Alas, the boy had a misguided sense of justice.

"Urgh... I suppose leaving these kids to their fate would make me a disgrace of a man... I'd never be able to look Carina in the eye again."

He chose to stand his ground with a decidedly undependable air, making incomprehensible excuses to himself all the while. Only his words carried any dignity. He demanded that the men unhand us.

It turned out he was much tougher than appearances would suggest, and he beat the bad guys in the blink of an eye, leaving us kids reeling from the sudden appearance of a hero on the scene... *Not*. He was beaten to a pulp along with the rest of us, and we shot him a withering look when it was all said and done.

"What did you think you were doing, man?"

I was in full agreement with the exasperated mutterings of my friends. Thanks to this weirdo's intervention, I'd taken more of a beating than I otherwise would've—and my face happened to be one of the tools of my trade, thank you very much.

When I cast the unreliable, golden-haired young man a suspicious glance, he laughed uncomfortably. His face was battered and bruised, and he apologized for his shameful appearance. "I thought maybe I could take them... But those men sure were tough."

The fact that he didn't have a guard suggested he was the son of a rich family, not a noble. I got the sense that he was hopelessly good-natured, but his inability to recognize such an obvious difference in strength made him an idiot, plain and simple.

My gang turned their anger on the blond. "It's your fault they took Alan's silver coin! How are you going to make it up to us?!"

He'd been robbed of all the money he had on hand as well, but kids like us

were always looking to make a quick profit. Guido had made a big show of pocketing the silver coin along with our earnings for the day, sneering that it was too extravagant for brats like us. My friends cursed under their breaths in chagrin, while the young man stumbled awkwardly over his words. I sighed and said it was fine.

“Alan...”

That one silver coin could have kept us fed for the next month without us having to work. The loss was a blow. We should have held onto it at all costs.

While the other boys were stewing in their regrets and rekindling their fury toward Guido, I burst out laughing despite myself. Maurie, who was just shy of ten years old, asked me what was wrong. As I checked to make sure he wasn't too badly hurt, I couldn't suppress the delight bubbling up inside me.

“Guido's finished.”

Everyone was taken aback by the unexpected declaration. “Huh? What do you mean?”

Maurie shot me a confused look, so I explained myself with a little chuckle. Guido had run off with the silver coin I'd been given. That silver coin had been a gift from the master of the mansion to which I'd been invited. Maurie nodded along, not quite following, and I went on like an old man recounting tales of yesteryear.

First, the messenger hadn't been sent by the Master of Luwak Street. Second, silver coins were common among the rich...yet that one had sounded wrong. What's more, I'd been hearing a lot of copper coins that didn't have quite the right ring to them recently. Guido had taken those too. I asked if anyone understood what I was getting at it. The boys all looked lost—except for the young man with hair the color of sunshine.

I giggled before flashing the biggest smile I could muster. “That was fake money.” The ensuing gasps of surprise made me laugh even harder. “Now then, shall I head straight to the police station to submit an anonymous tip? ‘I saw people talking about counterfeiting coins. If you think I'm lying, go catch a man named Guido and pat him down. He had something none of us ever see on the backstreets: a silver coin!’”

In contrast to the way Maurie's face lit up, another friend of mine objected. His voice was tinged with fear. "But if we frame Guido, the Master won't take it lying down..."

My voice came out loud and confident enough to echo through the sky. "Are you sure? We were just robbed of our profits, like always. Who could have guessed that counterfeit coins were mixed in? No matter what excuses Guido makes, his benefactor will start to look suspicious. The Master will come out looking a hundred times more sketchy than us kids. At that point, I'm sure they won't hesitate to cut Guido loose. They wouldn't want anyone thinking *they're* the main source of the counterfeiting. If the mayor or guild president found out, their own position would be in jeopardy. Do you think the Master would risk upsetting the very balance of this city?"

Despite my attempts to swallow it down, a gleeful laugh escaped my lips. "Anyone want to bet? Do you think Guido and his thugs will be exiled to a land far from Kelk, or do you think they'll end up serving the maximum sentence in a prison cell?!"

This was a fitting revenge for all the times they'd extorted us. I crowed that it served them right, and my friends erupted into cheers, heaping lavish praise upon me.

Tossing and catching one of the light-sounding coppers I'd kept hidden just in case, I made arrangements to tip off the officials using said coin as evidence. Of course, I found an adult to do all the talking, so it wouldn't be written off as a child's prank.

With all that done, it was finally time to return to my initial objective. I was about to bring it up to my crew, but I changed my mind. An uncomfortable silence hung in the air as we walked down the usual alleyway to the shack where we lived.

"Any reason you're tagging along, mister?"

Before we knew it, the golden-haired boy was bringing up our rear with a genial smile.

"Because this seems like fun."

He asked us to let him in on it, a carefree look on his face.

Chapter 3: Young Randy's Trials

The hustle and bustle of the harbor unfolded before my eyes. With the Boat Festival only a few days away, Kelk Harbor seemed more lively and crowded than ever. Locals happily came and went, while peddlers advertised their wares and shouted back and forth. All sorts of foreign tongues mingled together. A *mélange* of music and laughter played out faintly in the background. It all came together to paint a picture of a prosperous port.

It was an enticing hubbub sure to lure first-time visitors toward the city's streets. Unfortunately...

"Randy, water."

A voice that was neither charming nor cordial echoed through the room. With an unenthused reply, I, Randolph Eisenach, turned my back on the commotion of the port and came inside from the balcony.

The blue sky sprawling overhead was nothing compared to the boy who'd given the order. As he silently pored over paperwork in his room at the inn, I came up beside him and poured water from a jug. He had dazzling golden hair and handsome features—from his cheeks, which still showed traces of youth at fifteen, to his jawline and nape. However, his eyes, which darted over his paperwork and reports, bore a sharpness that didn't match his age.

He was only two years older than me, but I was positive there were more calculations and schemes running through his head than I could ever hope to imagine. I couldn't help but heave a sigh.

"You sure take your work seriously, Your Highness."

His lack of response was nothing new. With a sidelong glance at the mountain of numbers and words I could never hope to decipher, I poured myself a cup of water and gulped it down.

"When we were in the Speer Region a little while back, you exposed one official's corruption after another. At this rate, someone's going to publish a

book titled *The Revolutionary Travels of the Hooligan Prince.*”

The moment I muttered that the author would be one of the usual suspects, his bright blue eyes lifted from the page. Their slightly bloodshot look was something one would never see around the royal palace.

Perhaps he was under the impression that if he overcame all the trials he was given, he’d eventually get his hands on the prize at the end—the princess. But anyone who paid close attention to the family in question would know that was utterly impossible. Thinking to myself that love was blind, I gave a small shrug.

Since we were officially here on an inspection tour, we could have marched right into the city hall or the Maritime Merchants’ Guild, the two entities in charge of the port, but instead, he’d chosen to hide his identity and start with a thorough reconnaissance. He was probably quietly sifting through all those documents in search of clues.

I remarked that he was a lot more stubborn than he looked. Being nothing like my three older brothers, I searched for the right words. “You don’t need to go looking for problems on every inspection. I mean, sure, the Hoover Domain is the territory of that wily man who’s constantly trying to set you up with his daughter or relatives, so I get why you’d go looking for a weakness of his until your eyes glaze over...but still.”

His gaze sharpened even further, so I threw in a few words of sympathy. I commented on how obvious it was that the duke thought Prince Chris was obligated to listen to him and how it frankly pissed *me* off to see it.

When the look in his eyes softened a touch, I added, “Nothing’s going to come of pushing yourself. Let’s take a little breather. Just think, we have the chance to see Sauslind Kingdom’s famous Boat Festival! Well, then again...that’s just a consequence of being sent off on an inspection the second we tried to visit the Bernstein Domain. Man, they were so thorough in shaking you off that instead of feeling impressed, I was left wondering why they hate you so much.”

My thoughtless ramblings turned his blue gaze hard again, at which point I shut my mouth. Talking too much really *was* the downfall of us Eisenachs.

I gave an inane little laugh to put my naivete on display and draw attention to the fact that I was the younger one, then went on. “As I was saying, Prince

Chris, let's take a break. You don't have to be giving orders or carrying out missions all the time. Maybe you were just sent here to broaden your horizons."

I kept the thought that they wanted him to go out into the wider world, broaden his horizons, and then give up on his damned princess to myself. Unlike the brother closest to me in age, I strove to avoid putting my foot in my mouth a second time.

My continued attempts to placate him drew a beleaguered sigh from Prince Chris. "You just want to have a look around Kelk Harbor."

I didn't deny the accusation. Prince Chris dropped the documents in his hand with another sigh. As I watched him stand from his chair and pick up the cloak he wore to hide his face, I pumped a victorious fist on the inside.

This was Kelk Harbor, the western gateway along the continental highways. I couldn't bear the thought of coming all this way just to shuttle between the inn and city hall. I wanted to go out on the town, even if I had to bust out in the middle of the night to do it. Of course, I realized that line of thinking was probably a big reason why my father had ruled me out as a potential candidate for the imperial guard.

As opposed to the eldest and third sons of the family, I had yet to find that one and only person to whom I wanted to swear my fealty, be it a royal or someone else. I was perfectly willing to offer up my sword to this prince, but given how easily distracted I was, I figured my father and the higher-ups were probably correct in their judgment.

Thinking to myself that this might be the reward for my trials, I took my first step into the busy harbor—and all the while, I contemplated the terrors of lovesickness, which could drive a prince who had been extolled for his intelligence from an early age to madness.

We ran into trouble almost as soon as we headed into town.

"I swear something's wrong! Please look into it!"

All eyes were on a shabby-looking man who was pleading his case at the

police station. He was dressed in clothes that suggested he was a fisherman from the city outskirts, and his skin was dark with sunburn. He belonged to a race that looked out of place on a posh street where exotic goods were bought and sold. In fact, both the surrounding crowd and the patrolling officers shied away from him with disapproving glances.

The police tried to chase him away by insisting that he wasn't in their jurisdiction and needed to go to the station in his own neighborhood, but the man refused to back down. He claimed that when he'd gone there, they had sent him to the station on Main Street, and city hall had just told him to go to the police. Ignoring his desperate cries asking where he was supposed to go, the officers callously drove him off, as if he were nothing but a nuisance.

At first, the passersby looked at the man who had been dumped on the side of the road with a mix of pity and curiosity, but soon enough, everyone went about their business like nothing had happened. As the young lord who had been watching this play out from a corner of the street strode forward, I sighed like I'd known this would happen. The same went when the several guards accompanying him followed along with a rueful smile.

My brother deserves a medal for putting up with this since he was little, I thought to myself. Not that it mattered.

...

The sound of music swelled through the twilight harbor. The mansion at the end of the wharf was abuzz with festivities to usher in the night. Tonight was the eve of the Boat Festival. Held only in Kelk Harbor, it had become one of the most famous events in the whole of Sauslind Kingdom.

There was a certain time of year when a calm fell over the inland sea that stretched from the western gateway. During that period, Kelk Harbor was always flooded with vessels bound for the neighboring Miseral Dukedom, the Western Isles, and even the southern continent. The sight of ships of all shapes and sizes setting sail en masse was said to be breathtaking. For that reason, the cost of penthouse lodgings overlooking the harbor doubled during the season.

"Wow, this place is lively."

Spring came earlier here than in the capital of Saoura. In Kelk Harbor, the

season brought with it an important celebration to pray for safe voyages and commercial prosperity.

That evening, we were attending a pre-festival party in a manor along the wharf, far from the city center. It was a huge mansion, the sort owned by wealthy nobles who lived on the city outskirts. Waiters made the rounds, and the master of the house had invited bands and dancers onto the premises for this garden soiree. It was a much more relaxed affair than the formal, stuffy parties held in Saoura or the royal palace.

No doubt that was helped by the ever-present scent of the sea and the sound of the waves. Plus, taking stock of the guests, I noticed there were more merchants and townspeople in attendance than nobles. In addition to the bonfires, foreign lamps cast a fantastical glow around the area, lending it an exotic air.

In the midst of all the festivities, I, Randolph, was playing the part of a footman on standby, casting glances at the man wearing a disguise next to me. His dazzling golden hair was hidden under a dark cloth, and he was wearing the same uniform I was, but in reality, he was a man of exalted status. When I stifled a burst of laughter, his calm blue gaze landed on me. I did my best to keep it together, steeling my expression to show I understood what was at stake.

When we asked the fisherman for his story earlier, he'd told us that a child—not his own, but one who came around each day to help him with the chores—had abruptly gone missing. The police had written it off as a common enough occurrence, but this was different. The child had younger siblings. A fisherman's salary was a pittance, but the boy had always shown up to help first thing in the morning, no matter how hard the work was, to make sure he earned enough to support his siblings. It was unthinkable that he would disappear without a word.

"Hmm... I wonder what's going on here," I mused aloud.

When Prince Chris assured him that he would get to the bottom of the matter, the fisherman had looked perplexed. He'd made his case in the heat of the moment, but he wasn't sure he could trust the boy before him. So far, no one had ever been willing to give him the time of day; it was clear that he was

wondering why this kid, of all people, was the first to take him seriously. Still, the fact that Prince Chris had heard him out, along with his manifestly good status and upbringing, probably helped his case. After some ado, the man had bowed his head and backed off.

We'd then used the royal family's Shadows to look into things, and that was how we had ended up here.

"What was he called, again? The Master of Luwak Street, the slums of Kelk?"

This was turning into one of those clichéd tales about vanquishing the bad guys who had captured a princess. *But who would be the princess in this scenario? The missing kids? Wouldn't that make the prince of the story, you know...?* Upon making the association, I had to bite back yet another laugh.

Just then, there came a thunderous round of applause. A look in the direction it was coming from revealed that an audience had formed around an open stage set up in a corner of the garden. Evidently, the recipient of the ovation was a child.

While I was wondering what the big deal was, Prince Chris murmured, "That boy has a good talent for singing and music."

This was coming from someone who had grown up listening to the kingdom's finest musicians in the royal palace. His assessment was worth further consideration. Alas, I—and all the men of the Eisenach family, my father included—had no musical background whatsoever, so my understanding was limited.

As I watched from afar, vaguely intrigued, the kid finished his song and earned himself another round of applause, then sat down in a chair on the stage and began to perform his next piece. It was a sea shanty, the perfect song for a port town sinking into the darkness of night.

The song told a story that began in a port city. A man ventured out into the open sea, promising the lover he'd left behind that he would return with the treasure of her dreams. However, the man's voyage was full of hardships. Sometimes he fought pirates, other times he was buffeted about by storms that lasted for days, and when he finally set foot on foreign soil, he was hunted by the natives. Time and time again, he straddled the border between life and

death. Nevertheless, he did his best for his beloved back home, dreaming of a happy future with her.

At long last, the man made it back to the port city, a respectable sailor after all the trials he'd endured. But he was surprised by what he found there...

The child strummed his lute for dramatic effect, and the song continued into its second chapter. The story shifted to the woman's perspective. I'd been drawn into the tale, but I was torn away from the scene by a voice calling for a footman. I returned once the business was taken care of, only for the same thing to happen over and over again. It seemed one of the guests *really* wanted to summon Prince Chris, who stood out in spite of his disguise. They quickly realized it wasn't meant to be, however, as the people around him would always scramble to get the job done first.

Of course, those "people around him" were the footmen, myself included. For whatever reason, Prince Chris was strutting around like he owned the place, making no effort to get into the character of a servant. Sensing that it would be wrong to put him to work, his staff took the initiative to bustle back and forth. I was in honest-to-god awe. A prince was a prince through and through, it seemed.

I returned from my umpteenth errand just in time to catch a mighty round of applause and cheers as the song drew to a close. In an uncharacteristic move, I heaved a disappointed sigh.

"Man, I wanted to hear the rest of it. What happened to the port city girl in chapter two, Your Highness?"

In the evening darkness and the glow of the exotic lamps, I caught a sharp glint in his blue eyes. His shapely lips formed a response completely unrelated to the question I'd asked.

"Keep a close eye on that boy, Randy."

Surprised, I glanced over to see the singer who had basked in the lavish praise of the partygoers step down from the stage, only to be accosted by a member of the manor staff. While everyone else's attention was drawn to the follow-up act, he was invited to follow the man back into the mansion.

This was a garden soiree. Only a select few were allowed to set foot inside the manor, and it was a handsome child, of all people, who had been invited in.

Putting the pieces of the puzzle together, I acknowledged the order and jumped into my next course of action. Unsurprisingly, the moment I left his side, I saw an offbeat character approach the unbudging prince.

“He’s sure got a lot of confidence...”

I snuck into the mansion in pursuit of the child from earlier, wondering aloud if Prince Chris was going to be all right. His bodyguards were off doing their own thing at the moment. He still had a Shadow watching over him, so I figured he wasn’t in any real danger, but I worried he might do something reckless.

At fifteen, the prince of our kingdom was still in the prime of his youth. He’d desperately pined for his first love, only to have that family of tanuki thwart him at every turn despite his best efforts, and his powerful relatives kept trying to force a fiancée of their own choosing on him... He had no end of problems to deal with on the daily. Between everything going on, it looked to me like he was spinning his wheels—and like he was always vaguely irritated.

If only they were here, I was sure my third brother or the prince’s childhood friend, Lord Alexei, would find a way to take his mind off things. Too bad both had left to go train.

“Can’t say I’m all that close to him...”

My father and eldest brother had probably placed me at His Highness’s side because I was close to him in age and we already knew each other. Still, I was beginning to think that someone else might have been better suited to cheering him up. For example, someone who didn’t know anything about his status or circumstances...

Just as the thought crossed my mind, I heard voices approaching and ducked behind the nearest curtain. That same moment, the blade of a sword lunged straight for me, which I dodged on pure instinct. Before I even had time to wonder what the hell was going on, the sword took another stab at me in the dark, then another, and all I could do was avoid it with my well-trained movements and instincts.

What's more, the passersby didn't even seem to notice. *Give me a break!* I screamed in my head. Careful not to make a sound, I continued to dodge the assault with the minimum amount of movement and an exotic basket hanging from my arm. Once I was sure the potential eyewitnesses were gone, I delivered a powerful kick, one of the close-combat moves I specialized in.

"Urk!"

I was pretty sure I'd landed a hit on my opponent's solar plexus.

Then, the sword-wielding stranger jumped out from the curtain. His next thrust hit something, but he himself realized that it was too shallow an impact—he'd missed me.

A choked gasp filled the silence, which I followed with a bloodthirsty battle cry—and that was when my opponent screamed, "Wait! Uh... Hold on a second. Like, seriously, stop. In the words of our forefathers, good things come to those who wait!"

In spite of the many questions I had, I determined based on past experience that the best course of action was to put him down.

"Here's what I've learned: kill or be killed."

I unleashed another attack in time with my words, and my opponent ducked out of the way. Once again, I had to wonder who this mysterious stranger was. Though I was only thirteen years old, my physical combat skills were on par with my brothers'. Yet this man had managed to avoid taking a fatal blow.

Soon enough, we faced off in the moonlight streaming through the window and got a proper look at each other's faces. He was a boy with gentle features. He had the air of a well-to-do son, and he wasn't even bothering to hide his appearance.

Still, if the fact that he'd dodged my attacks was any indication, his skill was the real deal. He tried to talk me down in a genuine fluster, spouting the sorts of lines I might hear from an actor. "Besides! I was hiding here first. Sure, it's my fault for suddenly trying to stab you, but you took me by surprise. Since you came along after me, shouldn't you show a little more respect for your predecessor?"

I blinked. He had a point.

“Sorry.” I lowered my sword and gave him a polite bow. Then I held it back at the ready and added, “But you’re suspicious. I need to take you out.”

“How did you come to that conclusion?!”

Since I used my blade as a last resort, melee and martial arts were my go-to moves. Facing an opponent who wouldn’t succumb to those had me extra fired up. But just as I was contemplating how to beat the young man in front of me, consumed by an inappropriate sense of excitement, he came right out and identified himself.

“I was sent here by the department of City Hall in charge of regulating currency! I have an official seal right here. I’m undercover as part of a secret investigation. Now, who are *you*? Child or no, I’ll show you no mercy depending on how you answer. Do bear that in mind.”

My feet, which had been itching to dance to the rhythm of battle, shuffled sadly over the floor. In the end, everything was just as the prince had predicted.

Chapter 4: What Young Alan Witnessed

I swallowed down an exclamation of surprise. The sun had set while I was left to wait in another room, and the chamber to which I was eventually escorted had a dubious air about it. Several layers of a thin, exotic veil hung from the ceiling, obscuring the silhouettes beyond. I could make out several people behind it. They were all sitting on the floor in the same manner foreign performers sometimes did. An expensive-looking animal print rug was laid out over a platform one step above the ground, and a figure was lounging upon it.

Several dim lamps lit the space, and a suspicious scent hung in the air. It was the perfect entrance for the mastermind. I almost had to applaud in the privacy of my mind.

A voice called out to me from behind the veil as I was brought front and center. "You there, boy," it said in nasally tones. "What is your name?"

I gathered a lot from those few words. This person was in their midfifties. Based on the sound of their voice, they were thin. Probably a picky eater. The raspy edge to the voice suggested a habit of smoking or drinking. Furthermore, the faint rustle of clothes when they moved evoked images of opulent, exotic garments. The breathing of the figures seated around them was that of children my age.

"I'm Alan," I replied in my usual friendly and cheerful manner.

The owner of the voice laughed, perhaps amused by my fearlessness. "Alan, then. Your performance in the garden was brilliant. The guests were quite pleased. Would you mind playing one more song just for me?"

My trusty lute gripped securely in one hand, I said that I wouldn't mind. A smile on my face, I chose my next words carefully. "I do make a living off these skills, though. And I accepted your invitation because I was promised an attractive reward. If I perform here, can I hope for a little something extra?"

Laughter rang out from the other side of the veil. The Master behind the

curtain said that it was no wonder a boy as savvy as me had lasted so long on Luwak Street. Then they snorted and asked, “What do you desire?” It sounded like they were testing me.

I assessed the mood in the room, hiding my own nervousness. Was now the time to go all in?

Once I’d made up my mind, I smiled and said, “I’d love to become your new favorite.” I added that it would come with lots of perks, and I wouldn’t have to worry about the adults bleeding me dry anymore. I went with a fawning answer because I’d determined that now wasn’t the time to push my luck. It was something of a hunch—a sense for danger that had helped me survive in the backstreets. My instinct turned out to be right, but by the time I had set foot in the room, it was already too late.

The Master behind the curtain chuckled meaningfully, then called my name in a sweet yet sinister murmur. They praised me as clever and resourceful, but something about the compliment sounded insincere.

A moment later, they snapped their fingers in some sort of signal. “But...you still think like a child,” they sneered. Just as I braced myself, a couple of captive children emerged from a door toward the back.

“Alan!”

It was Marcus and Maurie, two of my teammates from the slums. Just as we’d discussed beforehand, they’d been sneaking around the mansion in search of clues while I drew everyone’s attention with my music and song. Children like us had been disappearing from the backstreets one after another, and before they went missing, they had always been approached by a suspicious man. This time around, the plan was to take him up on his offer, then rescue the other kids while I was confronting the Master. This was all based on my assumption that they must be confined somewhere in the estate.

But we’d been caught red-handed. Or, no...had our whole plan been a miscalculation?

Maurie apologized to me in tears, while Marcus looked guilty. I immediately began working out my next move. What did I have to do to escape with my friends? If I tried to fight back alone, I knew I’d be caught in no time. Was my

best move to submit and wait for an opening?

While I pondered my options, the Master behind the curtain guffawed. “You’re a clever boy, Alan. But what could children like you hope to accomplish on your own? You can search every inch of this estate, but you’ll still never find what you’re looking for.”

They gave a mocking laugh, and their next words were chilling.

“Alan, and you children there. Who do you think would care if orphans like you went missing from Luwak Street? If anything, most people would be glad to see fewer pickpockets and purse-snatchers around. Kelk Harbor is the western gateway to Sauslind Kingdom. We have to keep it spotless. The front door of a kingdom with such an excellent reputation should always be swept clean.”

The color drained from my face, and Marcus and Maurie gulped upon realizing what the words meant. The Master behind the curtain was saying that the kingdom’s authorities didn’t care how many orphans like us went missing, or what suffering we endured.

And he was probably right. We had no family. We were all of dubious heritage and upbringing. The only benefits we got from the state were the occasional soup kitchen or roadside lessons on how to read, write, and do simple arithmetic. I’d never once felt respect or gratitude for the government, the royalty, or the nobility. At best, I’d felt a longing for a world not my own.

Besides, just as the Master said, we had done our share of questionable deeds. That was the whole reason we’d chosen to resolve the problem ourselves, without relying on the help of officials. It was easy for the Master to say we were thinking like children, but we didn’t have any other options available to us.

We were the trash in the lowest recesses of the kingdom. The officials and higher-ups didn’t care about us. We could be swept away like dust—and no one would bat an eye.

“Ugh...”

A dark thought crossed my mind: would that boy I’d met feel the same way? The stark difference in our upbringings made it clear he was the son of a rich

family. We'd teamed up by pure chance, but I wondered if he'd just shrug and carry on with his own agenda if the rest of us got caught.

To be fair, we're perfect strangers, I thought in an attempt to lift my increasingly gloomy spirits. I'd made it this far all on my own. It wasn't like me to rely on others, I told myself.

Staying alert so as not to miss an opening, I nervously opened my mouth to speak. It wasn't a good idea to act too confident in this scenario—especially not when dealing with someone with so much unwarranted ego. “What's the point of kidnapping kids like us, Master? Do you plan to make us your followers, like all those children you have waiting on you?”

I asked them if they were planning to build a kingdom of children or what, my bad habit of teasing rearing its ugly head.

Perhaps confident they had the upper hand, the Master behind the curtain gave an amused laugh. “That's not a bad idea. You've got good looks, Alan, and a voice and musical ability to match. It would be a waste to sell you off to another kingdom. Maybe I should grant your wish and turn you into my new favorite.”

That was when it all clicked into place. They were a human trafficker who sold orphans no one would miss to other countries—a petty crook.

After humming in thought, I answered in my usual fashion. “Actually, I'm good. My motto is that I'll do whatever it takes to survive, but I have a few stipulations. One, I won't kill. Two, I won't abandon my friends. Three, selling my body is the absolute last resort. And I'm *definitely* not interested in giving myself to a *man*.”

Both the figure behind the veil and Marcus and Maurie stirred with surprise. The Master did indeed have a throaty voice, but it didn't sound rough and deep like a man's. Rather, it had a nasal quality to it.

I kept pushing. “Besides, *Mr.* Master. You're not the real Master who runs Luwak Street, are you? This mansion is owned by the Maritime Merchants' Guild. Merchants and nobles conduct various transactions on the premises during their evening parties. It'd be no surprise if the Master of Luwak Street was among them, but they never make public appearances. They'd certainly

never reveal themselves to lowly children like us. Even someone who thinks like a kid can tell. You're just some flunky."

The rustling of clothes told me that the Master had sat up. I could sense a rage building. Nevertheless, I persisted—in the hopes of creating an opening. "Well, no surprise there. You're pretty much engaging in petty villainy. I can't imagine the real Master of Luwak Street would bother selling kids like us for a bit of small change."

"Alan." The voice behind the veil dropped an octave. "Very well. Why don't I keep you by my side and discipline the insolence out of you? I'll make it so you can never sass me again...and so you'll call me 'Master' in a sweet voice and wag your little tail like the rest of these children."

Before I could shoot back a resounding "No, thanks," the men who had apprehended Marcus and Maurie started in my direction. Just as I saw my chance to make a break for it, however, the faint sound of a knock echoed through the room. It was so out of place that everyone turned their heads at once. The Master behind the curtain seemed both disgruntled and dubious at once, and a quiet voice called out to him from behind the door. It said that he had a visitor.

"A visitor?" He asked who it was, and the servant outside apologized before opening the door.

Our room was surrounded by a gang of thugs; I'd seen them when I was first shown inside. Outside the door, a new figure strode past the otherwise familiar sight.

The moment he arrived on the scene, everyone was spellbound—myself included, of course. He had an unparalleled sense of presence that was unaffected by the eerie lighting of the room. His hair was hidden under a dark cloth, so I couldn't tell what color it was. Nevertheless, just one look from his vibrant, clear blue eyes was all it took to bring the whole room under his command.

Suddenly, he was the one in control—of our lives, of the Master behind the curtain, of everything. It all hinged on his words or a single flick of his finger.

I could have sworn I heard a small voice of awe within me. The man who had

just entered the room had handsome features the likes of which were seldom seen. He was still in the process of growing, though, so that could always change. He was an adolescent boy, maybe two or three years older than us. Still, he had an aura unlike anything I'd ever felt before. Overwhelmed and mesmerized, I suddenly found myself wondering if, just maybe...

Then the original master of the room raised his voice, sounding irritated and somewhat panicked. *"You're the visitor? I don't recall asking for you or inviting you."*

The boy simply observed the scene without saying a word. The servant who had led him here watched him in silence, hanging back at his side.

Enraged to see this stranger acting more the part of a "master" than himself, the man behind the curtain began to shout in a masculine voice. He ordered his thugs to apprehend the intruder, whoever he was, because he had no use for a boy that old. That was when it hit me; I was probably on the border myself. The Master behind the curtain had a predilection for kids around ten who had yet to hit puberty. That was why he only targeted young children.

Five different men in the room reached for the boy all at once. The next thing they knew, they were knocked flat on their backs as if they'd been blown backwards.

Everyone else blinked, unsure of what had happened, but I'd caught a glimpse of it. A red shadow had darted out from between Marcus and Maurie, circled in front of the boy, and sent the men flying in an instant.



What was left in the aftermath was, just as I'd caught in my sights, a redheaded boy. His hair was short and spiky, and he had impish brown eyes. His expression was filled with an energetic vigor, as if he was enjoying the thrill of a life-or-death situation. He was like a miniature whirlwind in a young boy's form.

Yet the blue-eyed, lordly boy parted his shapely lips and spoke without a hint of admiration. "You could be a little quieter about it." The implication of "you noisy show-off" was clear from his tone.

The short-haired boy raised a voice of protest, as if to say that remark was uncalled for. "You kept me waiting too long, Prince Chris. I was thinking of going ahead without you."

The other boy shot back that he was too short-tempered, and their lighthearted banter drew more ranting from the Master behind the curtain. He yelled at the guards that it was pathetic to lose to a child, ordering them to take the boy into custody this instant. A pair of clear blue eyes locked onto him in response. That glare seemed to pack a punch even through the curtain, and I sensed the man flinch like a frog before a snake.

A chill in his voice, the boy said, "Helge Trout. I hear you're a foreign merchant...but your trade note has been revoked as of the Maritime Merchants' Guild's most recent meeting. You've also been stripped of your status as a guest. The president said we're free to do whatever we want with you."

"Wha—?"

The Master behind the curtain went speechless, while the boy continued to impassively state the facts. His lack of emotion was comparable to that of a commissioner. "Copper coins of inferior quality have been circulating in Kelk Harbor for the past few months. The authorities and guilds have been keeping a close eye on the situation, and it was recently revealed to be the work of a foreign merchant. The key piece of evidence was a silver coin a policeman found a few days ago. It takes quite a lot of skill and funds to remake silver coins. It's not even comparable to copper. And after quite a bit of research, it was your name that came up—Helge Trout."

"Impossible!" the man yelled.

At this point, the star of the scene was clearly the blue-eyed boy with a presence like no other.

“We have all the proof. When we looked into the source of the counterfeit coins, we found that they might have been coming from a certain merchant ship. However, it was officially considered a foreign passenger ship and therefore outside our jurisdiction. Still, we couldn’t turn a blind eye to fake money that has the potential to make the rounds all over Sauslind. Thus, I changed the ship’s status by way of royal decree. Oh, right... While we were there, we also discovered some of the children who had recently gone missing. The guild’s decision was made on the basis of this evidence.”

The Master behind the curtain muttered that this couldn’t be true, almost as if in mourning, but a moment later, he seemed to latch onto a part of that speech he couldn’t overlook. As his mind caught up to what was happening, he ripped the veil in front of him from the ceiling.

As expected, he had an unhealthy-looking, ashen complexion and was dressed in lavish foreign garb. With a face caked in makeup, he stared at the boy in shock. “Don’t tell me... Don’t tell me...?!”

Everyone waited with bated breath for the boy’s next words. It was one of the most reliable clichés in storytelling—displaying the ultimate crest that would bring all villains to their knees. A one-of-a-kind-item which might as well have come with its own sound effect. If he was going to flaunt it, now was the time. At that moment, the expectations of everyone in the room were aligned.

Instead, what came was a response dripping with instinctive revulsion. “What the hell am I looking at? I can’t stand to see a man in makeup outside the theater. Randy, arrest him on the charge of offending my sensibilities.”

“What?!”

The spiky-haired boy seemed shocked that he’d suggest such a flimsy reason, and it probably threw him off, as he was about to stick a hand in his breast pocket and grab the all-important you-know-what that one normally flashed in a situation like this. He’d been robbed of his chance to reenact the pivotal scene from one of the most popular dramas in the harbor.

He had encountered a setback, but he wasn’t let down in the end. The reason

was that the foreign villain, who still didn't quite understand what was going on, said *his* proper line. "Now that it's come to this..."

Raring to go, the spiky-haired boy stepped forward into a fight-ready stance that screamed, *I've been waiting for this!* He might as well have come out and said, *All right, my time in the limelight has come!*

Alas, we would soon discover that his expectations had been betrayed for a second time.

In a typical villain fashion, the Master behind the curtain yelled at his men outside to get the intruders, stating that he didn't care if they were nobles or not. But there was no response. Even I had to wonder what was going on. Where had the thugs stationed out front gone?

At first, the spiky-haired boy tapped his feet to the rhythm of battle, but his steps grew sluggish as his big moment failed to come. "Prince Chris. You didn't...?"

The blue-eyed boy harrumphed and was quick to answer, "I don't want to brawl in a smelly place like this." The look on Spiky Hair's face changed at that, and I likewise gave a start.

I rushed to plug my nose, but Marcus and Maurie, the first to get caught, were already unsteady on their feet. It was clear something was wrong with them.

Spiky Hair cried out in epiphany. "So *that's* why you made me drink that bitter powder before we came here!"

Beside the shouting boy, one of the bodyguards cracked open the door in search of an escape route. But what awaited him was the sight of his comrades lying in heaps on the floor, visible even in the dim light.

The man called Helge drew a step back, insisting over and over again that this was impossible. Seeing this, a smile crept across the face of the blue-eyed boy who had taken command of the situation. It was the very definition of haughty.

"I *do* understand the beauty of clichés, I promise...but is this man really worth giving my name to, Randy?"

The spiky-haired boy named Randy ran around the room, deftly knocking out the remaining men while yelling, “Who does he think he is?!” While he was at it, he smashed what few glass windows there were to improve the air flow. It was almost like his very presence was purifying the room, I thought.

On the verge of getting purified himself, Helge let his true nature slip in his fear. “What did I do that was so wrong?! I just made good use of the trash that settled down in our harbor. Plenty of people were happy about it! That’s how I made it this far! Even the officials and the union tacitly endorsed my actions. How dare they turn on me after reaping the benefits for so long!”

Just as Helge was about to reveal even more, someone approached him without a sound or a sign and knocked the raving man unconscious. The blue-eyed boy smiled faintly, as if he’d been waiting for this.

“I was wondering when you’d reveal yourself—Master of Luwak Street.”

Next to the fainted figure of Helge was a person standing straight at attention—someone who had disguised themselves as an elderly, hunch-backed servant until that moment.

Chapter 5: The Heart's Compass

The Master of Luwak Street? Who, this person? I, Alan, thought as I glanced over in surprise. I could tell from their physique as they stood at attention that they were a woman in men's clothing. Her body shape differed from the prostitutes on the street, but she was clearly female.

She gave a small chuckle, but it was difficult to discern her age from her voice. Plus, based on the way she touched her hand lightly to her throat, I figured she knew how to modulate her voice at will.

The Master of Luwak Street seldom made public appearances, and their age and gender were both unknown. Still, the fact that thugs like Guido could claim relation to the Master without being wiped out was proof of their existence. Whoever they were, they were indispensable in keeping the city backstreets under control.

And this woman was that person?

The chuckling figure turned her gaze on the blue-eyed boy—the one called Chris. The Master's eyes, hair color, and facial features were difficult to make out in the dim light. I had a feeling that was by design.

"I humbly beg your permission to speak, O Exalted One. I am the owner of this house, a servant sent by the guild. I'm afraid your suspicions are entirely unfound—"

"In that case," Chris interrupted her, a laugh in his voice, "why did you stop that makeup ghoul from talking?"

"Because it was an offense to the ears, of course."

"How convenient," the boy countered. "The truth is that you don't want him spilling your secrets, isn't it? That goes for the Master of Luwak Street, the Maritime Merchants' Guild, and the mayor of Kelk Harbor alike. You three always maintain a careful balance. You ensure that no single one of you gets a march on the others, yet you all reap the benefits of evil behind the scenes, just

like this man claimed. This particular incident escalated past what could be resolved between relatives, and you were forced to eliminate a loose end before things went public. Do I have that about right?”

“Hardly,” the Master replied in a voice that sounded neither masculine nor feminine. “I seem to have given you cause for confusion, O Exalted One. I would like to apologize again on behalf of the higher-ups and offer a proper explanation. Shall we take this conversation elsewhere?”

I saw Randy, the spiky-haired boy, narrow his eyes and lower his stance at the implicit demand to stop digging. It was a gesture of loyalty, a signal that he wouldn’t let anyone stand in his lord’s way. The boy was as forthright as appearances would suggest.

Sensing tension in the air as both sides refused to back down, I decided to intervene. I gathered that Maurie’s brother and the other missing children had been rescued from the phony Master’s boat and taken into custody for the time being, so there was only one thing left for me to do: return the favor. To that end, I pulled out intel I’d been saving for the right moment.

I said it like it was no big deal. Like I was just your average informant.

“You *are* the Master of Luwak Street, aren’t you?”

The Master shot me a look that could kill, and I shrank in on myself, clutching my lute to my chest. There was a reason the Master didn’t want anyone uncovering her true identity.

“Um, you see...” The terrifying look on her face had me sweating bullets on the inside, but I stood strong and explained my rationale. “The grown-ups always take a cut of what we children earn, but it’s *our* rightful money. So, one time, I tailed Gui...um, one of the men who was always shaking us down. That’s when I first heard what you sounded like.”

What I heard now was the same unmistakable sound I’d heard back then. There was only one possible explanation.

“Of course, you’d never be caught so easily. Even your own relative Guido didn’t know your gender, name, or what you looked like. Still, I heard a strange sound coming from the one known as the ‘Master.’ I hear that in some foreign

countries, there's a certain object you can strike against a gold, silver, or copper coin to determine almost exactly how much it's worth. Usually, their value is estimated based on weight, but different coins make a distinctive sound when struck by this particular tool. On occasion, it can be used to tune musical instruments too. It's apparently very, very valuable."

I flashed her a smile. "Every time you move, I hear the same sound I did back then. If I had to guess, I bet you're carrying that tool in your breast pocket."

There came a snort of approval. It was that boy called Chris.

His words were short and few. "Well done, boy."

My heart pounded in my ears. I'd heard a certain sound ringing from his chest for some time now. It was just like what I'd heard about in the stories long ago.

"Master of Luwak Street. I don't care if you feign ignorance of *that* truth, but it's a different story if you've had a hand in creating the counterfeit money circulating through Sauslind. I intend to get to the bottom of this scandal and crush it at the source. However, it's not too late to settle this with a discussion." His mouth lifted in a smirk. "It's like this boy said. You have an obstacle of your own. I assume it's the mayor who runs this city—the man appointed by Duke Odin. I know how those indoctrinated by the duke like to do things. Just as this makeup ghouel said, he wants the front entrance swept clean."

The realization hit me with a start. As far as the higher-ups were concerned, Guido and the Master of Luwak Street were no better than the rest of us—just more of the same trash.

The silent figure at last let slip a small sigh. This was probably what her voice really sounded like, stripped of all camouflage. "Honestly... I've allowed quite the troublemaker into my home."

She brushed back her hair as she spoke, letting her long, dark locks spill free. Her whole image changed with that one gesture. She had a one-of-a-kind presence, all her previous politeness nowhere to be found.

Her eyes locked on to me, the one who had revealed her identity, and she spoke as if quietly appraising me. "I've heard the stories about you, Alan the Honeybee. Rumor has it there's a skilled musician among the children of the

slums. He learned how to play the lute from a traveling band, and in just a month, he was good enough to put a professional to shame. You have a keen ear for sound.”

Her tone of voice was gentle, yet it had an element of danger to it. I gulped, realizing I had stepped into something I shouldn't have. The Master couldn't have been pleased to be unmasked by a child like me. I wouldn't be surprised if she had me taken out behind the scenes. The children who had been sitting around and waiting on the phony Master had long since fled, and Marcus and Maurie were half-asleep, huddled on top of one another. I was probably the only one in danger.

“I haven't forgotten how you framed a relative of mine either. Not that I mind, since it saved me the trouble of getting rid of that good-for-nothing. You were able to identify a counterfeit coin with your hearing alone. That's quite a rare gift. Now, in light of all that...what am I to do with you?”

I could tell the Master was weighing her options concerning me: she could either wipe me out or use my skills to her own ends. When I saw the way she was looking at me, I was struck with the thought, *Not again*.

This had happened to me once before. Just like when I'd been chained to the bow of that ship, this gift of mine would fasten yet another collar around my neck. By “gift,” I meant that my ears were a little sharper than the average person's. It was all thanks to that skill that I'd survived life on the backstreets. It was hard to deny that most things had gone my way, and I'd saved up more money than my peers. Still, in the end, it would be my ability that ultimately decided my fate.

It was as I was chewing on my lip that someone called out to me. His voice was flat and even. “You there. Boy. Your name is Alan, isn't it? How would you like to come work for me?”

“Huh?”

I blinked and glanced over, only to find those matchless blue eyes staring straight through me. The spiky-haired boy likewise shot his lord a look of surprise.

The boy quietly went on, “Your ability is a rare one indeed. But, you see, I

have a girl I'm determined to win someday, and her whole family possesses a rare gift similar to yours. That said..."

The boy called Chris turned his gaze on the Master of Luwak Street. By voicing his disagreement with the Master's point of view, he probably hoped to convince himself of his own resolve.

"What I want isn't her skills. All I desire is a life where she can read her books in peace by my side—a world where she never has to use her gift. I'm going to make that a reality. Would you care to help me, Alan?"

My eyes went wide, and my mouth fell open in time to the beat pulsing from my heart. I cleared my throat, then asked, just to be certain, "You really don't want me for my gift?"

The boy gave a firm nod, his eyes still fixed on the Master. He assured me otherwise, only to add, "However, I'll use all the tools at my disposal when the situation calls for it."

I exclaimed that he was no better than the Master, which drew a light laugh from the woman in question. She remarked, "You have quite the way with words. I'd heard that a man of high status was performing an inspection of the region, and I figured he'd be making his way to these parts soon...but for all the talk I'd heard of your brilliance, you're awfully wet behind the ears. Gossip is best taken with a pinch of salt, I suppose."

The boy named Chris snorted and shot back, "Might as well embrace naivete while I'm the right age for it. And if I may add, Master of Luwak Street, didn't you sit back and let me interfere because, deep down, you were just as angry? Despite constantly forcing their dirty work onto you, the mayor and union president have always intended to cut you off at the drop of a hat. Their recent foray into selling orphans abroad finally crossed a line for you, seeing as you hail from a similar background."

This series of shocking reveals left me gawking at the Master. The harbor was filled with orphans. It was a year-round port of call for foreign merchant ships; there was no shortage of women providing men physical comfort. It wasn't unusual to come across children who didn't know their fathers, or even babies left on orphanage steps.

Said orphanages provided a decent environment, thanks to the regional lord's preoccupation with appearances. Still, the children who came out of them rarely got ahead in life—especially in this city. One's birth, upbringing, family circumstances, and lineage all dictated how others viewed them. Any attempts to rise to the top would be thwarted by forces above.

For the first time, irritation seeped into the Master's tone. It was a more emotional version of her natural voice. "Do you mean to preach from on high, O Exalted One, that a person's upbringing doesn't determine their life? Or are you planning to adopt all the orphans in town? Hah! If you intend to rule our kingdom with such naive idealism, our downfall can't be far off." She scoffed that she'd better make arrangements to flee the country, but the boy wasn't fazed.

He replied, "A person's upbringing *does* determine their life." Despite the anger burning in the Master's eyes, he nonchalantly—and as haughtily as ever—went on, "There's no point in denying that I was born into privilege and that you were born clawing your way through the mud. Those are the facts. I am the most desired, venerated, and blessed person in the kingdom, who was brought up with the utmost love and care and never once wanted for anything. Tough luck."

Everyone was taken aback by his shameless boasting about his heritage and upbringing. That went for me, the Master, and the spiky-haired boy alike.

The next snort he gave was not one of complacency or contempt, but one that held a glimpse of a true ruler in it. "Master of Luwak Street. Alan. The reason you two and I are standing face-to-face, negotiating, lies in your own gifts and the skills you have cultivated. What other explanation is there?"

It was because I'd worked hard to survive that I was standing here now. It was because the Master had risen in the ranks despite her upbringing that *she* was standing here now. Our own efforts were what had brought us to this man.

I couldn't hold back an explosion of laughter.

In the end, it was the same sentiment phrased a different way. Either a person's upbringing didn't determine their life, or it did. One could change their stance, but it would only lead them round and round in circles. Ultimately, it all

came back to the same root: how did *you* see the other person?

As I laughed, I remembered an old story I'd heard—about a sound that no one had ever heard before. Its nature varied from person to person, but it would become clear upon meeting the one it belonged to. It was a compass. Even this man had a sound that reverberated from his heart. For some, it was a rousing battle hymn. For others, it was a strong, furtive rhythm that pulsed from the silent depths of the earth. Sometimes, it could even sound like the roar of a raging sea.

And as for the sound I'd heard inside myself...

Gramps, I thought as I wiped away the tears that had started to fall for reasons I didn't understand. He was the old man on the boat, the only one there who had ever cared about me. I hadn't meant to drag him into my revenge. *I'm sorry, gramps. All I wanted was to be free. I wanted to see the wider world you'd told me about in the stories.*

Plus, I'd wanted to meet that one special person—my heart's compass. The one who played the beat I was willing to stake my life on.

After wiping my cheeks, I turned to look at Prince Chris and the spiky-haired boy standing in front of him. I put my feelings of heartfelt acceptance into words. “‘Who does he think he is?’ You said it.”

His goal wasn't to lecture us and impose his ideals upon us, but to step out of his own world and confront us head-on. He subscribed to the belief that he could change the world around him by taking action. That was why he'd set his sights on the Master and offered *her* a deal—not the mayor of the town, who worked under the duke, and not the Maritime Merchants' Guild, which only cared about turning a profit.

I couldn't stop the delight welling up in my breast. I trusted this man. Even orphans like us would be safe in his hands. It was possible to change the world through his methods. If I stayed with him, my life would no doubt be filled with all the excitement and swashbuckling of a stormy sea—but it would definitely be fun.

“Lord Chris. I, Alan, hereby vow to follow you. I don't mind being collared if you're the one placing it around my neck. I'm sure it would be lighter and more

liberating than anything anyone else could put on me. I leave my gift—my all—in your hands.”

Chris grinned at my declaration, while the Master softly sighed. Her voice held the note of consent that came with a full acceptance of the circumstances, signifying that the matter was settled. In the midst of the action unfolding around me, I threw myself into a brand new world, accompanied only by the lute I’d refused to relinquish.

The next day was the Boat Festival. In the presence of the mayor and the president of the Maritime Merchants’ Guild, Randy and I watched from the edge of the VIP seats as a myriad of ships took to the seas all at once. The owner of those clear blue eyes no longer wore a disguise, his dazzling golden hair revealed for all to see.

He was the future king of our kingdom—Christopher, His Highness the Crown Prince. And I was present as one of his attendants.

With an entity as dazzling as the big blue ocean in my sights, I silently murmured, *I found him, gramps. My own personal compass. A sound that echoes across an endless clear blue sky—one that even I don’t know if I could play. My one and only master.*

Chapter 6: A Fight on the Deck

“What’s the meaning of this, Alan?”

No sooner had I arrived at the harbor than an old friend accosted me with a fierce glare. He hadn’t even given me a chance to celebrate our long-awaited reunion.

“No one told me the news until I took over for Prince Theodore. Ian was killed in an accident?”

He was referring to one of the Black Wing Knights, Ian Brennan. He had been a young man with hair the color of sunshine, whose good nature was a direct reflection of his status as a well-born son.

It all went back to that incident six years ago. Ian was the boy from a merchant family we met back then. I’d made his acquaintance before Prince Chris took me in, but it turned out he really was the son of a rich family. He had a girl he’d been in love with since he was little, and he’d been desperate to make a name for himself and win her parents’ approval.

He’d obtained information on the counterfeit coins in Kelk, spotted a messenger from the suspicious mansion he’d been keeping tabs on—and in the process of tailing him, walked in on the fuss between me and Guido. His interest piqued by the counterfeits I’d detected, Ian had next snuck into the estate owned by the Maritime Merchants’ Association, where he’d bumped into Randy by sheer coincidence. He and Randy had introduced themselves, exchanged information, and hurried off to the ship where the kidnappings were taking place. By the time they arrived, however, Prince Chris’s imperial guards had already checked everything out, robbing him of his chance to shine.

I couldn’t help laughing when he’d slumped his shoulders and moaned, “What about my glory...?” Ian had been the first to notice something was wrong and start his own investigation, only for Prince Chris to come along afterward, take all the credit, and settle the matter once and for all.

Plus, Ian had taken the time to check that we orphans were safe and sound. My first impression had been right; he was a kindhearted person. I'd worried about what would happen to Marcus, Maurie, and the rest of my friends once I was gone, but he'd taken good care of them in my absence.

During that time, Randy had inexplicably challenged him to a duel, and it had come to light that he was actually quite the skilled fighter. He'd gotten to know Prince Chris as a natural consequence, and I'd watched from the sidelines as the two of them, perhaps due to their proximity in age or their similar circumstances, grew close enough to be called friends.

Speaking of which, immediately after Prince Chris took me in, I was subjected to days upon days of nothing but studying. I had to learn proper language, pronunciation, etiquette, reading, writing, arithmetic, history, geography, sheet music—you name it. I'd had *quite* a few regrets at the time. And I'd learned something important: any invitation of the prince's always came with a catch. A few years later, the girl Prince Chris had been chasing fell victim to the same dilemma, but that's a story for another time.

"Alan..."

I looked up at the man questioning me with irritation in his voice. He had the same short hair and tall frame as he had back then. His skin was bronzed and his build toned with age. His baby face hadn't changed a bit, though.

He was brimming with all the same vigor and muscular vitality I remembered him for. Evidently, he'd been training as hard as ever since enlisting in the harbor's navy. Though he couldn't have been more than a year older than me, his line of sight had grown much higher than mine, and I instinctively stood straight at attention. Was this, as Prince Chris would put it, the nutritional gap in our upbringings?

This man was a marine dispatched from Sauslind's Southern Naval Unit—Randolph Eisenach.

I debated how to respond. He hadn't been informed of the details—about the truth of how our mutual friend, Ian, had betrayed Prince Chris and walked the path to his own demise.

Figuring it was safe to tell Randy, I divulged the full story with no small

amount of bitterness. It included everything I'd heard from the Shadows and all the things that had happened up north. What had gone on in the capital and the royal palace. What had been public knowledge and what had happened behind the scenes. Everything.

At the end of the long tale, Randy slumped down into a nearby chair. I'd never seen him like this before. Still, this was no time to be stewing in sadness.

Just as I was about to say something to him, he snapped his head back up. "What about Prince Chris? Is he all right?!"

He was still as excitable as ever—and as compassionate and surprisingly loyal to Prince Chris.

Knowing Randy, he was worried about how Prince Chris was faring after taking his own friend's life. I was a little relieved to see that he hadn't changed a bit. The time we'd spent together in the harbor was irreplaceable to me. I didn't want to lose anyone else.

In my usual manner, I replied, "We won't know how he's taking it until later, so why don't you check on him then? Before that, there's someone we need to go see. She's sure to have some damning evidence for us."

I was just as angry as he was. We'd only spent about a month together after our first meeting, but I'd grown very fond of Ian. I'd never forgive Duke Odin for setting him up, but Prince Chris had already dealt with him. That left one more culprit.

Randy rose to his feet, his expression hardening. He agreed with me, doing his best to reset his emotional state.

With that, we headed to a certain exchange house. It was one of the shops officially recognized by the domain's government, and was set up in every port town bordering the open sea, in which foreign money could be exchanged through legitimate transactions. Ostensibly, the shop converted foreign currency into the dora that could be used in Sauslind, but the owner had a second persona.

"It's been a while, Master."

I remarked from my place toward the edge of the shop that she hadn't

changed, at which a gloomy figure huddled in a corner, keeping her distance from everyone else, glanced up at me. She showed little care for appearances, with her hair tied back in an unkempt style and a slight hunchback. She shot me a nasty glare. Upon catching that look, I couldn't help flinching the tiniest bit.

She took off the monocle she was using to perform an inspection, quirked her lip a fraction, and urged us to get out of the way. It was her way of telling us not to interfere with her business. At first glance, it seemed like we'd been turned away at the door, but we did as we were told without a second thought. Soon enough, she led us to another room, where we were left to wait for some time.

When she came back, I greeted her again. "It's nice to see you for the first time in six years, granny. On behalf of my lord, I, Alan Ferrera, offer my congratulations on your continued good health."

Back then, I'd made the mistake of stepping on the Master's hot button toward the end of our encounter; I'd heard her natural voice and guessed her true age. I still had vivid memories of the terrifying look she'd given me.

That was one other lesson I'd learned from that whole affair: *never* guess a woman's age.

The reason the Master only revealed her true identity to a select few was, no doubt, because she'd be undermined if it came to light that the one running the backstreets was a woman—particularly in a port city so full of ruffians. This time, however, I went out of my way to say things I knew would upset her. After all, her own negligence had played a part in all of this. She acknowledged as much, so she only huffed in response.

"Ian's own family was one thing, but there wasn't much I could do about his lover and *her* family."

Ian was from a neighboring town. His fiancée's parents were officials who worked at city hall, in the department that regulated currency.

I cast doubt on her claim, my voice sounding unusually cold even to my own ears. "Surely you must have been keeping an eye on the mayor who worked under the duke? When he kidnapped Ian's fiancée and her family, didn't it occur to you that he might be planning to use them for something?"

“Come now,” she said, a hint of irritation in her voice, “don’t make me out to be all-powerful, son. I had my hands full cleaning up the whole city, thanks to that visit from the Malduran delegation.”

It must have been an order from the regional lord who cared so much for prestige and appearances. He’d probably insisted that they couldn’t show their Malduran enemies even a glimpse of weakness. And thus had the cleanup begun.

I couldn’t quite nod my head to that, but I could make some guesses of my own. Ian’s fiancée and her family had been kidnapped and used to blackmail Ian into committing the ultimate crime. Something told me they’d been taken while the Master was busy looking after her own domain—the city backstreets.

“What became of the orphans?” In a low voice, I warned her that she better not have cleared them out in secret again.

Once I became part of the system, I’d learned that running a kingdom wasn’t a charity. The children in the orphanages were one thing, but not even Prince Chris could do anything for the ones who weren’t under his patronage. Still, he tried to find ways to do whatever little he could. The medical facility he’d opened in early spring, which provided treatment to those from all walks of life, was one such example. Then again, the actual credit for the idea belonged to the woman he treasured above all else.

A host of other impoverished people were living in the harbor: washed-up sailors-turned-thugs, families waiting for a father who had been shipwrecked and would never come home, and those who had been forced to sell their bodies and then reduced to begging in their old age. Each had their own story, much like the shanties sung in town.

With a small sigh, the Master turned a familiar sharp gaze on me. “I’d wager you’re underestimating a couple things—the reason I have this title, and the power it holds.”

She was the Master of Luwak Street, one of the three forces that ruled Kelk Harbor and its backstreets. Our clear difference in tenure, experience, and authority brought a bitter smile to my lips.

The Master who ran the slums had committed her fair share of misdeeds, but

she was surprisingly kind to the poor. That was the reason Prince Chris had set his sights on her all those years back.

“Pardon me, Master of Luwak Street. Back when I lived in the slums, my profits were often stolen from me, but I suppose that was my own fault for making too much money. The nail that sticks out gets hammered down, as they say. I’ll endeavor to be more careful in the future.”

After that bit of posturing, I shot her a smile. “Then let’s get down to business, Master. I have a lot of complaints and a lot of things to be mad about, but that’s all in the past now. What we’re here to ascertain are the flagrant misdeeds the mayor committed. What he did to Ian goes without saying, of course—and before last year’s Hunting Festival, he helped the Maldurans who had landed at Kelk to gather up a band of thugs. If he tries a similar stunt again, I’m afraid the demon lord will descend upon this city. You have all the evidence we need to bring him to justice in a public forum, yes?”

Prince Theodore had already gathered the evidence of Duke Odin’s crimes, with the clandestine help of the Miseral Dukedom. The one whose involvement we wanted to confirm this time wasn’t the duke. News of his fall from grace had long since spread throughout the kingdom. Hence, the Hoover Domain was temporarily under the jurisdiction of the state. It also explained why Randy and the navy were standing watch over the harbor.

No one under the duke’s influence was in any position to start trouble. Still, we couldn’t let the mayor of Kelk off the hook. He was the main culprit in enticing Ian to treason. We’d be sure to bring him to justice with our own two hands.

With that thought in the back of my head, I looked back at the Master. She grimaced. “You’ve become a lot like that nasty prince, Alan.”

“Oh, wow... Should I take that as a compliment? Or an insult?”

I laughed, while the Master’s face twisted with bitterness. I enjoyed the sight of that.

It was thanks to the Master that Prince Chris had been able to obtain information on the events and unrest taking place in Kelk Harbor. Furthermore, despite a few oversights, it was through her influence that Ian’s fiancée and her

family had been covertly rescued from the mayor's clutches and were being treated for their illness as we spoke.

The woman I was looking at glared back with resentment, yet her face hid a trace of wistfulness. "I'm well aware that I'm in no position to say this...but I feel like I was robbed of something adorable."

I went wide-eyed with surprise, and Randy muttered beside me that he sort of felt the same way. I pouted, a little offended by that remark. Just then, however, there came a different kind of commotion from outside. I strained my ears, sensing that the sound was slowly but surely drawing closer. I wondered if perhaps someone had made their move before us.

The person who came rushing in whispered their news into the Master's ear in a show of appropriate protocol. After using my gift for the first time in a while, I nodded in comprehension.

Knowing what I now did, I spoke to Randy—not just to inform him that the harbor had been locked down, but to get him fired up for the fact that his time to shine was close at hand. "From the sound of it, the mayor made a break for it with someone else's help. Were you counting on this, Master?"

She had accounted for this whole turn of events.

Her gaze narrowing ever so slightly, she denied the accusation with a feigned look of innocence. Unsure of how serious she was being, I reaffirmed my stance that she was not one to be trifled with.

...

Not long after we made it to city hall, someone dismounted his horse and sharpened his blue gaze, asking us what the word was.

He was the first in line to the throne of Sauslind, His Highness Prince Christopher. He spared me, Randy, and the lineup of officials who had come out to meet him only a single glance. He then regarded Randy, who he hadn't seen in quite a long time—and who had outstripped him in height despite being the younger of the pair—with a huffy look.

The redhead almost opened his mouth to say something, but the prince went on talking before he could even say hello to Glen, his own older brother. "The

mayor got away? What is the meaning of this?”

Yep, the demon lord is definitely the scariest of us all! I reiterated in my mind. Just as I began to explain, someone came riding up on horseback to bring me news. It was Marcus, one of my old friends who now worked under the Master.

“We found the mayor! He’s attempting to board a merchant ship with a smaller boat that left from a nearby fishing village. The wind is strong today, so the Master says that if he makes it onto a sailing vessel, we’ll have a hard time catching him.”

“What happened to the navy ships?” Randy, who had already jumped into action, hurriedly shot back. Flustered, Marcus explained that a small fire had broken out. The timing was definitely too convenient to be a coincidence.

Cursing under his breath, Randy dragged a horse from a nearby stable and rode off all on his own. *He’s as straightforward as ever*, I marveled.

That was when Prince Chris, who had remounted his horse, called my name. “Keep up,” he ordered me.

“What?! But I’m not very good with boats...”

Prince Chris, Glen, and the imperial guard all took off galloping after Randy. With a groan of protest and against my better judgment, I hitched a ride on Marcus’s horse.

When we finally reached the wharf, we ended up having to get on a boat and chase after the villains. I complained that I wasn’t even a combatant, but not one of my stern-faced companions was willing to hear me out.

The Master had prepared us a fast boat as a precaution, and we were even provided with a helmsman who was good at catching the wind. It confirmed my suspicions that she had seen this coming all along.

We caught up with the merchant ship the mayor had boarded in no time at all, and to no one’s surprise, it became clear that the enemy ship was crawling with armed mercenaries. Needless to say, the ensuing whoop of joy came from Randy.

“Come on, Glen! It’s been a long time since I’ve last seen you in action. I’m

telling dad if you use the excuse that fighting at sea dulled your blade!”

“Wait! Hold on, Randy!”

Kicking off the deck in an enormous leap, Randy single-handedly boarded the enemy ship. Within seconds, his specialty hand-to-hand combat moves were sending men flying, accompanied by loud battle cries.

“Unbelievable...” Looking none too pleased, Glen turned to Prince Chris for instruction.

His golden hair disheveled by the sea breeze, the prince heaved a sigh. He grouched that the marine was still the same old firecracker. “Go on. You can’t let Randy handle them alone.”

Glen pondered the order for a few moments, but he soon cast a glance around the faces on the deck and signaled a few members of the imperial guard.

“There are no Shadows on the seas, so be careful.”

I boggled at the revelation. I’d been so certain there *must* have been a Shadow hiding somewhere. As I wailed that I never should have come along, I was forced to watch Glen and a few others board the merchant vessel before us.

Chapter 7: A Melody from the Harbor

The wind was strong, and the waves were enormous. It was the kind of weather that could easily sweep men overboard if they weren't careful. As I grabbed hold of the mast, I pondered what exactly was going on here.

It was inconceivable the Master of Luwak Street, who had been keeping such a careful eye on the mayor, would allow him to escape so easily. But if she'd done it on purpose, there must have been an ulterior motive.

Flicking my gaze from side to side as I considered the possibilities, I tried to gather as much information as I possibly could. A small anchor we had thrown had pierced the deck of the enemy ship, and a simple beam had been laid across the chain to further bridge the gap. Across the way, Glen and the imperial guards were swinging their swords and bringing the merchant vessel to its knees.

Still, the wind and waves proved a hindrance. The imperial guards kept stumbling and couldn't wield their swords quite as well as they could on land.

The exception was the Eisenach Brothers, who stood out from the rest of the crowd. Randy danced across the swaying deck, taking down mercenaries with his sure-footed martial arts. Glen's swordsmanship was no less flawless. Even if a wave threw them off-balance, they'd unarm their opponent with a single swing and deal him a fatal blow. I was torn between admiration and exasperation, wondering what stuff those two men's bodies were made of.

In the meantime, there came a truly pathetic cry from behind me. "Prince Chris! I, Alan, must swallow my pride and make a once-in-a-lifetime confession! I can't swim!" As I watched Alan hold on to something for dear life and scream for help, I let out a small sigh.

The cleanup this time involved getting revenge for Ian. Thus, I'd brought Alan along to see it through, but it seemed I'd picked the wrong man for the job. I ordered one of the imperial guards to go protect him, then drew my own sword.

The two Eisenach Brothers were in their element as they unleashed their skills on the enemy vessel, but mercenaries were boarding our ship from a beam they'd laid out from their side. Those were the moves of people who realized that / was the piece that would determine our victory or defeat.

The imperial guards who had stayed behind took those men on, but a few still managed to get past. "Your Highness!" they shouted. Keeping the two incoming mercenaries in my sights, I spun around the mast, holding it with one hand. This meant I'd turned my back to my opponents. Surprised, the men who had pointed their swords at me followed me behind the mast in automatic pursuit, tracking the movements of my feet, eyes, and sword. I would have been in trouble had they boxed me in from both sides, but the pair came at me from the same direction, as if caught up in the heat of the moment.

In this case, it would be easy to slay them even on a rocking deck. I knocked one of men's feet out from under him in time with a wave that jostled the boat, and I took down the other as I used my momentum to leap upward with my sword. The waves rose and fell without end—just like the moves Glen and his brother were showing off all the while. Next, I grabbed hold of the mast rope to stop myself from getting swept away with them.

Behind me, Alan gasped in misguided admiration. "You know how to do a sword dance, Prince Chris?!"

Ignoring his comments and the surprising amount of composure in his voice, I began to work out the true goal behind this farce. The wind was strong and the waves were enormous, but the harbor was still close enough to catch the edge of my vision. If—just if—this arrest ended in failure and the boat sank, we'd be able to swim our way back to shore. In that case, there had to be another objective.

I gave the idea some thought, then called out to the brothers on the merchant ship, just to be on the safe side. "Glen! Randy! Keep an eye on what's inside the ship! Someone could be trying to destroy the evidence!"

Picking up on what I meant in an instant, the two men exchanged glances and transitioned straight into their respective roles. Glen would handle the sword-wielding mercenary. Randy, the hand-to-hand combatant, would capture the

main culprit hiding inside the ship.

It was common to hire mercenaries to guard merchant ships, but someone from the Maritime Merchants' Guild had likely arranged for this ship, rather than it being one the mayor independently owned. I knew the chances were good, and it was the only possibility that came to mind.



The Diana company was run by Duke Odin. It was the cash cow for House Odin, who had a monopoly on pomelo fruit, of which the Miseral Kingdom was the main producer. It was one of the major trading houses. Said company had supposedly been seized by state officials, but perhaps they were conspiring to prevent further exposure of their misdeeds by letting the mayor escape.

If the mayor was caught, the company president would go down with him due to his own involvement. Hence, the president had aided his escape, and the Master of Luwak Street had schemed to expose them both at once. Most likely, she had struck a deal with someone from the Merchants' Guild. That about summed it up.

Glancing over when someone called my name, I realized that a navy ship had finally arrived on the scene. There weren't many mercenaries left. Some were beginning to surrender, and the sounds of clashing swords and battle cries had started to fade.

As I watched Randy come out of the ship with a plump man in custody, I swung down my sword and declared the game won.

Upon returning to the harbor, we found the locals had formed a large crowd, turning the whole affair into a spectacle. Between the tensions with Maldura and the arrest of their lord, there had been a number of incidents in the region as of late, and now all the merchant vessels in the state-seized harbor had been blocked from setting sail. Meanwhile, there had been a commotion over an arrest at sea.

No doubt everyone had come to see what all the fuss was about. From the deck, I could see the fear and trepidation on the people's faces as they wondered what lay in store for them.

At last, I understood the Master of Luwak Street's true goal. As loath as I was to dance to her tune, we'd been following her script ever since we boarded the ship she'd prepared for us. Besides, I couldn't deny that the setup worked just as much to our benefit.

I called Glen's name, nudging him toward the crowd with my eyes. My long-serving retainer swiftly picked up on my meaning and shouted from the deck to get their attention. "Greetings, citizens of Kelk Harbor, company personnel, and

sailors! Lend your ears to the first in line to the throne of Sauslind, His Highness Prince Christopher!”

The crowd buzzed with surprise at the mention of my title. If the prince had traveled all the way here from the royal capital, their lord’s crimes must have been more serious than they thought.

After shaking my head to toss my windblown hair out of my eyes, I looked out over the townspeople. As a hush slowly but surely fell over the crowd, I announced in a booming voice, “Duke Odin, the lord of the Hoover Domain, was recently arrested on the charge of treason, and we intend to bring every last one of his crimes to light. Nevertheless, trade will continue unimpeded. As will our friendly relations with the Miseral Dukedom. The harbor will be reopened to ship traffic within the next few days. Furthermore, the day we establish diplomatic relations with Maldura is close at hand. Kelk Harbor is certain to become an important hub in the future. I swear upon my name as Prince Christopher that this city shall see its golden age yet!”

The crescendo of cheers that followed was enough to rock the entire city. Joyful cries echoed on the sea breeze, praising both the prince’s name and the kingdom itself.

Beside me, Glen marveled at how gung ho and hot-blooded the townsmen were. As I thought to myself that he and his little brother were no better, I was reminded of an important lesson. Some people would never be satisfied until they saw a concrete display of power, not vague notions of authority or royal prestige. I’d learned that the hard way from the recent military uprising...but I felt like this incident had served as a further warning to me. History would repeat itself if I relied too much on cheap power.

As I made my way down the gangplank, addressing the cheering crowd in a manner befitting the crown prince, I cast a glance at the man who was happily tagging along behind me. “You helped the Master of Luwak Street set the stage, didn’t you, Alan?”

Alan played dumb at first, only to break out into a beaming smile moments later. He rubbed the tip of his nose like one of the harbor children. “What can I say? I wanted to hear the sound you’d make at sea, Prince Chris. The sound of

our future—one that echoes across the blue skies of this realm.”

His smile had a radiant glee to it, not unlike when we’d first met and he’d agreed to serve under me. It was the look of someone taking a chance on his future, one that hinted at all the emotions he carried deep inside.

He had a musician’s unique sensibility. I couldn’t claim to understand it. Still, I chuckled and said that if I had struck a chord with him, he was free to play all he liked.

Most likely, my and the Master’s interests aligned to some extent. Kelk Harbor was the western gateway along the continental highway and Sauslind’s main port city. Now that trade on the open seas had been suspended and the harbor was beset by uncertainty, someone had to step up to lift the spirits of the townspeople and the city as a whole. If the harbor remained in the doldrums, it would soon fall into decline and crime rates would soar. That would spell just as much trouble for the ruler of the backstreets. To that end, she must have been keeping an eye on those who might have helped the mayor escape—all so that she could stage this grand capture once I came into town.

Once again, I found her sheer cunning almost infuriating. It was a trait she shared with Alan, and the thought had me wondering if perhaps *he* had what it took to become the next Master of Luwak Street. Never mind what the man himself would have to say about that.

While I toyed with the idea of seeing the Master one last time while I was in town, I went about the business of tidying up in the aftermath. I listened to detailed reports of how the city was faring, ventured out to ascertain the information for myself, and took the opportunity to speak with the townspeople and sailors. Rumors spread that the crown prince was staying in city hall, and lords and local aristocrats came all the way from neighboring domains to pay their respects.

Annoyed, I wished I could tell them to spend that precious time combating the plague back in their own domains, but this was part of my role as a member of the aristocracy. Biting down a sigh, I humored the visitors and even had in-depth discussions with the ambassador from the Miseral Dukedom about the future of our trade relations.

Just when I'd picked out a temporary replacement for the mayor and the cleanup process was nearing its end, I received two messages: news of Alexei's return to the royal palace and a letter from Elianna. My heart fluttered in my chest, but the joy I felt was short-lived. The next piece of news hit like a blast of ice and snow to the spring blooming inside me.

Lady Elianna Bernstein, the crown prince's betrothed, has returned to the Bernstein Domain, along with General Bakula of the Black Wing Knights.

Arc 3: The Spring Bird

Chapter 1: Winter at the Royal Palace

Upon catching a glimpse of the girl swaying back and forth across from me, dozing off on her well-padded carriage seat, I, Anna Hayden, snapped my book shut and gently rose to my feet.

Our carriage was on loan from the royal family and as sturdy as one would expect, so it hardly bounced on most roads. A short while ago, however, I'd felt us stray from the well-maintained public streets. Sensing that we must be nearing our destination, I tucked a cushion under the girl's slumped neck. When I saw that this had fixed her in place despite the incessant rocking around us, I smiled and returned to my own seat.

Gentle rays of sunlight streamed in through the windows. The telltale buds of spring were a far cry from the still-harsh winter of the capital, Saoura. The farther southeast we traveled, the milder the climate and the softer the sunlight.

Swaying back and forth within the warmth and leisurely flow of time must have melted the tension building up inside her for quite a while now. Perhaps it had served as a release from all the matters of life and death, pressures, stressors, and sorrows that had piled up without her even realizing it.

We had conversed nonstop for the first few days after setting out from the royal capital, but once we'd learned the appropriate distance to keep from each other, we would each delve into our personal reading from time to time.

Needless to say, much had happened over the course of our journey. The domains we passed through were all strictly screened, and even riding in a carriage emblazoned with the royal crest or invoking the name of General Bakula of the Black Wing Knights hadn't spared us some difficult encounters. It was a sign of just how wary the entire kingdom was of the Ashen Nightmare. On several occasions, the girl before me had nearly been forced to identify herself,

but General Bakula had always managed to push through with a brute-force approach.

As she observed the situation in each region and the measures being taken against the disease, she seemed to have her fair share of personal views and ideas. She started writing in the middle of our trip, and I responded as best I could to her requests for my own opinion. In the meantime, an atmosphere of calm had prevailed since yesterday. She must have relaxed upon sensing the shift in the mood—upon feeling the air of the land where she was born and raised.

I couldn't help but crack a rueful smile at how defenseless she looked in her sleep. Still, the sight of it made me happy. I took her vulnerability as proof that she trusted me.

Reflected in my eyes were those distinctive, soft locks that looked translucent in the platinum light of the sun. The texture of her hair was clear at a glance, and it had such a soft, light quality to it that even a woman like me was tempted to reach out and touch it. That wasn't helped by the way it fluttered with every little bounce of the carriage or gentle gust of wind. The sight reminded me a little of someone else I knew.

When her eyes were closed, it gave a clear view of her smoky eyelashes and slight, well-defined features. It was as if a skilled craftsman had known exactly where to place her eyes and nose within the small contours of her face.

She was very pretty...but she looked like little more than a doll. Or so I'd once thought, before I came to learn what she was like on the inside.

This girl was Elianna Bernstein, daughter of Marquess Bernstein—and fiancée of the crown prince of Sauslind. When I first met her during the Autumn Hunting Festival, I'd discovered that she possessed a breadth of knowledge and a hidden dignity that one would never guess from her delicate looks. If it weren't for her, I would still be living in the borderlands, unable to follow my own path and passing my days in abject misery. No doubt I would have lost heart, married a man of my father's choosing, and spent the rest of my life tied down to the Edea Domain. The reason I'd been able to take the first step toward the future I wanted was because of the shock and awe I'd felt at seeing

her stand up to my father, as well as the buried secrets of history I'd learned from her. It gave me the courage to live like those two women.

As I thought back to that encounter, I let slip a small laugh despite myself. Now that I had the time to spare, I found myself reminiscing on events of the past. At the same time, I was reminded of how glad I was that the girl slumbering peacefully before me had made it home safe and sound.

...

It was a winter afternoon. Ever since His Majesty had fallen ill and a gag order had been imposed on the royal palace, a somber atmosphere had settled over the grounds. Access to the palace had been restricted, and all the common areas had been closed. Only a select few, such as ministers in crucial positions, would show up to discuss matters with grave looks on their faces.

What's more, the Malduran delegation was in a precarious position due to the interference of the pro-war faction. The only ones keeping the situation under control were General Eisenach of the imperial guard and Sieg of its first division. By defending the Malduran delegation and placing them under their own supervision, they had managed to hold the warmongers at bay.

The news hadn't gone public yet, but their actions amounted to a revolution of sorts. The military faction in the palace clashed with the imperial guard faction that backed the royal family. There were even internal conflicts within the military itself. I'd grown up watching the stalwart division my father led in the borderlands, so I was shocked by this turn of events. I couldn't believe something like this could happen in the royal palace of Saoura, the very heart of our kingdom.

Soon, the royal palace was placed under even tighter security. In the face of the ongoing national crisis, all non-essential areas, including the Department of History Compilation, were closed so that man power could be diverted elsewhere. I, Anna Hayden, had been staying in the maids' dormitory ever since I was hired to work at the palace, and I was now left with no choice but to return there.

Back in the beginning, there had been much interest and curiosity around me. I was neither a maid nor a court woman, but a civil servant in a position equal to

that of a man. Evidently, there had been the occasional professional woman before me, so my employment wasn't all that unusual. And since I was fortunate enough not to be working for an important department, my arrival hadn't caused too much of a stir.

Still, some felt the need to exclude me on the grounds that I didn't belong. Luckily for me, something happened to change that. More and more women took my side and supported me, all because the men in my department had a bad attitude. In the end, it went to show that the common enemy of all working women is men. Alas, all the girls I'd made friends with had either been sent to the temples to help or taken leave for fear of disease, leaving the royal palace deserted.

The state of the world was bleak. A deadly plague was once again on the loose, and tensions on the border were dangerously high. The crown prince's fiancée, Elianna Bernstein, was still missing in action. I sighed heavily, wondering what was going to happen next.

My father, earl of the Edea Domain, had instructed me not to leave the royal capital, so I spent my days trudging back and forth from the dorms to the royal archive, which was located toward the edge of Sauslind's royal palace. The quiet place of refuge was more empty and still than ever. When a voice cut through the overpowering silence, my heart leaped in my chest. It spoke the name of someone I'd been trying to find for a while.

"Explain, Mister Alfred!"

The voice belonged to a woman, and it was one I'd heard before.

"What do you mean, Miss Eli's gone missing?! All sorts of terrible gossip is flying around, and I've heard no word from Lilia. Lilia *is* safe, isn't she? What in the world is going on?!"

I froze in my tracks. The same question had been on my mind ever since I'd heard the news. As much as I'd wanted to find out more, I still lacked connections within the royal palace. Prince Theodore, the king's brother, had been a great help to me when I was first hired, but he was away at the moment. As for the one other person I knew...

"Calm down, Julia."

It was Alfred Bernstein, a gentle, mild-mannered man who always kept a calm tone of voice. He was Lady Elianna's older brother. The name Julia also rang a bell. She had been introduced to me as Lady Elianna's cousin at the Holy Night's Banquet. She was a well-to-do young lady who had regarded me with curiosity and remarked, *"It's rare to see Mister Alfred bring a partner to the banquet."*

Back then, she had demonstrated all the inquisitiveness and cheer of a girl her age, but now, her voice broke with tears. "You don't understand! The rumors are simply awful! They say that Eli ran away and abandoned her duty...that she's no longer fit to be the prince's betrothed...that she's seeing another man on the side. It's terrible. Eli lost her own mother to the Ashen Nightmare. She's been studying the disease her whole life, and she even pushed to develop a cure... How could they say that?!"

"Julia..."

The girl had grown more emotional with each sentence she spoke. I heard the sound of Alfred reaching out to comfort her as she wept, and I quietly turned on my heel. Be it Lady Lilia or Lady Julia, I'd seen for myself how close the Bernstein siblings were with their cousins. Judging by how freely the girls spoke to both Lord Alfred and Lady Elianna, I got the sense that they all considered each other family.

And I had no right to feel one way or another about that.

I paused behind a bookcase and let out a long breath. What mattered most right now was Lady Elianna. As far as I was concerned, the rumors were worth no more than that. Her past achievements alone could prove that beyond a shadow of doubt. Still, there were those who would entertain themselves with gossip at the slightest sign of weakness. It was just part of human nature.

I considered what to do next. I had been looking for Lord Alfred to see if I could get any information out of him, but he had his hands full dealing with the national crisis as an aide to the prime minister, and it had been a struggle to track him down. His cousin had probably only managed to secure a meeting with him under the pretext of bringing something for a relative.

Now that we've crossed paths, should I be so bold as to ask for his time? But who knows if I'll be able to do anything with the information he gives me...

I paced around in circles, opening and closing the book in my hand, until I eventually decided to go ask him after all.

Just then, however, someone who had rounded the bookshelf called out to me in a voice dripping with sarcasm. “My, my, if it isn’t the daughter of Earl Hayden.”

The implications of him not referring to me as a member of the Department of History Compilation were clear. Even some of my own coworkers refused to recognize a woman like me as a colleague. When I first began my job, I’d quietly endured an onslaught of taunts and harassment, telling myself that my only option was to gain recognition through my work. Fortunately, this came with the advantage of the maids befriending me as soon as they heard about the situation. In addition, the court women had offered me advice on my work, and my time at the royal palace had gotten off to a good start.

I had no desire to humor this man, but he was one of my seniors in my own department. No doubt he had an abundance of time on his hands now that our department was closed, just as I did. I greeted him politely, only to get a snort in return. He bombarded me with remarks that held little regard for anything but my status, saying that he couldn’t believe the daughter of the earl was hiding in the safety of the royal palace. I took it all in silence, until his next insult hit a sore spot.

“You and the prince’s fiancée are close, aren’t you? I wonder if she followed your example and hid herself in the royal palace in fear.”

I was aware that such rumors had been going around since the news of her disappearance. I’d been letting his unsavory comments slide to that point, but that particular one changed my tune. When I lifted my head and looked him straight in the eye, I could have sworn he flinched.

The moment I spoke my friend’s name, all the pent-up emotions inside me came spilling out into words. “Lady Elianna went to the countryside on official business. She took action to protect the people of the region and was met with an unforeseen accident. What a sad state of affairs that someone tasked with documenting our history should not show concern for her safety or determine the facts, but instead be misled by malicious gossip.”

The finality in my tone drained the color from his face. Just as I braced myself for his next tirade, a soft voice and presence abruptly cut in. A young man called my name from another bookshelf. His eyes were calmly fixed on the man across from me, as if to emphasize that he'd heard the subject of his sister come up.

Once the man had rambled off a string of excuses in a panic and fled the scene, the young man—Alfred Bernstein—walked over to me. I winced, fearing he was about to reprimand me for my reckless behavior, only to hear something else entirely.

“Thank you.”

When I reacted with surprise, he flashed me a serene smile.

“For believing in my sister, I mean. And for worrying about her.”

I'd only done what was right. I almost said as much on reflex, but it then occurred to me that he was likely at the end of his tether.

His cousin was nowhere to be seen, so he'd probably sent her home. If Lady Elianna was confirmed to be alive, he would have been sure to share that with me. I realized that now.

In that case, there was only one thing left to say to him.

“I'm sure Lady Elianna is all right.”

He blinked, then gave me a soft smile. It held all the warm emotions he always directed my way.

“Thank you, Anna,” he said, making my heart race in spite of myself. I didn't think we were on friendly enough terms for him to forgo a title, but I was too flustered to point it out. Then, he said the last thing I'd expected to hear. “May I hug you?”

“Pardon?!”

The look on his face was so bashful that it was hard to believe what had just come out of his mouth. “You see, His Highness and Eli always flirt every chance they get. I could use that kind of comfort, or energy boost, or food for the soul...whatever you want to call it.”

I hadn't the faintest idea what he was talking about. As I stood there,

bewildered, he took another step toward me, and I blurted out a blunt refusal.

“Yes... That figures. Apologies. I got a bit carried away.”

He drew back with a smile, and that was when I noticed how pale he looked. Perhaps he'd been too busy to get a good night's sleep. Torn between bemusement and sympathy, I offered a compromise. I told him I could at least brew him a cup of tea.

“I can't claim to be good at it...but as long as that won't bother you.”

I added that I hoped it would provide him at least a moment's comfort. Somehow, I felt terribly embarrassed to be making the offer, even though this was a concession on my part. Something told me my face was an uncharacteristic shade of red.

I saw Lord Alfred nod, delighted. “I'd love to have a taste of your tea.”



As I reflected back on the dismal events of winter, I felt my cheeks grow hot. The amount of twists and turns since then had been almost dizzying. There had come news of Lady Elianna's survival and the discovery of a cure, followed by that decisive showdown in the temple. If all of that had truly been planned ahead of time, I had to tremble before the crown prince's sharp mind.

Now, the two lovers were on the verge of making a name for themselves all over the continent. In the interim, I'd heard that General Theoden Bakula of the Black Wing Knights would be returning to the eastern defenses, having completed his various duties at the royal palace. Apparently, he'd invited Lady Elianna to accompany him back to her home domain.

"If your wedding ceremony is set to be moved up, you won't have another chance to stop for a visit. Don't worry, you just have to go and come back before His Highness makes it home from the harbor."

Lady Elianna had still hesitated, arguing that she shouldn't leave the royal capital while the prince was away.

At that, General Bakula had affected a more somber tone. He revealed that on the Black Wing Knights' way to the capital, he had stopped for a quick visit to the Bernstein's domain, where he'd discovered that Eduard wasn't faring too well.

"What? Is Grandfather going to be all right?!"

"He's gotten old. There's no telling what might happen to him. Are you so reluctant to go see him while you still have the chance, Eli girl?"

Lady Elianna fell silent, and his next push was the clincher.

"Go with him, Eli. If General Bakula and his men are accompanying you, you needn't worry about safety or speed. It should only take ten days or so to get there and back. You'll be home before His Highness returns," urged her father, Marquess Bernstein. With that, her return home was decided.

The one who had told me about the whole exchange and asked me to go along was Lord Alfred. *"I have to admit...I feel a little bad for pulling this right after we sent His Highness off to the harbor."*

He had explained that if I went with them, Eli would feel pressured to get back as soon as possible. As further incentive, he had thrown in something that he knew would pique my interest. *“The library in our domain has history books the royal palace doesn’t. And if Uncle Andrew is around, you might be able to ask him about his archaeology work and the hidden histories of all sorts of places.”*

In hindsight, I might have jumped on his offer a little too readily. Still, it was true that I wanted to visit the Bernsteins’ renowned regional library at least once. If I were still back in the Edea Domain, I might never have had a chance to visit their territory for as long as I lived.

Normally, it would take eight days to get there from the royal capital, but thanks to the sturdy carriage we’d borrowed from the royal palace and General Bakula’s forced march, it only took six. Outside the window, I could see an idyllic view of the countryside, its low plains uncultivated for farming or grazing.

The cry of a skylark gently roused the girl sitting opposite me from her slumber. It was as if she’d been lured to wakefulness by the spring bird’s song.

Chapter 2: A Spring Proposal

Upon arriving at our mansion in the Bernstein Domain, I was shocked to see the number of people who had come from all over the estate to greet us, as well as some of the faces among them.

“Welcome home, Eli.”

There stood a man with tanned skin and a buff physique that belied his vocation as a scholar. He was a rarity in our family, a muscular sort who insisted that physical strength was a necessity for his archaeological digs. He had a youthful face and carefree, childlike brown eyes. He was my father’s younger brother, five years his junior.

“Uncle Andrew!”

I usually only saw him once a year at best. However, since he’d made the rare visit to our estate in the royal capital right after the Holy Night’s Banquet, it had only been about two months this time.

In the midst of my joy at being reunited after such a short period of time, I spotted my grandfather sitting in his wheelchair. His legs had given out several years back, and he had been confined to that wheelchair ever since. Thus, it was difficult to summon him to the royal capital, and returning to my home territory was the only way I could see him.

“Grandfather... I’m home.”

With a face full of wrinkles and eyes that exuded deep wisdom, he gave off a slightly more sharp-edged impression than my father. But when I greeted him, he broke into a gentle, beaming smile.

“Welcome home, Elianna,” he said.

He extended a hand, and I rushed over to his side, embracing him for the first time in almost five years. I could smell the same familiar scent on him. The way he patted my head hadn’t changed a bit either.

“Eli... I’m so glad you were all right.”

His words served as a reminder that, much like the staff of our estate in the capital, my uncle, grandfather, and all the people back in our territory must have been worried for me. In Grandpa Theoden’s words, I’d made the right choice in coming home while I had the chance.

“I see you’re a man of your word, Theoden.”

“Of course I am. As if I’d let a youngster like him get the better of me more than once. Why, I stole her from right out under his nose! I can imagine the look on his face when he heard the news.”

He added that it was a shame he’d missed it, at which I instinctively stole a glance at my grandfather beside me.

“Grandfather... How are you feeling?”

“All better now that I’ve been reunited with my darling granddaughter.”

I had no response. Apparently, I’d been dancing in the palms of these wily old men.

I rose to my feet with a small sigh, then introduced everyone to Lady Anna, who had been watching our banter with a smile on her face. My grandfather’s eyes widened a fraction at the mention of who her father was.

As the first step to recovering from the long journey, I headed into the estate, where I had tea with familiar faces in a mansion that brought back old memories. I also heard some news for the first time. General Bakula and my uncle exchanged information about what had gone on in the royal capital and around the kingdom, and I breathed a sigh of relief upon hearing that infection rates were on the decline. It was then that my grandfather brought up an earlier incident.

“Was old Dan Edold any help, Eli?”

The servants of House Bernstein had arranged various supplies for me in the Ralshen Region. When I had returned home and confirmed this with my father, I had thanked him with no small amount of surprise, but it now occurred to me that there was no way my grandfather couldn’t have known about it.

I said yes and thanked my grandfather, at which Uncle Andrew said something surprising. “Can you believe it? First my brother drags me back to the royal capital right before the Holy Night’s Banquet, claiming the matter is urgent, and then he sends me off on a tour of the three northern domains of Ralshen, Azul, and Tor. He’s more of a slave driver than he looks.”

My eyes went wide. “You were up north when I was, Uncle Andy?”

I asked if he was the one who had arranged for supplies to be sent to me from other territories, and he nodded his head with a blithe smile. “My darling niece was fighting a one-woman battle. The whole family rallied to support you. That aside, you really stepped up, Eli! I was so proud of you.”

“You should have come to see me...”

I could only imagine the strength it would have given me. It’s true that his support alone had helped me a lot, but if I’d had the chance to see someone I’d known since childhood, it would have put me in a completely different state of mind.

My uncle smiled with all the composure of an experienced adult. “I figured that I shouldn’t show my face and snap the thread of tension you had going. You were so desperate to do everything you could. Still, I watched all your triumphs from afar. You did a great job, Elianna.”

There was a straightforward admiration in my uncle’s voice and expression, and as memories of that time flashed before my own eyes, I felt a lump form in my throat. He was my favorite uncle, whom I had begged to tell me stories of history and archaeological sites from all over the world since I was a little girl. To hear such lavish praise from him both embarrassed me and instilled me with a strong sense of self-confidence.

He went on, “When I first heard you’d been engaged to the crown prince, I wondered how things were going to turn out...but I’m relieved to see there won’t be any problems. I mean, I can hardly believe you had so much strength inside you. I really missed out. Should’ve had you follow in my footsteps.”

I blinked in surprise. My uncle, the world-traveling excavator and archaeologist, wanted *me* to be his successor?

“It’s not too late, Andy,” Grandpa Theoden insisted. “What if you took Eli on a two-or three-year trip around the continent? I’ll help get you across the border.”

My grandfather seemed taken with the idea. “That’s not a bad suggestion. Perhaps you can tour the ruins of the ancient myths she’s always loved.”

He asked Lady Anna, who had been listening to this conversation with wide-eyed surprise, if she’d like to come along for the trip. There was a hint of amusement in my grandfather’s expression, and I felt like I’d gotten a glimpse of the mercilessness he could show to even Alfred, his own grandson.

Lady Anna played along and deftly sidestepped the trap. She considered the offer seriously, as if it was genuinely appealing to her. “That’s a very tempting invitation. The traces and breath of history that lie dormant all over the world... It’s the desire of anyone who studies history to see and touch those for themselves. However...”

When she lifted her gaze, I saw the unwavering strength of a woman who had set her own course. “I would rather search for the truth that lies in recorded history than explore ancient sites and historical remnants for myself. I want to read the accounts of those who lived in that era, in that time.”

She fixed her navy blue eyes straight on my grandfather and Grandpa Theoden as she spoke. “Thus, I am grateful to have been born in the times I was. I’ve been able to see and touch things for myself, to hold conversations—and to share invaluable moments like these with people who have left their mark on history.”

Grandfather’s eyes lit up with amusement, and Grandpa Theoden gave an impressed laugh. He said that she was a tricky one. “Don’t you think she’s wasted on Alfred?” he even teased.

There was no way the men of the family wouldn’t know that she had accompanied my brother to the Holy Night’s Banquet. I assumed that was why they were testing her like this.

My grandfather nodded quietly, then welcomed her for a second time. “Lady Anna Hayden, I do hope that my estate will deepen your knowledge and open further avenues for you to explore. You are free to use all the public facilities

during your stay. If there's anything else you require, you need only ask."

My eyes widened a fraction. That was my grandfather's ultimate offer of hospitality. For my own part, I couldn't help but marvel at what a wonderful woman Lady Anna was. She would never go back on the path she had chosen for herself. That had been true both when she confronted the earl and when she moved to the royal palace all alone and put forth her best effort. Surely many had fallen for her dignified demeanor.

A giggle escaped my lips. Though I wouldn't go quite as far as Grandpa Theoden, I still found myself thinking that our Alfred would have to get his act together.

...

The next day came. Grandpa Theoden and a few of the Black Wing Knights returned to their posts. Lilia's letter had mentioned the remaining soldiers up north heading back to the royal capital, so I asked him if it was all right not to wait.

"Please, they're not infants. If they're too useless to make decisions without their leader, we don't need them in the Black Wing Knights," he sternly replied.

From what I'd heard, the knights' jubilation at General Bakula's survival had rocked the town, but the man in question was unmoved. He seemed of the mind to retrain the knights from scratch in light of the military's most recent blunder.

Thinking of how difficult it must be to lead an order responsible for national security, I thanked Grandpa Theoden again. He had protected and cared for me throughout the dead of winter. I'd been heartbroken when the truth of his whereabouts was kept from me, but now here he was, alive and well. I couldn't imagine a more precious feeling.

A soft look in his one eye, he reached out and patted me on the head. "I plan to be there for your wedding."

I was surprised to hear him say this without prompting, but it meant that he approved of the relationship between me and His Highness. A delighted smile came to my face, though he didn't neglect to grumble, "Don't get me wrong. I

still can't stand that stupid prince."

General Bakula, the hero of our kingdom, must have come around to acknowledging His Highness at some point. He'd begun to see him as an equal. I wondered if perhaps that was part of the motivation for sniping at him.

Once we'd seen the men off, a certain someone popped up out of nowhere.

"Phew... They finally left."

"Oh, Jean. Where have you been?"

I'd spotted him among the party returning to our territory, but I'd seen no sign of him on the road or since we had arrived at the estate.

My lazy manservant scratched at his head, deflated. "The general was hell-bent on chasin' me all over the place, yellin' about how he was gonna retrain me along with the rest of his knights. I had a hard time givin' him the slip."

Annoyed, Jean wondered aloud if the old man was really over sixty. I cracked a rueful smile.

Later, I gave Lady Anna a tour of the area, during which I set foot inside the regional library for the first time in years. The sturdy stone building was dimly lit, and in the present season of early spring, the simple act of standing around reading could chill one's feet to the bone. It was far from cozy, but there were still a handful of patrons with their noses buried in books. The building almost seemed to go on forever, and the space stretched unevenly overhead due to all the additions tacked on over the years. And every inch of it was crammed to bursting with books.

Furthermore, there was a separate building next door used as a school for reading and writing. Some played music there, while scholars debated theories among themselves. Lady Anna looked on in surprise, shocked to find that some of those people were women. Soon enough, she found herself drawn into one group's discussion on historical theories. She listened intently, and when she was asked for her own opinion, she seemed thrilled about the chance to contribute.

I watched her for a while, then began to explore the nostalgic grounds of the library. I savored the unchanged scenery, the musty quality to the air, the life of

the books, and the scent of ink. It was almost as if time had stood still for the past five years.

In keeping with my own tradition, I picked out a few tomes and went straight to reading. It was then that I noticed a half-destroyed building just outside a door toward the back of the library—the greenhouse devastated by a major storm a long time ago. The place had taken on a gloomy appearance, with the surrounding grass and trees left to grow wild and the ivy creeping up its sides. Still, some of the glass had been left intact, making it warm and toasty on days with nice weather. It used to be one of Jean’s favorite spots to nap. Today was slightly overcast and chilly, so he’d probably found somewhere else to sleep.

Having stumbled upon the grounds after a long time away, I decided to sit down on the sun-dappled steps to read. All that talk about ancient myths with Uncle Andrew had put me in the mood to revisit old favorites. Some of them depicted the cruelty of the gods, while others contained anecdotes about flowers; there were stories that escalated from golden apples to war, and all manner of witches and monsters made an appearance. One story told of a harvest goddess who stopped blessing the earth when her daughter was dragged to the pits of hell. Yet another told of a woman who waited and waited for her lover to return from a voyage, only to end up chasing after him in the form of a bird.

Just as I had grown absorbed in reading, I could have sworn I heard the cry of a skylark and smelled the scent of the sea, and I glanced up from the pages as though beckoned.

For a moment, I wondered if I was dreaming.

A fairytale prince emerged from the half-shattered door. Clad in a cloak the color of the ocean, he had long, slender limbs and an eye-catching presence, as well as a vigorous, well-trained physique and captivatingly well-proportioned features. His lips formed a gorgeous smile as he called my name.

“Eli.”

The man had dazzling golden hair and eyes the color of a clear blue sky. His smile was radiant and his voice was sweet. He was none other than the crown prince of Sauslind Kingdom, Prince Christopher himself.

I stared back at him blankly, forgetting even to blink. Smiling back at me, he knelt in front of the steps where I was sitting in one fluid motion. The blue eyes looking up at me and the voice calling my name both undoubtedly belonged to His Highness.

But...this must be a dream, right?

There was simply no way that His Highness, who was supposed to be visiting a port city far to the west, could suddenly appear before me. Once, long ago, I'd dozed off while reading a book, turned into a character from the story, and found myself unable to distinguish between dream and reality. Was the same phenomenon happening to me now?

"Eli?" His Highness prompted when I sat there in his silence, his expression as gentle as ever. The note of concern in his voice drew a blink from me.

"Your Highness?"

Incredulous of his affirmative answer, I asked him if he was real. He chuckled, leaned forward with one hand pressed to the stone steps, and kissed me from below. Surprised, I almost pulled away on reflex, but he'd already wrapped his other hand around my back to hold me in place. My breath started to come in gasps as his mingled with mine, and by the time our lips parted, it was full of heat.

The reflection of my face in his blue eyes, mere inches from mine, was bright red. Torn between protesting or telling him that he had successfully dispelled my doubts, I settled for mumbling his name again.

His Highness flashed me a mischievous smile. "That was your punishment for running back to your territory without telling me."

If I told him I'd planned to return right away, he'd only hear it as an excuse. Embarrassed as I was, I opted to apologize.

"But...how on earth did you get here, Your Highness?"

It was almost like magic.

Bobbing his head, he flashed me a carefree, boyish smile. "I enlisted the help of the sea breeze. I wanted to see you as soon as physically possible."

When I heard the words “sea breeze,” a possibility occurred to me. The journey from the western Kelk Harbor to the Bernstein Domain would take nearly a month by land. However, I’d read in a book that so many ships set sail around this time of year because the winds were exceptionally strong.

“Your Highness... Don’t tell me you *sailed* all the way south?”

The Bernstein Domain was located to the southeast of Sauslind. All in all, it was closer to the southern harbor than to the royal capital.

His Highness nodded back without missing a beat. “For my first time at sea, I rather enjoyed myself. Shall we set sail together next time?”

This came as yet another shock. Though sailing was gaining popularity, I’d heard there were still plenty of unknowns and dangers lurking at sea. I could already imagine Lord Alexei scolding the crown prince, of all people, for taking such a risk.

Before I could comment, His Highness took a small box wrapped in paper from his breast pocket and handed it over. He said it was a souvenir.

“What’s this?”

It was a small box inlaid with mother-of-pearl that glittered and emitted a rainbow of light. A relic said to have been unearthed from the ruins of a southern continent long ago, it was now exclusively imported from the Far East, making it an extremely valuable item. But what struck me most was the pattern on the box. It conjured up images of the story of a woman who had pined for her seafaring lover and ultimately turned into a bird to chase after him—the tale of a very beautiful, pitiable bird called the kingfisher.

And now His Highness had brought the lover back home to me. It was a coincidence, to be sure, but something about it felt like fate. *This* was what His Highness had picked out for me. By the way it cast reflections of light around us, I could tell the sun had come out again.

I was so happy that I smiled and said, “Thank you so much, Prince Christopher.”

He took one of my hands in his, then, still kneeling, fixed me with a much more solemn expression.

“Eli. I decided I’d ask for your hand in marriage once I came home from the harbor. Though the kingdom will have the final say about our wedding ceremony, it is of my own free will that I wish to marry you.” He looked me straight in the eye, adopting a more formal tone of voice. “I love you. I swear to protect you for as long as I live and offer you my unconditional affection. Will you marry me, Lady Elianna?”

I had once asked His Highness to make me his wife. Now, however, he was proposing to me not as his future queen, but as an individual woman.

Bursting with joy and inexplicably overcome with the urge to cry, I gave him my answer in a trembling voice. “Yes, Prince Christopher.”

His Highness’s grave expression lit up with delight, and he leaned forward to kiss me again. This time, it was chaste and sweet.

“I love you, Elianna.”

Gazing into his blue eyes at point-blank range, I, too, was overwhelmed with bliss.

The cry of the skylarks served as a reminder of the coming spring, their song almost seeming to congratulate the two of us.



Epilogue

Once we left the greenhouse, I was reunited with Lord Glen, the other members of the imperial guard, and a somewhat strung-out Alan. Just then, a courier burst onto the scene. The contents of his message came as the umpteenth shock of the day.

Prince Theodore, younger brother of the king, has relinquished his claim to the throne.

His Highness, on the other hand, didn't sound the least bit surprised. Rather, there was a hint of disgruntlement in his voice. "No doubt this is his idea of taking responsibility...but it's bound to cause all sorts of trouble again."

This man would always tackle those problems head-on, whatever they may be. I told him I'd join him, gently clutching his hand in mine. He shot me a wide-eyed look of surprise before beaming and giving me a firm return squeeze. He then seemed to pull himself from his thoughts.

"But first comes paying my respects to the head tanuki."

I've heard that in a kingdom far to the east, there are tanuki figurines made of clay... Is he talking about a life-size version of one of those?

As I pondered whether we had anything of the sort in the Bernstein Domain, a black kite swooped across the afternoon sky with a shrill cry.

Arc 4: The Library Ghost

Chapter 1: A Ghost's Pride

I am the Library Ghost.

Surely you think I'm talking nonsense, but if it's coming from the mouth of the man himself, it must be true. I dwell within the historic library built by Marquess Bernstein. Between the old, musty air just to my liking and the eerie splotches of darkness that dot the grounds, it's the ideal haunt for any specter.

For the record, I'm a ghost with no connection whatsoever to House Bernstein, one who just so happened to settle down here because it made for a comfortable abode. Sometimes people will see me on a rainy day or an overcast twilight, unleashing the most satisfying of screams at the sight. Some even faint from the shock.

None have ever been a match for me. That is, until now.

"Goodbye, milady. I'll be back to pick you up in the evening. Promise me you won't leave the library."

A certain child responded to her servant's directions with an expressionless nod. She had fluffy, flaxen hair and grayish-blue eyes, and her features were almost doll-like.

Noting that she was back again, I shot the girl a vicious glare. As things stood, this little lass was my archnemesis. She had been frequenting the library for some time now, but whether I stood in the darkness, where it was easier to see me, or right in front of her nose, she never seemed to notice me. I tried a few different strategies, like accentuating my footsteps or placing a pale hand on her tiny shoulder, but nothing ever worked.

Meanwhile, the servants who came to fetch her would always capture me in their sights and let out an earsplitting shriek.

Kids these days just had no respect for the dead. Ghosts were meant to be seen and feared.

Gradually, I was consumed with a ghostly sense of mission. I had to show this girl just how frightening I was. My honor—no, my very dignity as a spirit—depended on it!

So it was that, one day, I was contemplating what I could do to let her know of my existence. Instead of going to her usual reading room, she sat down on the rung of a ladder with her book of choice. And then...wait for it...beyond a shadow of a doubt, she laid eyes on me!

“It can’t be...”

Her tiny lips uttered a rare cry of surprise, and I felt a surge of emotion.

Oho! So the day has finally come.

It made me almost teary-eyed to think back on all the hardship I’d endured to this point, and never had I felt the adage that “hard work pays off” so well exemplified.

Come, child! Cower to your heart’s content!

I grinned darkly, arranging my face into the spine-chilling expression I’d worked day in and day out to perfect, then I waited for the characteristic scream of a child to follow.

“Dr. McDuckert’s medical texts!”

The thing she’d *actually* pounced on was a tome on the bookshelf behind me. Alas, she’d cut me dead. Pun intended.

Ha... Oh dear. I was so shocked I started cracking outdated jokes.

“What are these doing here?”

She sounded so enraptured that it was a little off-putting coming from a child her age. As she opened the tome with all the bashfulness of a girl meeting the man of her dreams, I was racked with bitterness. Only the most disrespectful kids would pay more attention to a book than a ghost like me.

Stifling my chagrin, I huffily peered over from beside her, wondering what

sort of book could bring such a sparkle to her eyes. The next instant, I all but toppled over in surprise. What leaped out at me from the page she had turned to was an illustration of a half-skinned human body, its structure depicted in great detail.

I could have sworn she was gawking at me for a moment there... N-No. It must have been my imagination. That's impossible. Now then, you've got some nerve scaring a ghost like me, you accursed book!

After wiping the nonexistent sweat from my forehead, I wandered off elsewhere for a change of pace, a touch unsettled by the girl concentrating single-mindedly on her books with a flush on her cheeks.

It was then that I overheard a conversation among the library staff.

"Say, isn't that girl kind of creepy?"

Someone else shushed him, lowering their own voice in reproach. "That's the regional lord's daughter! You'll be in trouble if anyone hears you."

"Fair point. But, c'mon, she just doesn't act like a kid. Guess what book she asked me to find for her a while back? *Punnett's Theory of Mathematics*! I asked her who she was getting it for, and she told me she wanted to read it herself. Most kids her age are reading picture books or fairy tales. And I saw her actually reading the thing too. She's so peculiar it's downright freaky, don't you think?"

"It must be the Bernstein blood...but you have a point that she's not very childlike. I guess that's how a girl turns out when she doesn't have a mother around."

I cast a disdainful glance at the staff as they carried on with their conversation, growing even more disgruntled than I already was. It was true that she was an odd child, but that had nothing to do with whether she had a mother.

When I found my way back to the girl, I was unsurprised to see her still absorbed in reading.

Well...perhaps it is for the best that she rectifies her reading choices, but still. Children do have the tendency to lose themselves in whatever they love.

Struck with a pang of sympathy for the unendearing child, I reached out to pat her little head. All of a sudden, her gray-blue gaze snapped up. I could have sworn our eyes met.

Why? Because she broke into a seldom-seen smile.

Don't tell me...she can see me?

A crow cawed as it flew past the window, and she turned her attention back to her book. Most likely, it was the sound of the bird that had gotten her to look up in the first place. There wasn't a soul in the world who wouldn't scream upon seeing me.

Probably. I think.

Needless to say, I spent the days that followed developing an even more ghastly visage.

...

It was a damp day that foreshadowed the start of the rainy season. I was all alone, looking as pensive as a nobleman lost in thought as I gazed out the rain-soaked window at the landscape beyond the library.

How long has it been since I began to wander the earth once more as a spirit? I've forgotten my own name, even the home where I was born and raised, and spent many months and years drifting along the current... Hmph. What's that? Did someone just call me a senile old sleepwalker? Oh, never mind. Now, I'm the Library Ghost that dwells in the Bernstein Domain. That's all that matters.

With the pitter-patter of the rain in my ears, I set off to patrol my turf—the grounds of the library.

The air had that damp quality peculiar to the rainy season. Moisture accumulated in every nook and cranny. The ancient books added to the oppressive atmosphere, and the gloom hanging over the premises felt positively refreshing to a ghost.

Surely playing the melancholy nobleman beset by shadows would suit me in this moment. No, wait. Maybe I'd be better off as the nihilistic outlaw with a grass whistle to his lips. Mm. Why, I can almost hear the music swirling in the

background.

Just as I had started humming a tune, euphoric over what a perfect fit I was for the role, I heard a woman's exaggerated scream from the direction I was headed, followed by the jeers of children echoing through the silent library.

"We did it! Now run for it!"

I recognized the child giving the instructions. But before I could put my finger on who he was, the group of naughty ten-year-olds made a break for it.

Amid all the restless excitement, a girl suddenly emerged from among the bookshelves. Her hair was wispy, and she had a doll-like, expressionless face. My archnemesis.

When she heard the patrons buzzing around her and saw the staff approaching her to ask what had happened, she took a startled step backward, only to bow silently, hold up the front of her skirt like a bag, and flee the building. As she passed by, I caught a glimpse of a two-legged tadpole and an adult frog threatening to leap out from her tiny skirt. Apparently, it was one of the maids attending her who had screamed.

As I watched the girl wearing a frog in her fluffy hair like a barrette run off, I rubbed my (imaginary) five-o'clock shadow, chewed on my (allegedly) bitter grass whistle in spirit, and recalled a scene from a few days earlier.

As usual, my archnemesis had been reading a book near an abandoned bookshelf. When I heard the sound of a boy's voice getting louder and louder, I poked my head over to have a look. There, I saw a boy of about ten years old, the same age as my archnemesis, calling out to her with all his might.

Though it wasn't any of my business, I almost stepped in to intervene. Whenever that little girl was absorbed in her reading, she rarely ever registered anyone else's voice. Yet before I could reveal myself, the girl finally noticed, looked up, and blinked up at the boy, whose face was as red as an apple.

The boy, who still had all the mischief of any boy from these parts, seemed embarrassed that he'd spent so long trying to get her attention. Red with breathlessness, his face twisted in anger as he shouted, "Ugly cow!"

It was with a touch of awkwardness that I watched as the boy ran off and the girl blinked her big, round eyes in bemusement. I got the feeling that I'd stumbled upon the bittersweet beginnings of a romance. The reason for this was that I'd spotted a ribbon the girl had worn a couple days earlier in the boy's hand, and I sympathized with his attempt to return the lost item to its owner.

From then on, this sort of thing became a daily routine for the contrarian little boy. He'd regularly put bugs in her hair to get her attention or drop insect carcasses on her books while she was reading, and just recently, a bat weakened by an extermination had even been dropped right in front of her...though that last one had to be a coincidence.

When the girl came down from a ladder, there had been round objects like glass beads lying on the floor, and a scholar and staff member had even slipped on them and fallen with a shriek. What's more, her attending maid seemed to have a strong aversion to insects and amphibians, and the boy's pranks appeared to work only on her. The other day, she'd fainted without so much as a sound at the sight of a giant toad.

Even I was deeply impressed by that toad. Despite being dragged out of his comfortable abode, he'd looked nothing less than confident and imposing. Dignity and majesty had practically oozed from him. No doubt he was the king of all toads. I'd hoped to ask for his name, assuming he must be someone famous, but alas, he'd been mercilessly torn asunder by a member of the library staff.

His final croak had sounded like the promise of a reunion meant for me. *See you again*, I'd felt him say with a cynical smile.

What a refined performance and a lasting impression he'd made. He was nothing like your average dullard. Just thinking back on the encounter filled me with delight, but I soon snapped back to my senses. That wasn't the point here.

The matter at hand was the complicated, bittersweet beginnings of a romance turning into a problem for everyone else around them.

At first the staff had dismissed the boy's antics as a bit of childish mischief, but they grew increasingly uneasy, concerned that his conduct toward the regional lord's daughter was inappropriate. His pranks were becoming more

and more aimed at making the unfazed girl cry out of sheer spite. Not that I couldn't understand the sentiment. No matter how much she was bullied, she was too fearless to look surprised or give so much as a single yelp. One could say it was admirable for a child her age...or just plain impertinent.

I'd tried all sorts of tricks in hopes of giving her a scare, so I understood why he was digging in his heels. Still, it was vexing to think that an opponent I was having trouble with might be forced to scream over a trifling prank.

With a conflicted groan, I watched the girl brave the pouring rain to release the frog into a pond outside. No matter how little emotion she showed on her face, surely she had to feel *something* about being the victim of so many pranks. I got the vague impression that she was in low spirits. The sight of her trudging her way back to the library and taking shelter under the eaves broke my heart. It made me feel like I was ganging up on an innocent child—and a little *girl*, at that.

Ah well. I suppose I'll save my latest scare tactic for another day.

When I followed my archnemesis up the stairs, I was met by the sight of the little boys who had run away earlier dropping bags of water on the patrons below. All of a sudden, the girl's eyes narrowed into a fierce glare. With a swiftness that surprised even me, she lunged forward and shoved one of the boys who was taking aim from the railing. It was a strikingly purposeful, decisive move.

"How dare you trample the books underfoot! There are plenty of other things you could have used as a pedestal!"

What? That's her issue? I thought with a blink, and I'm sure I wasn't the only one.

Standing on their stacks of books and leaning over the railing, the rest of the boys glanced back at her, startled, before the whole group began hurling insults. They called her the freaky Bibliophile Princess—a weirdo with no friends. Everyone else called her a creepy kid, by their account. She was supposed to be the regional lord's daughter, but maybe her parents had just dumped her on the library doorstep.

Their jeers and taunts had me up in arms in an instant. There were some

things no one had a right to say, children or not.

The girl's dignified voice rang out faster than I could express my rage. "Why should anyone else be bothered if I'm a freak? If I'm so creepy, you're free to keep your distance. This is a library. People come here to read in peace. It's no place for those who would trample books underfoot. Get out!"

The boys were intimidated; her rebuke was both logically sound and carried enough authority to compete with a full-grown adult. One of them became defensive enough to argue back. "Wh-What's your problem?! You think you're better than us just 'cause you're the lord's daughter?!"

As soon as one spoke up, the others were quick to chime in. Only the boy who had initiated the pranks stayed silent, his expression torn between anger and shame.

I was outraged. Why, he was a disgrace of a man. *He* was the one who had escalated the conflict, so he ought to have shown the backbone to set things right.

At this point, another boy got so riled up that he raised his hand and shouted, "Who cares about a dumb book?!"

"Stop!" the girl screamed upon noting the water bag in his hand and the direction he was aiming it. She flung herself in front of the bookshelf, and the pouch hit her dead-on, exploding into pieces. A horrified silence fell over the children.

Heedless of their reaction, the girl took one look at the books she had failed to cover and burst into tears. She frantically pulled the drenched tomes from the shelves and began wiping them dry with the inside of her skirt. After a moment's pause, the bullies went back on the defensive, insisting it was all her own fault.

"Hey!" the first boy began to protest, but I acted before he could finish that thought.

I donned my Anti-Archnemesis Face, the fruit of my tireless brainstorming that (I hoped) was certain to make a grown man turn white as a sheet and wet himself—a countenance that could put the gatekeepers of the underworld to

shame. For the accompanying sound effect, I figured the cavernous croak of a trio of toads would do.

I stood in the boy's path, with the girl behind me. The boy who'd been about to speak stared up at me, his mouth hanging open. The other children did the same. Soon enough, a resounding shriek spilled from their quivering lips.

Yes! Now that has a pleasant ring to it.

While I savored that sound for sore ears, the majority of the boys fled the scene. Only the original culprit stood his ground, hugging a friend of his who had been rooted to the spot in fear. He snapped at the little girl, much to my instant disapproval. Did he have even more cruel insults in store for her?

Instead, the words died on his tongue as he watched her sob. He bit down on his lip, his face contorting like he was about to burst into tears himself, and took his leave.

There! The bullies have been vanquished. No need for tears, little one.

Not a second after I had given myself a pat on the back, the girl's brother and the library staff rushed to the scene in response to the children's screams, crying, "Eli!"

Before us stood the heir to House Bernstein, whom I had seen in the company of my archnemesis countless times before. He was a boy of about thirteen or fourteen with a gentle countenance and an affable air about him. His brown hair and gray eyes didn't bear much resemblance to his sister, but his habit of getting so absorbed in a book as to tune out his surroundings was proof enough of their blood relation.

As soon as he saw the state his little sister was in, he rushed to wipe her dry with a handkerchief and patted her head soothingly as she cried. He then murmured, "I'm so sorry, Eli."

The girl scrubbed at her eyes and looked up, only to find guilt in her brother's gaze.

"I stopped Jean from interfering. I thought it'd be nice if you could make a friend your own age. But anyone who would damage a book doesn't deserve your company. From now on, I'll instruct Jean to keep them far away from you."

The brother looked distressed to see his sister in tears for once. I nodded to myself as I listened to their exchange. I too had suffered the boys' shenanigans for so long out of an interest in seeing the girl make friends her own age, even if it meant allowing them to disturb the peace of my library domain.

I-It certainly wasn't because I'd developed fatherly feelings for the girl, or that I was scheming to discover her weakness! Nothing of the sort!

"Alfred..." The girl blinked, then screwed up her face and said, "I believe this water came from Aogafuchi. And the soil in that area is acidic..."

"True. The hydrangeas there are blue, aren't they? ...Wait a minute, Eli. Did the water get in your eyes?"

"Yes."

By Jove!

Evidently, her rare show of tears had a simple explanation: she'd gotten acid water in her eyes.

I can't believe this. So I acted out of character for nothing? Give me back all my righteous anger!

While I gnashed my teeth in frustration, the siblings left the staff to deal with the books and went elsewhere to wash out the girl's eyes. Thus, I never heard the next part of their conversation.

"Say, Alfred. I already have a friend, so there's no need to worry about me."

"Do you mean that boy you met in the royal capital's library?"

"The royal capital? No. I met him here."

"Oh?" the brother prompted, a curious look on his face. His sister merely beamed back at him.

Later on, I overheard an outrageous piece of gossip. Would you believe it?! That girl had earned herself a new nickname: the Library Ghost!

But why? That's my title! Why are they calling her that?! Grrr! I lamented, swearing an oath anew. That girl was my archnemesis. Not content with

jeopardizing my raison d'être as a ghost, she had even stolen my rightful name after I rescued her from those bullies!

That little girl is going down! You'll regret this, my archnemesis!

With that mantra as my guide, I threw myself back into my ghostly craft, hoping to one day reclaim my stolen title.

Chapter 2: Ghost vs. Maid

An evil spirit is haunting my mistress, and there's a story behind how I, Nora Boyd, arrived at that conclusion.

The Bernstein Domain, in which my family resides, is a small territory off the main roads of Sauslind, easy to miss on a map and devoid of any local specialties to speak of. Nestled among picturesque wheat fields, orchards, and rivers cascading from small peaks, it comes together with the adjacent territories to form an idyllic region of rustic simplicity. The locals are quite in tune with the laid-back character of their home, and the stories I often hear of inter-territorial rivalries and tariff disputes might as well be tales from a distant land. Anyone who lives here is more likely to know the name of a calf born to the domain that year than that of any nobleman.

Despite the relaxed nature of the Bernstein Domain, we receive a steady stream of visitors throughout the year. This is because we have one of the best libraries in all of Sauslind. The book-crazy marquise has amassed a grand collection of tomes over the generations, ranging from one-of-a-kind titles to technical texts, and from old, weathered antiques to brand new releases from foreign kingdoms.

The library is said to be full of books that any academic would die to read, and the premises are packed with scholars and researchers all year round. There are thus a large number of inns and lodgings for those academics to stay in. Merchants likewise tend to frequent the Bernstein Domain. Evidently, the new tools and improved seeds developed by the researchers make for a great business asset; some traders have made a fortune that way, so more keep coming in hopes of emulating their success. Sometimes even dignitaries from distant lands come to meet the former regional lord of the Bernstein Domain. Our humble domain subsists on the money these various visitors spend.

And so, after the latest fiasco, the kids who had been playing pranks on the lord's daughter were given a stern talking-to by their parents—accompanied by

a great big smack upside the head.

When my old friend, Dieter, recounted the story in a sulk, I righteously fumed that he'd gotten what he deserved. My mistress was a quiet, elusive sort who didn't tend to assert herself, but she was a sweet girl. Whenever she saw us servants rubbing our chapped hands together in the winter, she'd offer us a homemade ointment.

And she'd been careful to test the salve on her manservant, Jean, of course. She seemed to have learned from her many previous failures.

"I'm serious, Nora! We really saw it."

Dieter was talking about the terrifying ghost he'd supposedly seen shadowing milady—the otherworldly creature who had glared at him and his gang of bullies with the promise of a curse to come. Some of the kids were afraid to pee alone at night after that, but if you asked me, they'd had it coming.

A hand on my hip, I gave my old friend a look of distaste. "I remember having to escort you to the bathroom whenever you spent the night. You're *still* afraid of ghosts?"

"Give me a break! That was back when I was five!" he shouted back, then went on to berate me for digging up stuff from years ago.

The boy before me was the leader of the troublemaking gang. For a ten-year-old like milady, he was on the mature side. He behaved no better than your average brat, though.

I was two years his elder, and I'd once been responsible for looking after the neighborhood children. These days, I was employed as a servant in the regional lord's estate to help out with the household expenses.

When I prompted Dieter to get to the point, he screwed his lips into an awkward pout. "So...you should warn Her Ladyship. I wanted to tell her myself, but for some reason, I can't get inside the library anymore."

The few times he'd managed to get in, it hadn't taken long for him to get tossed back out again. The word among the children was that it was the work of the ghost's curse.

I parroted the word “ghost,” shooting Dieter an incredulous look. He seemed intent on hiding it, but I knew he’d been hovering around milady ever since he’d first picked up her ribbon. No matter how easygoing our domain was, the object of his affections was still a noblewoman. I was tempted to tell him that she was out of his league, but I kept it to myself and acquiesced to his request.

“To tell you the truth, I’ve had similar concerns. Before that manservant named Jean came along, the maids who attended milady often claimed to have seen a ghost. But Master Alfred is always hanging around her, and *he’s* never said anything of the sort.”

While I pondered what that might mean, Dieter meekly pressed me to do him this favor. I offered to mediate if he wanted to apologize to milady, but after some hesitation, he stubbornly declined. He probably *did* want to say sorry, but he felt too guilty for making her cry. He just couldn’t bring himself to face her.

Just as I was feeling a pang of fondness for the “little brother” I’d looked after for so long, he handed me even more tools. According to him, they were for exorcising evil spirits.

“We all feel bad. We know we took it too far...”

Evidently, the boys who played all those practical jokes on milady had put the set together. Their so-called token of apology was an exorcism kit...

I told him I’d save the tools for after I investigated, finished my work early (around dusk), and hurried off to the library. It was almost time for milady to come home. If the ghost had been spotted in the library, it was best to check while she was still there.

As I arrived outside the stone library, which I didn’t often visit, I found myself struck by its grandeur. Perhaps the twilight was to blame, but the huge shadow the building cast made it look almost like a gigantic monster. The age spots and ivy-covered exterior worked together to create an eerie effect, and the entrance was so dimly lit that it felt like walking into the mouth of a beast.

I shook my head furiously. I couldn’t let Dieter’s tall tales get to me.

The library of the Bernstein Domain was open to the public. Still, anyone who didn’t mind their manners was in for a stern reprimand. Okay, correction:

usually only those who mistreated the books.

Once inside for the first time in ages, I began to search the vast labyrinth of a building for my mistress. She wasn't in any of the reading rooms, nor the lounges. It occurred to me that, given the size of the place, it would probably be smarter to wait for her by the entrance, but just as I turned a few bookshelves, I finally spotted her.

I opened my mouth to call out to her. But then...I saw it.

The shadow dancing around my mistress. The translucent *thing* that was not of this world.

...

I am the Library Ghost.

No need to introduce myself a second time, eh?

That evening, an unusual situation arose at my usual haunt of the Bernstein library. Late at night, a crowd of children had swarmed together from who-knows-where. I could see a glimmer of bravery in their faces as they held their lanterns aloft.

What's this? A test of courage? It's the wrong time of year for that, but I suppose I wouldn't mind spicing things up for them.

The leader of the group was a girl of about twelve. Barking orders at the rest of the children, she was a sharp contrast to my archenemy.

"When the ghost shows up, we attack him with our respective exorcism tools. Don't get cold feet now. What's our motto, boys?"

"If we stick together, there's nothing to fear!" the boys of about ten shouted in unison.

She next instructed them to break into pairs and start searching, and to shout as soon as they found anything. With that, the group went their separate ways.

I beg your pardon?! A ghost hunt?! And they're treating me like an evil spirit, to boot!

I wasn't sure whether to be offended or pleased. I wasn't an evil spirit.

Nothing of the sort. Still, wasn't this the perfect opportunity to make a name for myself as a ghost? And to reclaim my rightful title from that little girl?

Hmm... I'd rather avoid an exorcism, though. That would spell the end of my life as a ghost.

Although I didn't feel too threatened by what amounted to a child's game, I was aware that kids could pull off outrageous feats from time to time. One could never be too careful. Plus, I recalled what one of the children had been holding: a ring of garlic. The last thing I wanted was for my home to end up covered in *that*.

Just as I was debating what to do, there came a loud scream. "Did you find it?!" the other kids shouted back, rushing in from all directions.

No, I'm over here...

Following the sound to its source, I found one boy had been taken hostage by an unfamiliar man. The boorish-looking fellow was clearly neither a scholar nor researcher.

"What're a bunch of kids doing here this late at night?! Go home and get to bed, you little shits!"

Well said. Trespassing in the middle of the night could get you kids punished by the regional lord, you know.

"Oh!" The leader girl seemed to have had a revelation. "You must be a thief! My father warned me about this. The Bernstein library is full of valuable books and art, so it's a popular place to rob. He told me to let him know if I saw anyone suspicious!"

The man looked flustered for a moment, but it wasn't long before he was shouting at her to shut her trap. He tightened his grip on the other child, insisting that this was none of their business.

"If you care about your friend, you'll pipe down. Nobody move a muscle."

The captive child choked out a few words: he told the girl called Nora to run. The other kids shouted his name—Dieter—in distress, while I gave a snort. I couldn't believe that some petty thief had the nerve to ransack *my* turf. I was

going to take it upon myself to personally put him down.

Floating behind the children, I put on my signature scary look. With the light from their lanterns shining up at me, I could tell my face was illuminated for maximum effect.

The petty thief noticed me there, his jaw dropping and his eyes going wide. Yet just as he had relaxed his grip on the boy in his arms, someone else suddenly popped up behind him and struck the back of his neck, rendering him unconscious.

Excuse me? That was supposed to be my moment. Who goes there?

“Oh, Jean!” The girl called Nora identified the man. He looked rather lifeless. One of my kind, perhaps?

“I was on patrol. I’ve already apprehended the rest of his gang, so it should be safe now.”

“Wow, Jean... I didn’t realize you were actually good at your job.”

He listlessly restrained the bandit, expressing his offense at that comment, before casting a glance at Dieter, who was hacking and coughing, with the children fussing over him.

Then, he seemed to put the puzzle pieces together. “I think I’ve figured out what’s goin’ on, more or less... Uhh. If you ever see somethin’ strange hangin’ around, don’t worry. It’s harmless.”

With a word of goodbye, he slung the thief over his shoulder and disappeared into the darkness. If you asked me, he was even more suspicious than the crooks.

The children exchanged glances, deflated, then turned to their leader for further instruction. Nora crossed her arms with a conflicted look, but a few moments later, she sighed and let them fall to her sides. She said it was time to call it quits.

“Jean is milady’s personal manservant, and Master Alfred hasn’t said anything about it either. It must really be harmless, then. We don’t need to go out of our way to exorcise it.”

The children sighed, finding the outcome a letdown. Groaning in disappointment, they took their leave.

I was as frustrated as they were. I'd hoped this fiasco might boost my ghostly image, but so much for that.

However, it was one of the children's parting remarks that I truly couldn't stomach. "I guess Her Ladyship will have to keep on being the Library Ghost. And here I was hoping to clear her good name by way of apology."

Come again?! Hold on, son! Get back here and exorcise me! Clear my good name! I am the true Library Ghost! Not heeeer!

Arc 5: The Sauslind Royal Palace Costume Contest

Chapter 1: The Court Staff's Revenge

It all happened in the Sauslind royal archives, sometime after last year's Hunting Festival. The crowd that had gathered in a corner of the library were all male. I, Konrad, a staff member of the royal archives, took a long, sweeping look at the assembled faces. Their expressions were filled with a resentment that had been building for some time now.

That was no surprise. Why, you ask?

"I'm at my limit."

The staff member trembling with rage was dressed as the living dead. His face was so pale and bony to begin with that I wasn't sure the costume was necessary, but that was beside the point. Today was the one day of the year when we were allowed to dispense with all ceremony.

His bloodshot eyes the only splash of color on his pallid face, he ranted, "Why does he insist on flirting in the library?! Couldn't he at least show the consideration to do it away from me?! I was turned down for the hundred and first time the other day!"

The rest of us instinctively backed away at the sound of his bloodcurdling cry. And trust me, it wasn't because we were scared of his appearance.

An employee from a different department piped up in commiseration. As he began to recount his own plight, his voice soon choked with tears. "Every day I work myself into a block of ice in my bitter cold workplace. *Hic*. One day, it was so nice being around the warm body of my girlfriend that I fell asleep in the middle of our date, and she sent me a break-up letter saying, 'If you find me so boring, we're done.'"

The men around him rushed to offer comfort as he threatened to break down crying. The ones nodding along in sympathy, assuring him that the fatigue must

have taken its toll, were from the department known as the demon lord's council room. Rumor had it their workplace was home to a veritable ice monster.

For some reason, they were all dressed as bright, warm balls of fire. I got the feeling they'd misunderstood the assignment, but perhaps it was an attempt to offset their daily hardships.

"At least you *had* a girlfriend..."

That resentful, vindictive remark came from one particular unit of the imperial guard. Their costumes were that of mangled soldiers resurrected on the battlefield. They were dressed as what were known as deserter samurai—or, well, not quite. Were deserter "knights" even a thing?

"We're part of the supposedly sought-after imperial guard, yet not a single one of us has ever found a girlfriend! It's all because that stupid, glitzy demo—Ahem. Because a certain *someone* loves to drag us east, west, and most recently, to the Miseral Dukedom! We're supposed to be stationed at the royal palace, dammit! We're put to work harder than soldiers on the battlefield! We're expected to dash through the rain in the dead of night, camp outside, and vanquish bandits! And once we make it home after all that, we're treated to the royal couple's incessant flirting, and the girl we'd planned to ask out when we got back already has a boyfriend! Is there truly a god out there?!"

As I watched him turn his eyes heavenward and bemoan his fate, I grew concerned that his heartbreak might lead him to dabble in some fishy religion. Then again, if he showed up at a temple looking like *that*, he'd probably be exorcised on the spot.

Fate is a cruel mistress.

As could be inferred from the complaints thus far, our group had come together to air our daily grievances against the most exalted man in all of Sauslind Kingdom. We certainly hadn't banded together out of misguided bitterness, nor did we have a motto of "Down with happy couples!" Don't be silly.

Normally, this sort of thing wouldn't be allowed, but today was a day for dispensing with all formalities. It was the one day a year when the entire royal

court could disrespect their superiors and get away with it. However, that only applied to those in costume. There was an unspoken rule among the children that if they didn't get a treat, they were free to play a trick, but it would be no laughing matter for us adults to attempt the same. Besides...our target wasn't someone to be trifled with.

We gave one another's costumes a quick once-over. With a nod, we confirmed that it would be difficult to tell who was who like this.

If we could get a scream out of him, even the tiniest yelp, it would do wonders to lift our spirits. We wanted to see that glitzy demon lord's legs buckle under him as a ghost popped out from the darkness—or if that was too much to ask, we at least wanted to scare him enough to dissuade him from flirting in public for a while. I *certainly* wouldn't go so far as to hope for, say, the satisfaction of seeing Lady Elianna witness his cowardice. That would be simply delusional.

Okay, maybe I was thinking about it a little.

Ever since the glitzy demon lord's wedding date had been set, he'd lost all self-control around Lady Elianna, as if he'd been freed of the shackles holding him back. The number of people from different departments nursing grudges spoke to how often the pair had been caught in a public display of affection.

Even I had found one particular encounter too much to stomach. When Lady Elianna had been reading on a ladder as per usual, the demon lord had come along with his sparkling smile, boxed her into the narrow space with nowhere to run, and started smooching on her!

He's out of control! What kind of advanced technique is it to trap a girl from below?! I'm so damn jealous, you stupid, glitzy demon lord! I'd thought, and I know I wasn't the only one. If you had the same reaction, that makes you one of us. Feel free to put on a costume and join in the fun.

"All right. Let's follow the plan."

We split up into several groups. As long as even one of us managed to scare him, we'd consider that a win.

Luckily for us, the weather was awful that day. Even in the middle of the

afternoon, the atmosphere was dreary and depressing. The air was heavy with the stifling, silent presence of stack upon stack of books. As if to harmonize with our surroundings, a low, eerie rumble emanated from the sky outside. We relished the perfect timing, only to come to our senses a moment later.

“W-Wait, thunder? This isn’t good. Quick, we need to split up and—”

Just as we librarians had started to panic, there came a voice from the darkness beside us, low and deep enough to scrape the earth.

“And do what?”

We all gulped. When we ventured a nervous glance toward the source of the sound, there stood our target, his smile ferociously radiant even in the dim light—none other than the crown prince himself.

The color drained from our faces so fast you could practically hear it, and our pallid visages were no doubt the spitting image of the dead risen from the grave. Thunder cracked, as if to verbalize our internal cries. Then came the hammering of a sudden downpour.

The glitzy demon lord observed our appearances with a smile. “I know full well what day it is...but why are you all gathered in the royal archives, pray tell? A few moments ago, I came across my personal guards in costume as well.”

I could all but hear the voiceless screams of my peers. *We’re busted! He’s seen through everything! What idiot said we had nothing to fear if we stick together?! We got a little too swept up in the festivities, that’s all!*

He wasn’t even wearing a costume, yet with the way he’d brought thunder and torrential rain in his wake, the crown prince had all the presence of a bona fide demon lord. The entire room was cowed by his gaze and voice, which dropped another octave. His dulcet tones would surely enrapture any woman who heard them, but there was something equal parts terrifying lurking beneath the surface. “Don’t tell me you have some diabolical plan to scare my fiancée? That you hoped to frighten her to the point of tears? Oh, certainly not. No one would even *dream* of it. Nor would any of you fantasize about something so indefensible as making her cling to you in fear, I’m sure?”

Those are your own fantasies, Your Highness!

No one could speak their mind in the face of his intimidating aura. Then, just as tensions had mounted to the point that we were begging the gods for mercy, a bloodcurdling shriek sliced through the fraught silence. It would have been one thing if it had been the shrill scream of a woman, but the fact that it came in the booming tones of a man gave us pause.

Yet the crown prince turned on his heel without a moment's hesitation, so the rest of us rushed after him. After climbing the scares—excuse me, *stairs*—and navigating around a few bookshelves, we followed His Highness's lead and stopped dead in our tracks. In that same instant, a flash of lightning flooded in from the window, illuminating the whole space with a loud crack.

Amid a heap of fallen guards, the ghost of a girl was bathed in pale light. She was drenched from the head to toe, so her face was hidden from view. Only her hand hung limp in front of her, as if pleading for something. Indeed, she was the perfect picture of a voiceless spirit expressing her lingering regrets.

We were on the verge of screaming, a clap of thunder our cue, but then someone else spoke before we could.

“Eli!”

As we watched our fearless prince rush toward the ghastly figure, we flew into a panic. *His Highness is going to get possessed by a ghost!* At the same time, we could hardly believe our own ears. *Wait, did he say Lady Elianna?*

“What happened?! You're soaking wet!”

We were oddly touched by the sight of His Highness hastily removing his jacket and draping it over the female ghost. Leave it to the glitzy demon lord to show more kindness to a ghost than to a flesh-and-blood human.

“It started pouring out of nowhere. I went to close the window, but the fitting was broken...”

“So you struggled with it until you ended up drenched? Oh, honestly... I know how much you love books, but you have to take care of yourself too.”

“My apologies...”

Apparently, our contrite lady ghost was none other than Lady Elianna. We all

breathed a sigh of relief, doing our best to calm our fear-stricken hearts.

Then, right before our eyes, His Highness scooped Lady Elianna into a gentlemanly bridal carry.

“Y-Your Highness?”

“We need to warm you up and get you out of those clothes or you’re going to catch a cold. And as we know, a cold can lead to something much more serious.”

“I-I can walk on my own. Besides, the window is still—”

“Eli.” No sooner had the tone of his voice changed than he etched one of his killer, dazzling smiles onto his features. “If you catch a cold, it’s inevitable that I will too. I thought I’d taught you that lesson, but I suppose it hasn’t quite sunk in.”

“What? Why would that be inevitable?”

“I believe it would be faster to explain through actions than words.”

“Y-Y-Your Highness, *please!*”

We gazed into the abyss as the glitzy demon lord leaned forward and Lady Elianna scrambled to fend him off. I could have sworn some sort of white, translucent spirit matter was leaking from my mouth.

The pair left the royal archives, flirting all the way. Those of us left behind began to tidy up the mess, looking like nothing so much as zombies roaming a graveyard.

I think we all learned a few valuable lessons that day. For starters, we had to reflect on what a mistake it had been to try and scare a certain someone in the first place, and at the same time, we had to appreciate how perceptive he was to unflinchingly identify that creature as Lady Elianna. But above all else...

How do their regular personas manage to be even scarier than our costumes? Are we sure it’s a good idea to let them run our kingdom one day?

It was an emotion-packed day full of costumes and concerns for Sauslind’s future.

Chapter 2: The Treacherous Costume Contest

The day had come once more. It was the time of year when ghosts danced and made merry—the time when children dressed up as those same spirits, asked for candy, and went around playing tricks. Indeed, this was no holiday for grown-ups.

Or it *shouldn't* have been, anyway, but for us court staff, it presented a rare, once-a-year opportunity. It just so happened to be the one day of the year when dressing up in a costume and scaring the dignitaries was considered a permissible offense. Alas, all our attempts so far had ended in disaster.

“Konrad, this is going to be our year!”

I was an employee of the royal archives, and the one giving me a pep talk was from another department. Even more new faces were joining in on the free-for-all festivities this year. It was the perfect chance to make friends with people who worked in different areas.

Having been roped into participating once again, I responded with a noncommittal nod. All these years, we'd dressed up in costumes and done our absolute best to scare a certain prince. This was a product of our growing resentment and envy of him for constantly flirting with Lady Elianna right in front of us, when none of us had girlfriends of our own. Seeing him act like a scaredy-cat over a ghost would be the perfect way to blow off a little steam! It had all begun with that silly little idea.

This year, things were going to be a little different. Queen Henrietta herself had found out about our secret free-for-all and decided to lean into it. In her view, events that allowed the staff to interact—civil officials and military men alike—were a good opportunity to get to know the members and roles of the other departments. Furthermore, allowing an outlet—albeit a modest one—for everyday grievances and malaise would clear the air and help revitalize the court.

With those goals in mind, the plan was to hold an unorthodox free-for-all on a

trial basis. However, a few rules were laid down to ensure that things didn't get too out of control. First, it was against the rules to scare anyone who wasn't in costume. Second and third, each participant would receive a piece of candy, and the person who collected the most candy would receive a special prize from the queen. The fourth rule was that there would be four special ghosts among those in costume. Said people would have multiple pieces of candy to hand out, and each of their candies would be worth ten regular pieces. And lastly, the festivities would begin once the work day was over and end when the clock rang 8 o'clock.

All the participants ooh-ed and ahh-ed when they heard the explanation. There was going to be a special reward! And from the queen, no less!

The first ones to chime in excitedly were the crown prince's personal guard, who were said to have become even more embittered since last year. "Does that mean we could get an apology from a certain prince who's always yanking us around from east to west and demanding the impossible?"

"No, I'd rather lecture him speechless! Just imagine that... His Highness at a loss for words..."

One voice calmly urged them to reconsider. "Think bigger. It's a special prize from *Her Majesty*."

As everyone's attention turned to the speaker, a question in their eyes, they heard one of the younger guards swallow hard. "Do you mean...we could ask her to set us up with one of her personal, handpicked maids or court ladies?"

The look on the faces of all the lonely, single men changed the instant they were made aware of the possibility. *Is that possible? Would she really do that?! Well, it wouldn't hurt to ask!* went their wishful thinking.

As I watched this, I thought to myself, *C'mon, guys. No one even said the special prize is a favor from the prince or queen.*

And so began a day of revelry for spirits from all walks of life. As soon as the bell rang to signal the end of the work day, ghosts flocked one after another to the royal archives, which was located toward the edge of the royal palace. The fact that we were less likely to disturb the other departments made it the ideal

location, and it was where we'd held the event in secret last year. However, it was extra rowdy this time around.

Why? Because the first hurdle was a werewolf blocking the door.

"Why are you standing in our way, Commander Glen?! You're supposed to be on our side!"

"Forgive me. I had no choice."

"Yeah right! I bet His Highness told you he'd give you a day off if you held us off!"

"D-Don't be ridiculous!"

"Traitor! Hand over the candy!"

It devolved into an incomprehensible squabble, with one person threatening to put a curse on him to make him bald.

From the sound of it, Commander Glen of the imperial guard, the special ghost dressed up as a werewolf, was holding his men back outside the door. It seemed to have turned into a fistfight, as it was forbidden to draw one's sword in the royal palace except in cases of emergency.

Meanwhile, we librarians and the other civil officials had been hanging out in the archives since before the work day ended. Dressed in our ghostly garb, we exchanged glances and breathed a sigh of relief. Hand-to-hand combat was not our area of expertise.

The civil officials from one particular department celebrated the fact that we'd cut down on the competition. Word of the special ghosts had already gotten around, so they'd arrived one step ahead in anticipation of such a situation.

Just as we took off in search of the person who was supposed to be farther toward the back, someone else called out to us. "My, what's this?"

It was a voice like a chill that crept up the legs from the earth. A few members of the aforementioned department froze, instantly recognizing who it belonged to, then nervously turned around.

Without a shadow of doubt, the one standing there was their boss, Alexei

Strasser. His icy blue eyes bore an intense frostiness as he stared back at his subordinates. “When I heard that staff were sneaking out of work before the day was over, I insisted that no such slackers could be under *my* command... How very embarrassing for me.”

I could have sworn I heard the men’s silent screams.

One brave soul among them spoke up in a quivering voice. “We’re very sorry, Lord Alexei! We’re ready to accept whatever punishment you may dole out later. But won’t you please grant us some of your special ghost candies?!”

Several others echoed the request, at which point I saw a blue vein bulge out on Lord Alexei’s temple.

“Do I look like I’m in costume to you?”

“Huh? I thought you were supposed to be an ice demon...”

As soon as they said it, the men seemed to realize their mistake: a workaholic like Lord Alexei would never participate in an event like this. They clamped their hands over their mouths, but it was too late.

The ice demon’s lips curled into a rare smile—in this case, an absolutely terrifying grin. “Now is as good a time as any. I ought to have a nice, long talk with my direct reports every once in a while.”

Praying for the handful of men who had dropped out of the race, still rooted to the spot in fear, the rest of us headed for the innermost parts of the archives. This had long since ceased to be the library where we worked on a daily basis; now, it was an underworld labyrinth. It was certainly a fitting stage for a free-for-all. The autumn sun had gone down early in the day, and the handful of lanterns lit along the walls were like signposts guiding us through the maze. We couldn’t even imagine what lay in store for us next.

The civil officials left in the game were down to us librarians, a few young men from the Pharmacy Lab, and, surprisingly, a handful of doctors. From what I understood, they wanted to get a morale boost from the queen’s special prize before Doctor Harvey, the court physician, could make another unreasonable request of them. It went without saying that the men from the Pharmacy Lab bore the same grudge against the prince that we did.

One of the group nervously ventured, “Say, there are four special ghosts, right? If one is Commander Glen, and the second *isn’t* Lord Alexei...who’s left?”

“The third is probably the princess, and the last has to be the demon lord.”

The queen hadn’t announced who the ghosts were. Still, judging by all the traps the demon lord had laid, it was safe to assume that he and his beloved were included among their ranks.

Our target was the princess. We had every expectation that she would be generous with the candy. Unfortunately, the traps standing between us and her were brutal.

“Do you think it’s Prince Theodore?!”

Could our own boss be one of the special ghosts? Just as we had exchanged glances, a cheerful voice cut in from the side.

...

Gosh, the queen sure comes up with some fun ideas.

I, Alan Ferrera, stepped out in front of the court staff. I was dressed like a pirate, one eye covered with an eye patch and my head and belly wrapped in cloth.

“Hi there! I’m the second ghost. Want some candy?”

The civil officials greeted me, seemingly satisfied with the answer to their questions. It looked like they’d only just remembered my existence, but it made sense in hindsight. It likewise must have dawned on them that I was their second best shot after Lady Elianna, seeing as they all came rushing over at once.

“Please, Lord Alan! Share the wealth!”

Surrounded by a herd of ghosts begging me for candy, I was a little daunted.

“Now, now, hold your horses,” I said. I wasn’t about to let such an entertaining setup go to waste. “If I hand out all the candy I have, it’ll leave you all on equal footing. There’d be no point. Use your heads a little, my dear civil servants.”

The ghosts exchanged bemused glances. “Umm... Are you inciting us to fight amongst ourselves and steal each other’s sweets?”

“No, silly. You just need one of you to come out the winner. If you all make it to the finish line together, no one will get the prize, right?”

Thinking back on the rules, they all realized I had a point. Only the one who collected the most candy would get the queen’s prize.

“Besides,” I went on, “the greatest obstacle awaiting you is the demon lord. If you can’t get past him, you’ll never make it to the princess. Don’t you think it makes more sense to form a united front?”

“What do you mean, a united front...?”

Hm. That blank look the ghosts were giving me wasn’t the least bit endearing.

I repeated myself like a teacher patiently lecturing his students. “Only one of you needs to get to the end. If that person makes it to the finish line, you all win. You can split the prize among yourselves. And if you have the hope that at least one of you can make it, you won’t be afraid to face the demon lord that lies ahead. I’ll give my candy to the last man standing. What do you think? Isn’t that a good idea?”

The men nodded along in agreement. Beaming, I added, “So leave your candy with me for now!”

Just as the ghosts had traded glances and reached into their pockets for their sweets, someone said, “I can see your tail, Alan.”

I was so startled that I jumped in the air, my hands flying to my rear end. When I turned around, I found that the last boss—the demon lord himself—had graced us in person. Naturally, he was dressed as his devilish namesake, complete with spiral horns and an all-black outfit. Somehow, his golden hair looked more radiant than ever. His blue eyes, on the other hand, were shooting me a look as frosty as Lord Alexei’s.

“There’s no rule that says a special ghost can’t make it to the finish line. I’m sure you’re scheming to cheat everyone else out of their candy and claim the prize for yourself.”

The civil officials stared at me in shock. Next thing I knew, they were looking menacing enough to match their ghoulish costumes.

I backed away, attempting to laugh the whole thing off. “C’mon, guys... Now that it’s come to this, why don’t we all team up to steal the demon lord’s candies?”

I was about to add that we could then head straight for Lady Elianna, but Prince Chris bitterly beat me to the punch. He told us she wasn’t around. When we looked back at him in surprise, he claimed he’d been looking for her, casting an irritated glance around his surroundings.

He then added, “Besides, there’s no point trying to get candy from Eli. She has that incorrigible sweet tooth Jean hanging around. No doubt he’s eaten it all by now.”

The same possibility occurred to the rest of us. As they groused that this sent them back to square one, I could sense the civil officials shifting their target to me, so I scrambled to keep the conversation going.

“Th-Then why did you get in everyone’s way, Your Highness? If we can’t get any sweets from Lady Elianna, there was no need to set all those traps.”

Fierce eyes worthy of a demon lord turned on the crowd. “Tell me... Did you all plan to say *that* line to Eli?”

Both the officials and I blinked, confused. A moment later, I struck my palm with my fist as I put two and two together.

“Oh! You mean that stock phrase everyone says on Masquerade Day? ‘Trick or treat’? Jeez, Prince Chris, that’s so petty!”

“The only one who can ever, *ever* say that to Eli is me.” Defiant, the demon lord set his sights on us. “Now that it’s come to this, *I’ll* take all the sweets and claim the prize from my mother. Hand over the goods, now.”

“You sound like a thief-turned-bandit! Aren’t you supposed to be a prince?!”

Prince Chris threatened us to shut up and hand over the candy, so the civil officials and I formed a united front and declared all-out war. None of us noticed that someone was watching our raucous antics from above.

I stared in disbelief at the spectacle downstairs, wondering what on earth those kids were doing.

Today was the free-for-all masquerade. It didn't seem like the young ones were going to make it here any time soon, however. *That makes victory mine*, I thought, turning on my heel with a grin.

The moon was especially bright for a mid-autumn evening. Hence, the door to the second-floor balcony of the archives, which was rarely used, had been left wide open. It was a tad chilly outside, but the sight of several women giggling and squealing had a certain warm glow to it.

Seated at the table and surrounded by maidservants was the Bibliophile Princess, Elianna. She was dressed as a charming witch, trademark hat and all.

Her maids called out to me when they saw me come through the door. "My, are you the first to arrive, Prince Theodore?"

I walked up to Elianna with a smile, brought my vampiric face close to hers, and uttered the line Chris has tried so hard to stop anyone from saying. "Trick or treat, Eli."

Eli gave a blink of her gray eyes, then said something surprising. "Oh, but I'm not participating in the costume contest..."

"Hm?"

That was when a smug voice cut in. I turned around to find Queen Henrietta, the hostess of this event, sauntering toward me. She and Eli were wearing matching outfits, like a mother and daughter. "No shortcuts, Theodore."

As I greeted my sister-in-law, she gracefully took a seat next to Elianna. She then slowly opened her fan.

"I don't see any sign of Chris, the military officers, or the civil officials," she said. "What a pitiful showing."

I wondered what was going on here, only to hit upon a certain possibility. When I asked for confirmation of my theory, I saw her eyes dance playfully behind her fan.

“That’s right. I’m the fourth special ghost. Why don’t you try that classic line on me, Theodore?”

I threw up my hands in surrender. “Absolutely not. My brother would kill me. That aside... Your Majesty, did you plan all this just so you could wear matching costumes with Eli?”

“Why, I should be offended. I organized the event in the hope that it would give the court staff a nice break. Then again...that’s an interesting thought. Elianna, dear. Would you like to say the traditional line for me?”

Eli seemed surprised to be put on the spot. Still, she seemed to have picked up on the queen’s meaning, as she wrung her hands and shyly ventured, “Um...trick or treat, mother.”

I could practically hear the queen’s gaze intensify on the other side of the fan. Eli looked taken aback, but my sister-in-law was so easy to read.

Clearing her throat, the queen handed Elianna a special savory treat she’d saved just for her. The sight of the two of them happily munching on their snacks together made me realize the true purpose of this undertaking.

Downstairs in the archives, the hustle and bustle was still going strong, but the atmosphere on the balcony was different. Under the moonlight of a long autumn night, an amicable ladies’ tea party was in session.



Afterword

Hello. Yui here. Yui...here...

You know, the same Yui who was hounded by an editor hell-bent on getting this book out by October, and who proceeded to live in fear of incoming calls like a character in a horror movie.

You know, the same Yui who, like a Buddhist monk reciting a mantra, told myself over and over that it was wrong for a working professional to go incommunicado, only to scream in terror at the torrential onslaught of emails.

You know, the same Yui who was tormented by the specters of looming deadlines even in my nightmares.

You know, the same Yui who spent every waking and sleeping moment despairing over a blank manuscript.

Okay, you get the picture (lol). To be fair, nearly all the emails ended up being anime-related.

It's hard to believe that I was publishing two books a year back when I first started writing *Bibliophile Princess* (*stares off into space*). Writers sure are amazing... (Myself excluded.)

Time to get serious. Thank you so much for reading *Bibliophile Princess Volume 7: The Blue Sky Compass and the Spring Bird*. This one was a continuation of the previous *Guiding Light of Hope*. The plan was for volumes four through six to cover the story dubbed “the Conspiracy Arc,” but, well, a lot happened. For Eli, Chris, and the rest of the cast—and for me.

Given the times we live in, I suspect a lot has happened for my readership as well. You have my most sincere thanks for sticking with me through the Conspiracy Arc despite that.

All told, volume seven was devoted to finishing up the Conspiracy Arc's homework. Whereas Eli spent volumes four through six running from place to place, in volume seven, it's Chris who travels west and east, and he even

ventures out to sea to make up for all the time he spent cooped up in the royal palace. He certainly lived up to his title as the hero of our story.

Eli collapsing from exhaustion was one of the first storylines I planned. In the beginning, she was a passive character who mainly stuck to her books, but starting from the fourth volume, she travels far and wide across the northern region. The point of the story was to show if our quiet bookworm could rise to the occasion.

Of course, that was a lot to ask of her, so she collapses and reunites with the hero in a scene straight out of *Romeo and Juliet*. Though I didn't quite have her say, "O Chris, Chris, wherefore art thou Chris?" from the balcony (lol).

Next comes the Harbor Arc, the middle section that depicts Chris and Alan's first meeting. I'd had the idea for this story in my head from the very start, but it sure was hard to put to paper. Even I was stunned by the slow pace of my own writing.

My one ray of hope was young Randy. He was insanely fun to write, and I never wanted to let him grow up! I loved that he was tiny but strong. It's so cute! He was definitely one of the author's darlings. But when my ever-rational editor told me I had to let him age, I did so in tears. Now that he's taller, who even needs him anymore?

Kidding! I love all my characters (lol).

The last story shows the progress of Anna and Alfred's romance, plus our main two characters' proposal. Then comes the comedy. The more lighthearted side stories were both revised and expanded versions of stories I'd previously posted on the web.

All in all, I felt like this volume showcased a lot of different facets of the *Bibliophile Princess* universe, so I really hope you all enjoyed it.

Now for the usual confessional.

To my editor, I'm so, so sorry for making you work from morning till night, even on your days off, and for making you call me on Sundays! (orz)

To the lead proofreader, the editorial team, and everyone from the printing press, I'm so sorry. And thank you so much.

To my illustrator, Sheena-sensei... I don't even know what to say. Thank you so, so much for all the lovely color and insert illustrations. I've likewise received endless amounts of motivation from Kikuta-sensei, the artist in charge of the manga adaptation.

I'm also grateful to all my family and friends for their support.

And last of all, my thanks go out to my dear readers. By the time this volume is published, the start of the anime won't be far off. It's thanks to your support that *Bibliophile Princess* has made it to the TV screen. The production company, staff, and animators have all been working hard to bring you *Bibliophile Princess*. I truly hope you enjoy the adventures of Eli and friends in the world of animation too.

I look forward to the anime, and I hope to see you all again.

Yui



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Bibliophile Princess: Volume 7

by Yui

Translated by Tara Quinn Edited by Suzanne Seals

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