
NOVEL
3
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I Abandoned My Engagement
BECAUSE MY SISTER IS A TRAGIC HEROINE, BUT SOMEHOW I BECAME ENTANGLED WITH A RIGHTEOUS PRINCE

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JOHANN HOLBRAND
Eric's captain of the guard
LINGSHA
Eric's bodyguard
ERIC ELSHAID
Crown prince of Elshaid
KOH TAILONG
Aide to the Ren Empire's prime minister
FANG LIU
Fourth imperial prince of the Ren Empire
LEIA WESTORIA
A saint of the Kingdom of Elshaid

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Seven Seas Entertainment

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Prologue

AS THE AUTUMN WINDS began to blow, I found myself emerging through the castle gate and walking the streets of the royal capital to meet with someone.

After I send her off, I have my audience with His Majesty…

Today was a very important day—my engagement to Prince Eric was on the line.

Though Eric proposed and I accepted, our engagement was not yet official. He was the crown prince, after all. Our engagement needed not only our consent but that of his father, the king, as well. My audience with the king had been delayed due to the aftermath of revoking the special rights of dukes, but the day had finally come.

Earlier, Eric told me, "His Majesty likes you, Leia. I assure you, he won't object to our marriage."

With Eric's vote of confidence and my service to the kingdom as a saint, I didn't doubt my own worth. However, I was well aware that as a daughter of House Westoria, I would be marrying someone of a higher social class. For someone of Eric's status, politically useful marriages were preferred—not to mention that my own sister was involved in a plot to murder the crown prince and a saint. And even though Berklein had been behind it, it was doubtful the king would overlook that.

I was at a crossroads, about to embark on a new journey in life. Strangely enough, the girl I was going to meet with was about to take the first steps on a new path as well.

There she stood at our meeting place, a pretty girl with pink hair.

"Oh dear, did I keep you waiting?" I asked.

Noticing me, she ran over with a smile. "Leia! My sweet sister, I'm so glad you came."

"Of course I came. I promised, didn't I?"

"I know, but I'm still happy to see you."

My little sister Jill had such a sunny disposition that she seemed like a total stranger. Her smile still made me feel conflicted

after all those long years of abuse I endured.

When a person changes so dramatically, I suppose it takes a while to adjust.

“Is something wrong, Sister? I hope I’m not bothering you by being too chatty and chummy.”

“D-don’t say that, Jill. If anything, it’s the opposite.”

“The opposite… What do you mean?”

Jill seemed concerned that I was thrown off by her radically different personality.

“It’s nothing. I’m just relieved to see you looking so well.”

“Oh, is that all? Well, yes, I am doing well. I had resigned myself to my fate, but your kindness to me has filled my heart with gratitude.”

Reassured by my words, Jill’s face broke out into a smile of relief. Last month, Jill returned to court to be sentenced. Given the severity of her crimes, her punishment was sure to be harsh. The memory of all those sleepless nights worrying over her fate were still fresh on Jill’s mind.

Due to the extenuating circumstances of her case, she was sentenced to join a convent. When I heard the decision, I sighed with relief.

And that was thanks to Eric and Dale, who laid the foundation of her defense by testifying that she helped with Algrene’s arrest.

“Glad to hear it, Jill. But isn’t this still hard for you?”

“Yes, I suppose so, but I must be grateful that I’ve been given a second chance at life.”

Jill was not the sort of person who would find life in a convent easy. Other daughters of the nobility lived there, but she was the only criminal. Considering her position, the convent could possibly be as torturous as a bed of nails to her. But if she had decided to take responsibility for her crimes and walk the difficult path of atonement, it wasn’t my place to intervene.

“Leia…I truly cannot thank you enough.”

“Jill?”

“I assumed I would be sentenced to death. But I’m standing here today, given this chance to atone for my sins, because you didn’t wish such a punishment on me.”

“It wasn’t only me, Jill. Eric and Dale also—”

“Yes, of course, but I think it was your influence that mattered the most. My eyes are finally opened. I know now that God does *not* hate me—I had only convinced myself so.”

Jill gazed heavenward. There wasn’t a cloud in the sky, the sun gleamed brightly, illuminating the path Jill was to walk. She was moving on with her life. If nothing else, this belief came naturally to me as I looked at her.

“I hope you continue to change for the better, Jill. I’ll be praying for you.”

“And I will change, Sister, just you watch. I promise I’ll never cry again.”

Jill had convinced herself she was the heroine of a tragic story. She spent her days crying, believing she was cursed, that nothing was her fault and everyone else around her was to blame. Unable to face reality, she had sunk into her own world for years.

But she was now ready to take her first step toward a life that embraced the truth. As a saint and as her big sister, it was my earnest wish that she succeeded.

“Jill, I have faith in you. If you keep true to yourself as you are now, I know that God will forgive you.”

Jill looked up and nodded, her eyes filled with determination. “I do hope so. I promise you, I won’t ever run from reality again.” She then took my hands, closed her eyes, and nodded again. And in that moment, my heart felt a ray of light shining on her future.

“Leia, my dear sister, thank you for everything.”

“I pray for your happiness, Jill…”

“Aww, I’ll be praying for your happiness too, Leia. Do tell me when the wedding is. I want to at least send a letter of congratulations.”

“It’s a promise.”

We paused to listen as a horse-drawn carriage approached us from a distance. Her ride to the convent had arrived.

Up to the very last moment, our parents did not come to see her. Even Catherine, my stepmother who loved her dearly, never came to the dungeon to visit her.

That's shocking. I didn't know love could be so shallow.

Either her love had run dry, or there was some other reason. Either way, she had turned her back on her own daughter.

"You must be Jill Westoria. I am Sister Eleanor, your guarantor. Are we ready to depart?"

"Yes, Sister Eleanor. I am ready when you are."

"Then let us be on our way."

Sister Eleanor descended from the carriage to help Jill inside. She was to supervise Jill at the convent. As Jill followed, her eyes were focused straight ahead on the future. There were no traces of the former tragic heroine in her.

"Jill…I'll visit you, I promise," I murmured as I turned away and the carriage rambled off into the distance.

This was for the best. I honestly believed that. Jill would live out the rest of her days atoning for her sins. I knew the road that lay ahead of her would be anything but easy, but I had faith that she would overcome it.

Do your best, Jill… I'll do my best as well.

I had no need to worry anymore. I just needed to be her ally and wait for her until she was ready to get back on her feet again, no matter how long it took.

"And now…to see the king. I wonder what he'll think of me."

I was going to be Eric's wife. This audience with the king needed to go perfectly.

I gathered my wits about me and started to walk back to the palace. The city streets were livelier than before, but walking them alone felt somewhat melancholic.

These days, the kingdom was bustling with people more than ever as the Elshaid Foundation Day drew steadily closer. The

boisterous voices of merchants and frantic footsteps of shoppers echoed out behind me as I made my way to the palace.

Chapter 1:
The Crown Prince's Bride-to-Be

"I GATHERED MY WITS…but I'm still a nervous wreck."

As I stood in Eric's study waiting for him, an anxiety I couldn't quite name had a hold on me. Especially on an important day like today, Eric had no time to rest. He was running around, checking over reports dealing with the aftermath of the Algrene incident, and quelling the surges of unrest and discord resulting from the radical government reforms.

I couldn't count the number of times I wanted to admonish him for overworking himself.

But he's devoted to seeing his dream for the kingdom become a reality. Whenever I see the fiery determination in his eyes, I can't bring myself to stop him.

"*Leia*, don'tcha want any tea?"

The tea Lingsha had grown cold—I'd forgotten to drink it. "Oh! Pardon me, Miss Lin, I drifted off there…" I uttered a quick apology.

The two of us were alone.

"Don't you worry about it. Want me to brew another cup?"

"No, thank you. I don't think I could keep anything down right now."

"I know the feeling, oh yes. Everyone has days like this." Lingsha sat down on the sofa and gestured for me to join her. After an interminable awkward silence, she looked me straight in the eyes and said, "Leia, are you really that scared to meet with Eric's dad?"

I smiled awkwardly. "Yes, I am. I've met His Majesty before, but not to ask for his blessing to marry his son… I just don't know how I'm supposed to behave."

What if I'm too nervous to speak? The terrifying thought refused to leave my mind. That showed just how important this audience with the king was.

"Aw, just be yourself and you'll be fine, Leia, oh yes. Don't worry, Eric's dad knows you're a good person."

“Is it really that simple?” I chuckled. “You know, hearing you say so makes me a believer, Miss Lin. What a strange power you have.”

I felt embarrassed to laugh about it, but it did lighten my spirit a little. And she was right, there was no use in trying to put on airs. I just had to be myself.

I’m definitely still nervous, but I’m feeling more optimistic.

“But, Leia, I heard this is your second engagement. Won’t it be easier the second time around?”

“Oh, no, not at all. I was a bundle of nerves the first time too… and that was only an arranged marriage. Both sets of parents approved the union, so there was nothing to worry about.”

“You mean, your dad and Philip’s dad decided on the marriage, yes?”

“Exactly. But this time, Eric and I pledged our love to each other first, and now we’re seeking His Majesty’s approval. It’s a completely different situation.”

“Now I see. Oh yes, I get it.” Lingsha nodded knowingly. Then she clasped my hand and said, “In the Ren Empire, this is how we give each other courage. See?”

The surge of warmth from her hand filled my heart with peace. I could practically feel the tension leave my shoulders.

“Wow, that’s amazing. What’s this warm sensation? Is this chi? Thanks, Miss Lin, I feel much calmer now.”

“Of course you do. Chi flows through the body just like blood. You can find it under your eyelids and under your fingernails and toenails too.”

“W-wow, that’s incredible. I’ve learned something new.”

Surviving all the turmoil in the Ren Empire really did make her resilient. She knew about so many things as well. It all made my worries feel incredibly trivial.

The worldly Lingsha sat up straight, tilted her head sideways with a curious expression, and asked, “When Lingsha gets married… do you think she’ll need to meet the parents too?” Her eyes looked as though she was picturing that future in her mind.

“Yes. I’m pretty sure you’ll have to.”

“Tell me what it felt like the first time, please. I can learn from it, yes?”

“Gladly. Well, I’ll tell you about the time I met Duke Gilbert…”

I looked back on my past experiences as I talked to Lingsha. At first, I was so excited that Philip was to marry me. All I could remember was how hard I focused on smiling as I spoke so that I didn’t offend Duke Gilbert, one of the Great Four of Elshaid.

“Hmm, sounds like a pain in the butt. Doesn’t the meeting ever go super quick?”

“No, a marriage is the joining of two families; it’s a very big deal.” Barely after the words came out of my mouth, I remembered that Lingsha was a princess of the Ren Empire, twelfth in line to the throne. If a refugee like her married, the situation would probably be quite different.

“You know…given your situation, marriage might be an even bigger ordeal, Miss Lin. I’m sorry, I should have been more considerate.”

“Aw, don’t sweat it, Leia. But you’re probably right. I should expect to see bloodshed when the big day comes, oh yes.”

As usual, Lingsha’s casual way of delivering the most brutal sentiments shocked me. Silently, I worried that I had said something inappropriate.

I…can’t think of a good reply.

I felt terrible, since Lingsha’s Ren Empire wisdom had served me so well countless times.

“Miss Lin…this tea is delicious. It always is, but did you change something this time?”

“Johann bought that tea. He found a new shop, see.”

“Oh, did he? Well, that’s lovely news!”

I felt bad about how desperate I was to change the subject. Lingsha’s interest in the topic of marriage came as a complete surprise. Did she have feelings for someone? *Wait, should I ask if she was seeing anyone? That’d be worth celebrating.* Okay, now I was genuinely curious.

“Miss Lin…pardon my asking, but do you have a boyfriend? Please don’t feel obligated to respond…”

No answer.

“Miss Lin?”

But there was still no answer. Perhaps I’d asked her something I shouldn’t.

“Um, Miss Lin? I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have pried.”

“Leia…don’t apologize… You weren’t prying. I was just—”

“Lady Leia! Lady Lingsha! Good thing I found you both! I’ve brought some pastries from the newest bakery in the capital!”

Johann barged into the study, a bag from a pastry shop in hand. It smelled delicious and filled the air with freshly baked sweetness.

“Ooh yes, that smells good! You’re great at your job, Johann.”

“Thank you so much, Sir Johann,” I added. “Why don’t we all have them now for tea?”

“Ah, yes! Great idea. Come, Lady Lin, join us.”

“Sure. Thanks.”

I made the tea more often, since Lingsha had taught me how. The tea I brewed tasted good now, even though it still didn’t hold a candle to hers.

“Here you go…”

“Thank you, Lady Leia!”

“Thanks!”

We sat down at the table to have our tea and pastries. They were crisp on the outside and melty on the inside, and they gave off a potent buttery fragrance.

Mm…so good.

As I savored the pastries Johann bought us, Johann and Lingsha were engaged in a spirited discussion over a book they’d read recently.

“Lady Lin, that book you lent me yesterday was terribly intriguing. That last sentence in particular provoked my thoughts quite profoundly…”

“I know, right? That’s a Lingsha favorite. You should read it too, Leia. I know you’ll love it, oh yes.”

“I’d love to.”

The pair had become quite avid readers lately. I often came across them fervently discussing their opinions like this. The pastries were likely a pretense to having these conversations—I had a feeling that Johann was buying them a lot more recently.

Had he developed a sweet tooth?

No, there was more to it than that—this atmosphere between them…it felt the same, yet different. Lately, it seemed like Johann and Lingsha had grown closer.

Their dynamic changed right around the time Johann was suspended.

Could it be? Were they seeing each other?

No, it doesn’t look that serious.

Lingsha had said that she brought Johann pastries and books while he was under house arrest. That probably just led to them spending more time together outside of work, nothing more.

Satisfied with my conclusion, I brought my teacup to my lips.

“Lady Leia, is something troubling you?”

“Oh, no, it’s nothing, Sir Johann. I was just thinking.”

“I see. Well, no wonder, you’re about to embark on a very important task. His Highness looked unusually nervous this morning himself. Hah! Hah! Hah!”

Johann looked genuinely amused. And I was surprised by what he said.

“Er, he was nervous? Wow, I didn’t know Eric was capable of feeling anxious.”

“Yes, I have little memory of him ever feeling this way. But I’m certain that today’s audience with His Majesty is terribly important to him.”

When I saw the look in Johann’s eyes, my apprehensions started creeping back. I never dreamed that stoic Eric would be nervous about an audience with his father…

But knowing that Eric is nervous because of me*? That doesn't feel bad at all.*

"Don't say that, Johann! Lingsha worked so hard to unravel Leia's tension, and you've *ruined* it!"

"M-my apologies! Lady Leia, I know you'll be just fine! His Majesty will approve of you just the way you are!"

"Yeah, that's exactly what I told her!"

Johann looked flustered after Lingsha's scolding.

My nervousness was definitely back…but it was a good nervousness.

"Miss Lin, you needn't worry," I said proudly. "Eric is just as nervous as I am. We're sure to triumph over our fears together."

"Ooh! That's our Lady Leia! So valiant!"

Johann and Lingsha met my valor with a smile. They were both rooting for me. I couldn't disappoint them.

"Lady Leia…I have indeed never seen Prince Eric so nervous, but I've also never seen him so happy!"

Eric was happy. Clearly, he wished to be with me as badly as I wished to be with him. Hearing the words from somebody else made me feel self-conscious, but the joy I felt smothered those feelings.

"Oh, Johann, thank you so much. Yes, this fear I feel is something I need to conquer… But it's not a bad fear. It's proof that I am serious about our future!"

"Indeed. And I'm glad to hear it."

"Leia, the blissful fear you feel today will become a treasured memory later, oh *yes*!"

Blissful fear, those could be the perfect words to describe it. Whenever I remembered the day Eric declared his love for me…my cheeks reddened. I was sure that I'd look back on the events of today feeling just as jubilant.

I recalled the first thing he ever said to me: "Are you the insolent saint who has been abusing her little sister?"

Our relationship started off on the worst footing, but we got to know each other, and now we were walking on the path to

marriage together. There was no telling where life would take you—that's what made it so enthralling.

This was a truth I rediscovered in that moment.

***

"Sorry I'm late."

I heard the door open, and Eric stepped inside. He emanated an air of dignity and confidence, despite his frayed nerves. In fact, I didn't think he looked any different than usual. We all rose to greet him.

"Eric…" I hesitated. "Shall I make some tea?"

"Hey! It's my turn!" Lingsha cut in.

Even upon further examination, Eric did not look nervous at all. He looked peaceful, even.

"No thanks, I don't have time for tea. Hmm? Leia, is there something on my face?"

"N-no, it's nothing."

I strode over to him, gazed into his eyes, and smiled softly. In the past, I could never relax when he looked at me like this, but over time, I found his gaze became quite soothing—filling me with the conviction that this was a man who would always be there for me.

"All right… Well, just to review, I am going to formally introduce you to my father. I'm going to tell him you're the woman I love."

"Yes, and I will tell His Majesty loud and clear that I adore you," I said softly and squeezed his hand.

Eric lay his other hand on top of mine and said, "Then let's go. Are you ready, Leia?"

"Of course I am, Eric," I nodded.

And then, hand in hand, we went to the king's audience chamber.

“Leia…”

“Is something the matter, Eric?”

“No, it’s just, well…you’re so strong. Your strength inspired me to grab hold of happiness on my own terms. I’m…eternally grateful.” Eric’s voice was soft as we walked down the hallway.

He didn’t have to go out of his way to tell me that. And I could say the same of him.

“Eric, you’re every bit as strong. I was thinking the very same of you.”

“Hah. I think that when we’re together, no obstacle can stand in our way.”

We kept talking. I knew without looking that the man I loved had eyes that were brimming with confidence right now.

“Yes. I know we will be all right.”

“We will,” Eric answered firmly in reply.

When I heard his voice, I thought to myself, *I am truly blessed that I found this man…and that I earned his love.*

At last, we reached the audience chamber.

“Prince Eric, Lady Leia, His Majesty awaits. Please enter.”

Two guards standing at attention greeted us at the door. They were members of the king’s royal guard.

“Good. Indeed. Um, Leia…are you sure you’re all right?”

“Yes. I’m ready.” As the words left my lips, I was shocked to realize that I was completely calm.

I nodded to Eric, and he opened the door.

The audience chamber was as majestic as ever. The king sat upon his throne deep within the chamber and watched us as we entered.

***

Inside the audience chamber, we knelt before the throne, and Prince Eric said, “Your Majesty, thank you for granting us an

audience with you. We have come here today to announce our engagement and ask for your blessing."

After a pause, the king slowly spoke. "Saint Leia, Leia Westoria, it has been a while since we last talked. Look at me, child."

"Yes, Your Majesty."

Obediently, I looked up until my gaze met the king's. His eyes, the deep blue color of the ocean, just like Eric's, held a peaceful gleam within.

"Hm. You look well."

"I am, thank you."

"So…is everything going well with Eric?"

"Oh, you know it! We're like—ack!" Frantically, I clapped my hand over my mouth.

Uh-oh. That's way too casual. I'm so embarrassed! How could I speak to a king like that…

The king chuckled. "Ah, yes, so that's how it is. Well, I'm glad to hear it. Now let me ask again: Eric, do you wish to marry Leia, the eldest daughter of House Westoria?"

"Yes, Father. I want to spend the rest of my life with her."

"I see… Now, what about you, Leia? Will you stay by Eric's side always?"

"It would be my greatest joy, Your Majesty." My answer came without hesitation.

The king gave his chin a satisfied stroke and continued, "Eric, normally, a crown prince should marry either the princess from another kingdom or the daughter of a duke, to forge alliances and strengthen his kingdom. And yet, you have chosen Leia. I trust you know the implications of your choice?"

My breath caught in my throat.

He was right. Eric was the future king, and there were a number of women better suited to wed him than the daughter of a mere count.

Ordinarily, his status as crown prince would forbid him from choosing someone like me for his bride. I already knew this, but

hearing it from the king's mouth made the reality weigh heavier on my heart.

But despite all that, Eric had still chosen me. That meant something. It meant—

When I glanced at Eric, he whispered, "Don't worry, I imagined we would meet a degree of resistance." Then he turned to the king and said, "It's true that if you consider prestige alone, House Westoria is lacking. However, I believe that Leia herself has the strength needed to be my partner."

"Oh?" the king asked.

"She has rescued me more times than I could count—and it was her help that made it possible for me to vanquish the darkness that was consuming this kingdom. Only Leia—no one from any other house could have helped me as much as she did. I want Leia Westoria—no, I *need* Leia Westoria. She is the only woman I can trust by my side."

Eric's tone was firm and incisive. His words made me so happy that tears blurred my vision. I couldn't imagine a greater honor than receiving such praise.

"Hmm…I see." The king smirked. Then he looked at me, his expression melting into a smile, and said, "Leia, what do you think?"

"I agree with Prince Eric completely, Your Majesty. I wish to be his support and his guide. I will spare no effort to be worthy of that. And when he ascends to the throne, I promise you, glory will come to this kingdom. To that end, I will assist him as his wife and as a saint of Elshaid."

"I see… Your love for him must run quite deep." The king smiled again. All traces of harshness were gone—his eyes were as gentle as always.

Thank goodness…

It was a relief to see. It looked like we would receive his blessing.

The king gave us another look over and said, "Very well. Leia Westoria, you have my blessing to marry Crown Prince Eric Elshaid."

"Thank you!"

“You have my humble thanks, Your Majesty.”

We bowed deeply in gratitude.

We did it! The king gave us his blessing!

I was dying of happiness. I hadn’t felt such a sense of accomplishment since the day I was chosen to be a saint.

But this wasn’t the end—it was a new beginning. I needed to work even harder now to be a good partner for Eric. And I would never forget my vow to be his support and his guide as we walked through life together.

“Leia, Eric, I know you will be a fantastic husband and wife. I wish you all the happiness.”

“Thank you!”

“So, when will it be?”

“Pardon?”

“Your wedding. We’ll need to coordinate it with the palace staff right away. You want to announce your engagement as soon as possible, don’t you?”

The king grinned like a cat.

At that moment I recalled that the crown prince’s engagement was a big deal to a kingdom. The way it was announced was of utmost importance.

“Yes, I suppose we would want to announce it as soon as possible,” Eric said.

“Good. I knew you’d understand,” the king nodded, satisfied. “Our subjects are worried about the consequences of revoking the special rights of the dukes. Some good news like this would help reestablish the authority of Elshaid’s royal family, and it would be a smart move for us politically as well.”

Everything made sense to me. The king was right: The faster we announced our engagement, the sooner we could put the minds of Elshaid’s subjects at ease.

“It’s almost Foundation Day. We should announce it at the party that evening. I’d like to hold the ceremony as soon as possible, though we will need at least half a year to prepare.”

The king paused there and looked at us. He probably wanted to hear our thoughts.

Elshaid Foundation Day was a huge festival held once a year all over Elshaid. It would indeed be the ideal stage to announce our engagement.

“You are absolutely right, Your Majesty,” Eric answered the king. “Foundation Day would be the perfect event to announce my engagement to Leia.”

Truth be told, it had yet to sink in that we were really engaged. My shoulders tensed upon hearing concrete plans being made.

“All right, then, very good. Now, I know this is short notice, but would you two join me for dinner tonight? We have much to discuss.”

“Understood, Your Majesty,” Eric answered.

“Well, that is all. I’m going to go now. You two may take your leave.”

Now that our audience had concluded, we followed the king out of the chamber to find ministers and other officials lined up to meet us. Apparently, they had all heard the rumor that we were engaged and had gathered here to eavesdrop.

There were only a couple of guards when we first got here—what a surprise to see so many people!

I felt a twinge of panic, but Eric looked composed.

“Hullo there. Sorry to have kept you all waiting,” the king said.

An elderly minister stepped forward and said, “Oh, not a problem at all, Your Majesty. The crown prince’s engagement is an incredibly important matter. We all feel the significance of it personally.”

The king got a twinkle in his eye and said, “Heh! That you would. Listen up, all of you. This day forward, Leia Westoria here is engaged to the crown prince. An official announcement will be made in due time, but I’m telling you all first. We will hold an event soon to announce it formally—be prepared.”

At his command, everyone present bowed their heads. Seeing the response filled me with a sense of awe. I was going to be the

future queen, a saint, and Eric's wife. I needed to work harder than ever now to fulfill the new sacred task I was given.

"We are done here. Disperse."

At the king's command, everyone made themselves scarce, Eric and I included.

"You must be exhausted," Eric said. "Since you have no saintly duties today, you should rest until our dinner with the king."

"Very well. I shall take you up on that kind offer."

I decided to take a little nap as Eric suggested. Because he was right, I felt like I had just put in a lifetime of work on this one day...

Back in my room, I flopped onto my bed. I hugged my pillow and rolled onto my side, feeling sleep wash over me.

I deserve a little nap, don't I...

My mind and body, weary from all the excitement, welcomed sleep's caress. My consciousness slipped into darkness.

I was dreaming.

I was in an unfamiliar place.

My father and stepmother, my sister, and I all sat at a table, enjoying a cozy meal together.

In the dream, I was euphoric.

A loving family—that might have been what I wished for all along.

Eric and I were to marry and become a family.

Would we be able to build as happy a family as the one in my dream?

When I woke, the sun was shining through the western window. I had overslept.

But what did that dream mean?

My family, whom I hadn't seen in a while, was there—it was strange that I would dream about them.

"Family… At some point along the way, life in the same house with Jill and Catherine became a source of anguish. I have very few good memories with my family…"

Up until quite recently, a part of me had given up on the idea of family, thinking it was never meant to be. At some point, I had lost faith in the people I called family…

I don't know what a happy family feels like… Will I be able to act the part when my time comes?

"Come on, Leia, don't discourage yourself. Your relationship with Eric is too strong to let something like that shake it."

I would be with Eric. He chose me—what kind of partner would I be if I didn't believe in myself? I decided to walk by his side, no matter how treacherous the path we were on. I couldn't waste any time falling into despair.

There was a rap at the door and one of the palace servants called out to me, "Lady Leia, Prince Eric is expecting you." It was nearly time for our dinner with the king.

"Understood, I'll be out shortly. Could you tell His Highness for me?"

"Yes, my lady."

I would hate for us to be late to dinner because I was dragging my feet. I quickly got dressed, opened the door, and headed to Eric's study.

I'm about to have dinner with the king. Come to think of it, this is a first for me.

"Sorry to have kept you waiting, Eric."

I opened the door to find Eric smiling sweetly.

"No problem, I'm glad you were able to get some rest. So, are you ready?"

"Yes!"

We walked side by side down the corridors of the palace until we reached the dining hall on the first floor. When we opened the

door, we were greeted by a massive round table with a white tablecloth, its center adorned stylishly with seasonal blossoms.

“Ah splendid. Eric, Leia, you’re here,” the king greeted us as he arrived, soon after we were escorted to our seats. He sat down with us and had a servant promptly pour us all some wine.

“Now, I think this calls for a toast,” His Majesty said as the servant reverently backed away. We clinked our glasses together.

“To the young couple and the bright future of Elshaid.”

“Cheers!”

Thus began our banquet with the king.

I was nervous about this new experience, but the dinner had a serene atmosphere from start to finish. The king was in good spirits as he sipped his wine. According to Eric, His Majesty held his liquor well, and nobody had ever seen him drunk. As if to prove this, there wasn’t even a hint of pink in his cheeks as he spoke with us.

“I see, I see. So you have given quite a bit of thought as to what sort of king you would like to be and how you would steer the kingdom.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

Perhaps because he was a little tipsy, Eric chatted freely with the king. His Majesty seemed relieved to discover that his son had a clear vision for the future of Elshaid.

When we were down to our last bottle of wine, the king pressed Eric with another question. “It is quite clear that you have the proper attitude for a crown prince. But, Eric, now that you’re to be wed, have you given any thought to what kind of family you desire?”

“Huh?! What kind of…family, Father? Er, well, I…I haven’t yet…”

“Eric, why the panic? Think of poor Leia’s feelings.”

“Sorry, Father…”

Eric looked uncharacteristically wounded by his father’s admonishment. I had to cut in.

“It’s all right, Your Majesty, I’ve never brought it up with Eric… though I fully intend to have that conversation moving forward.”

“I see. Well, I am still quite impressed at how calm you are, Leia. I suppose it was that calm disposition of yours that held Eric up all this time.”

“Oh, that’s an exaggeration, Your Majesty…”

The king chuckled. “Modest as ever, aren’t we? That’s one of your virtues, Leia. Now, Eric, why don’t we take the opportunity to have a nice long chat? This isn’t mandatory, of course, but personally, I would love to see my son in a happy marriage.”

The king looked at Eric with soft eyes. It was the look of a proud father who’s watched his son grow over the years. Eric held his gaze in silence for a while, until he finally mustered up the courage to say, “As you wish, Father. We can have a long heart-to-heart.”

“Mm-hmm. I’ll leave you to it. Now, do you know why I’ve brought up the subject of family? It’s because, to a king, his kingdom is like a giant family.”

“A giant…family, you say?”

“Correct. Eric, if you wish to succeed as king, you must first build a small, happy family of your own. That is my advice.”

The king’s voice was quiet, yet firm. “Build a happy family…” The words reverberated loudly in my heart as the dream I had earlier came back to me.

“Yes, Your Majesty, I will take your advice to heart. I’ll start by making Leia happy.”

“Good. Now, my wine glass is empty, so I’d best be on my way.” The king rose to leave the table. Eric and I stood to see him out, but the king raised a hand and said, “You two, have some nice quality time together. I’ll see you later.”

With that, the king left the dining hall.

Phew… I was too nervous to even taste the food.

Left alone, Eric and I resumed our dinner in silence.

What do we do now? Eric assured the king we would talk about starting a family…but maybe I should be the one to break the ice?

As I was about to speak, Eric spoke first. “So, I guess I’ll start?”

“Oh, um, go ahead.”

“Thanks. I…I was born a prince, so I always knew I had to live my life in service of my kingdom. I felt that it was my duty as royalty.”

I mulled over Eric’s words. Truly, as crown prince, he had shouldered the duty of leading the kingdom since birth. To live up to the expectations placed on him, he had always let his strong sense of justice guide him through life.

“Needless to say, my sense of duty hasn’t changed. But ever since I met you, my way of thinking has, little by little. I regret the way I treated you at the start, but my days with you have been filled with joy, Leia. It’s a feeling I’ve never felt before.”

“Me too, Eric. Our days together are more precious to me than the finest jewels.”

And I truly meant it. Each and every memory with Eric sparkled like a precious gem.

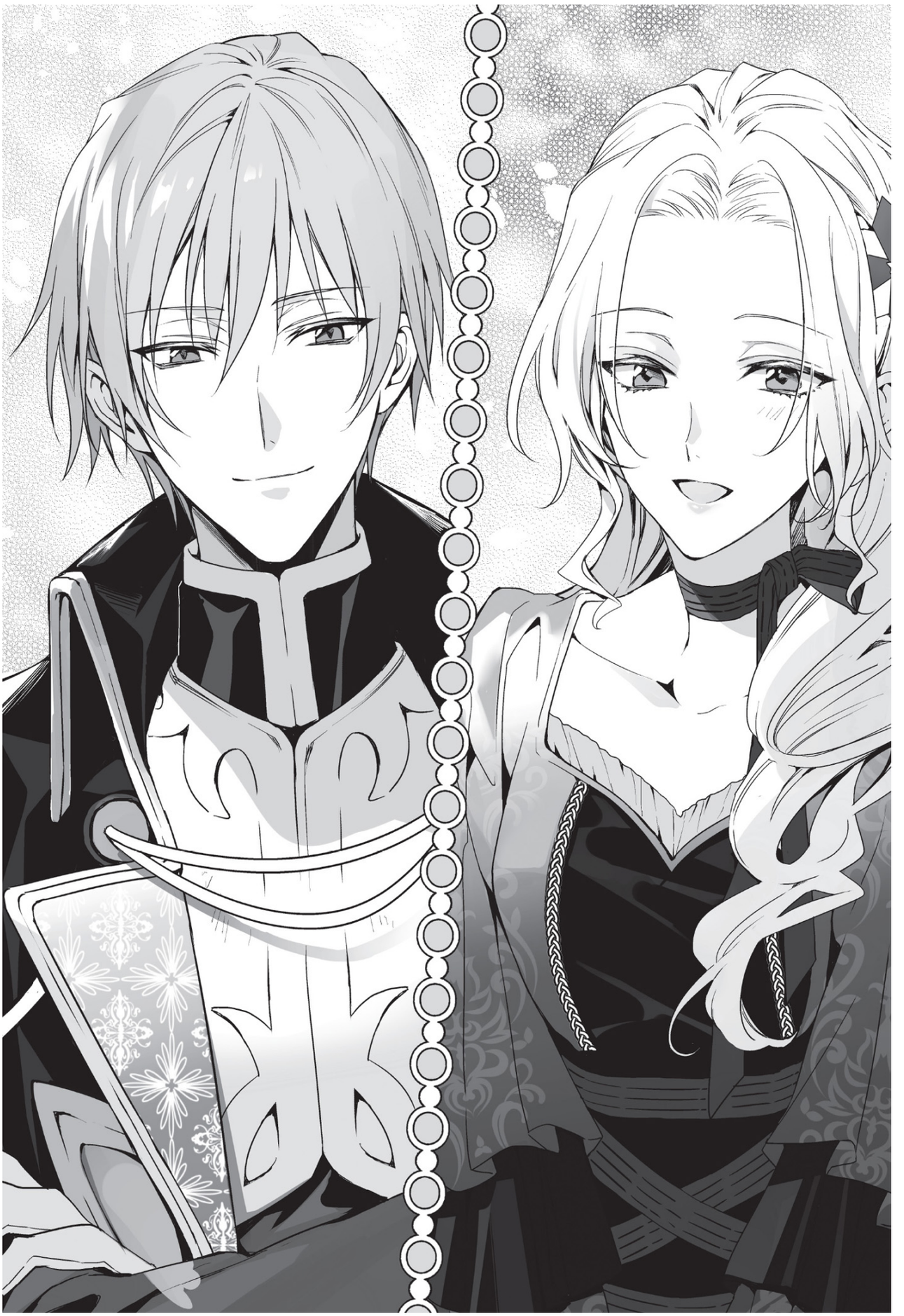
“I’m so happy to hear that… So, this is where things get serious. I asked you to marry me because I wanted us to have a happy future together.”

“And I want that too, Eric.”

It was thrilling to hear he had thought so much about us and about my happiness. Without Eric, I never would have known the joy in sharing the same feelings with another person.

“Which brings me to what I wanted to discuss with you. Firstly, how should we even go about this? As I’m sure you’re well aware, I never gave a passing thought to this sort of thing before.”

“I know… Well, why don’t we start by brainstorming what we both want in our daily lives? Like, what sorts of things we might want to do together.”



“Aha…that’s my Leia. That’s exactly the advice I needed.”

Eric gave me a thankful smile, and I smiled back.

We’ve just taken one big step forward.

After dinner, Eric and I took a stroll through the palace garden; the night breeze caressed us as we walked. Illuminated by the moonlight, the palace garden looked like a wonderland at night.

“Thanks for everything today, Leia. And thanks for staying out so late with me like this.”

“Oh, no, I had a wonderful time. And it has been a while since we’ve been up so late together. Strange, we used to stay up together like this all the time when I was your bodyguard.”

“Come to think of it, you’ve taken care of me since the day I met you, Leia.”

“Oh, now don’t say that, Eric. You’ve taken care of me more times than I could count.”

“Have I?”

“Yes.”

I nodded firmly, and Eric smiled back softly. It was a gentle smile, the sort he never would have shown me when we first met.

I’ve seen him smile like this a lot lately.

The thought brought a smile to my face. Eric stopped in his tracks.

Is it just me, or is his expression kind of tense? I wonder what’s wrong…

I looked at him, waiting for him to speak.

“Leia.”

“Yes…Eric?”

“There was a reason His Majesty broached the subject of family at dinner.” Eric spoke slowly, his gaze on me turning serious. As his eyes, bluer than the ocean, beheld me, I felt myself tense. “Before he married my mother…my father proposed to another woman and was turned down.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Of course you didn’t. I was just as surprised when he first told me. Apparently, she turned him down because she was sickly all her life and felt she wouldn’t be a proper mother for the future ruler of this kingdom.”

“I see…”

The sickly woman who turned down His Majesty’s proposal must have been a very empathetic person. It surely took a lot of courage to turn down a chance to be a queen. Yet, she made that choice.

“Then, the woman he married wound up dying soon after Dale was born. And until very recently, my relationship with Dale was not what you could call great, even if you were being charitable… So I imagine my father has some insecurities about what a royal family should look like—well, *any* family.”

“Meaning…he doesn’t want you to end up like him.”

The king’s boundless goodwill warmed my heart. It was clear that he loved Eric dearly.

“That’s what I think, yes. Which is why he’s trying to push me toward fatherhood.”

“He’s a wonderful person. I respect him even more now.”

And I meant every word. He cherished Eric and valued familial bonds. It was worthy of respect.

“Thank you… To be honest, all my life, the only thing that’s been on my mind was my role as crown prince.”

“But not anymore?”

“That’s right. Of course I want to live my life for Elshaid. But now I want us to be happy together, to guarantee that I am a proper king. How can I possibly make my kingdom happy if I can’t make my wife happy?”

“I see your point,” I giggled. I couldn’t hide my joy—I felt the same way.

It might have been a mundane conclusion to reach, but I wanted to be happy with the one I loved. It was a promise we made

to each other. And just the act of making that promise made our future seem much brighter.

“That’s why I want us to each think about what we want to do in life. I’m sure this is the key to having a happy marriage.”

“Yes, I’ll gladly think about that.”

I took Eric’s hand, and he smiled bashfully. I loved the boyish expressions he had come to show me from time to time.

And there we stood, gazing up at the stars coloring the night sky.

The stars seemed to twinkle into infinity.

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“So, what do you think?”

“Yes. You look very nice.”

After a flurry of busy days, Foundation Day was here. At tonight’s banquet, my engagement to Crown Prince Eric was to be announced.

I stood before him now, wearing a new gown. It was made of dark blue fabric that darkened as it neared the hem. I loved the color, since it matched Eric’s eyes. The bodice was adorned with large diamonds that sparkled whenever I moved, and a similar style of jewelry adorned my neck, hair, and ears.

“Thank you, Eric. Your vote of confidence is the most reassuring of all.”

“Ha ha! Oh, don’t sell yourself short,” Eric chuckled as he looked me up and down. “All eyes will be on you tonight.”

He was dressed in formal attire, predominantly white—the very portrait of a crown prince. He was even more striking than usual.

“Is something wrong?” he asked, his voice tinged with concern.

“Er, n-no. I was just swooning…” I stammered.

“Swooning, you say? But I hardly look any different.”

I was embarrassed that I'd blurted out the truth, but Eric remained composed. In a way, I was a little disappointed, but it was an authentically Eric sort of response.

That dense man… He has no idea what effect he has on me. Eric was dignified to begin with, but that suit only amplified his aura.

"Well, I'm relieved to see you aren't too nervous. That's my Leia, steady as a rock."

"Oh, I *am* nervous. I'm barely holding it together right now."

"Ha ha ha! Oh, really? Sorry I assumed. Well, shall we go?"

I took Eric's arm and we walked together to the party hall. Today was the biggest day of the festival, and Johann had said that the streets were just as lively as they were last year.

But this year, with the radical reforms that were passed, all of Elshaid's subjects, common and noble alike, were anxious. We needed to make sure that the announcement of our engagement was a success. I hoped that it would brighten the mood of the kingdom, even if just a little.

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Eric's name was announced as we entered the party hall. This was my first time entering a party escorted by a royal, so I concentrated on each step I took. Eric and I greeted everyone who called out to us as we slowly made our way into the party.

The nobles are flocking to Eric a little more assertively than normal. They must have heard rumors about our engagement. We didn't exactly try to keep the news a secret, so it would come as no surprise if a fair number of people already knew.

His Majesty made his entrance right behind us, signaling the party was about to begin. During his opening remarks, my engagement to Eric would be announced.

"Good evening, everyone, and welcome! This is a most auspicious day for the kingdom of Elshaid. Let us pray for its continuing glory as we celebrate its founding!"

As the king made his speech at the podium, applause roared throughout the party hall. With a meaningful glance at Eric, he gestured for us to join him at the podium.

“Well, are you ready?”

“Yes.”

Eric escorted me up to the stage to stand beside him at the podium. As I stood slightly behind him, he looked confident and strong. He evoked a sense of regality that a future king should possess.

Once he made sure we were in place, the king continued, “And now, Crown Prince Eric has an announcement. Eric?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. I’m sure many of you are already aware, but I recently got engaged. Now, I would love to introduce my fiancée to you.”

Eric turned to look at me. I wasn’t lying when I told him earlier that I was nervous. It was only by sheer force of will that I was holding myself together.

I can’t give in to my fear. I need to be proud as he introduces me as his fiancée!

I gently nodded back at Eric before turning to face forward again. The eyes of the nobles turned to look at me in unison.

“This is Leia Westoria. I’m sure many of you already know her as a devoted saint who serves our kingdom. She is already one of Elshaid’s greatest assets, and I have chosen her for my bride because I know that she is most worthy to be queen.”

“My lords, ladies, and gentlemen,” I addressed the crowd, “it is an honor to speak on a day as special as Foundation Day. It is with a humble heart that I offer you all my goodwill as your future queen.”

After I followed Eric’s little speech, the party hall burst into applause. The sound of the people clapping eased the tension from my heart.

But as I scanned the crowd, I noticed there were those that weren’t clapping.

I guess some people don’t accept me as their queen.

Remnants of the rebellion that Berklein and Algrene had fomented were still firmly rooted in Elshaid's soil. Ever since the special rights of the dukes were revoked, not a soul objected to Elshaid's future king…but it seemed that my becoming queen wasn't going to go unchallenged.

"Prince Eric—so the rumors about you marrying Count Westoria's eldest were true… To be blunt, I'm disappointed. I never dreamed a righteous man like you would marry the sister of a criminal."

After the announcements were over, the first person to approach Eric was Margrave Linboldt, a man with long red hair tied in a plait and one of the largest landowners after the former Great Four. His amethyst eyes glared coldly at me. The nobles standing behind the margrave held lands far from the royal capital, and they too regarded me with cold stares.

"I am well aware of the crimes House Westoria has committed, but I decided to marry Leia in spite of that. That is just how great her achievements are."

"Your Highness, with all due respect, are you mad? And for that matter, don't you think Jill Westoria's sentence was far too lenient?"

"What did you just say? Do you object to the judgment we made?"

"Humbly, yes, I do object. If you ask me, Count Westoria should have been stripped of his title. Furthermore, his daughter deserved the death penalty. I highly doubt Leia Westoria's achievements could possibly be great enough to eclipse that."

The margrave's tone was charged as he argued his case to Eric. He was known to be a fair and just man, and even Eric regarded him highly. He had told me that he wasn't worried about the remote lands falling into chaos after the reform since Linboldt was in charge.

And although I hated to admit it, I couldn't entirely refute the arguments Linboldt raised.

"Lady Westoria, what do you think about all this? I've heard you are a decorated saint, but in terms of achievement, you hardly

rate compared to the other two saints. You only managed to catch the prince's eye because you happened to be stationed near the royal capital. Nothing more."

"B-but, my lord!"

I took pride in my hard work as a saint. But he had a point: I was the newest member. And since I was stationed near the royal capital, the margraves who ruled over the remote lands would not regard me as highly as the others…

"I know more than anyone just how exemplary Leia's service has been. She fulfilled not only her duties as saint, but as my bodyguard with the utmost excellence. I will not let any further slander slide, not even from you, Margrave Linboldt. She has earned the respect of His Majesty himself. Regardless of your protests, the matter has already been settled."

Eric's voice shook with suppressed anger. Given that the king approved of us, the margrave had no right to object…but I still felt an ache in my heart.

"And I am well aware of that, Your Highness. But as a nobleman with a long, proud history of serving Elshaid's royal family, I simply could not let my feelings remain unspoken. I must be true to my own sense of *justice*, even if it earns me your resentment, Highness. Now, if you'll excuse me."

The margrave marched away. He reminded me of Eric, not too long ago. Which only made his declaration sting all the harder for me…and I felt so weak and pathetic for it.

"Was that Margrave Linboldt just now? Prince Eric, Lady Leia, is something wrong?" Johann asked.

"Leia, you look like you're gonna be sick. Want me to blast him away for you?" Lingsha offered, punctuating her remarks by staring daggers at the margrave.

"I'm all right, Miss Lin," I said, putting out my hand to stop her from pouncing on him then and there. "And the margrave did nothing wrong."

Lingsha cocked her head to the side, a curious look on her face. “Ya sure? But he looked so menacing…”

“I stand by what I said. Margrave Linboldt did nothing wrong. House Westoria was in the wrong here.”

“Don’t say things like that, Leia,” Eric rebuked me gently. “That stubborn margrave doesn’t even know you. If he got to know you, he would understand that nobody is worthier to be my wife than you.”

If he got to know me… I suppose he’s right. And despairing over it won’t help anything anyway.

If he wouldn’t accept me, then I’d have to earn his respect. I decided to be optimistic.

I never thought I’d meet someone whom Eric would call stubborn. It appeared that Elshaid was a far bigger kingdom than I took it for.

“Yes…yes, I understand! I’ll put in the work to prove that I’m worthy as your wife, Eric.”

“That’s my Leia, you always land on your feet. That optimism alone proves that I need you.”

Eric’s kind words banished the ache in my heart. Despairing wasn’t like me. Eric wasn’t the only one with a talent for pushing through any obstacle with a devoted mind.

“I see. I did sense that he had said something unpleasant,” Johann said. “Well, if you ask me, there isn’t a more perfect couple than you two in the entire land. Congratulations on your engagement.”

“Oh, Johann…thank you.”

“Thank you so much, Sir Johann.”

I bowed deeply to Johann as he beamed radiantly at us. I was honored to hear him say we were a perfect match. It warmed me to my very core.

“However, I must say I was surprised when Lady Lingsha and I received invitations to attend this party as guests.”

Johann and Lingsha always attended this sort of event as Eric’s bodyguards, but Eric made a point of inviting them as guests this

time.

“Johann, Lingsha, I want you both at my wedding. Not just as my bodyguards but as my friends.”

“Friends? Are you saying we are your friends, Your Highness?” Johann asked.

“I am. Of course I can’t always call you that, since I’m the crown prince, but yes. Especially you, Johann,” Eric said bashfully. “You’ve always been there for me, and I trust you more than anyone…” He took a breath, then finished firmly, “So I wanted to formally introduce you to my future bride not as my vassal but as my friend.”

“Your Highness,” Johann murmured as tears welled in his eyes. “I am so grateful, so overjoyed…that I shall never forget this day as long as I live.”

“Ha ha, no need to be so dramatic, Johann. I look forward to our continued friendship.”

“Yes, Your Highness! I shall serve you loyally until the day I die,” Johann declared and gave a deep bow.

I understood well how deep his loyalty ran—he had served Eric since they were little boys. Thus, Eric made it a point to call Johann his friend on this special day.

Johann has spent more time with Eric than anyone else, after all.

The men shared a bond strengthened from such a long friendship that surely nobody else could imagine it.

“Still, Sir Johann, Miss Lin,” I said. “You both give off a strikingly different impression when you’re dressed formally like that.”

They were usually dressed practically for action, so seeing them in formal attire was a novel sight. Johann wore a suit rather than his bodyguard’s uniform, and Lingsha was very beautiful in her dress. Her hair was down, giving her a completely different air than her usual ass-kicking aura.

“You look very pretty, Miss Lin. Don’t you agree, Sir Johann?”

“Huh?! Wh-why are you asking me, Lady Leia?” he sputtered. “Well, I suppose she does look pretty…”

“Sir Johann, it’s proper to look a lady in the eye when you say something like that.”

But Johann just blushed and looked away.

Well, well, Johann, are you…

Johann interrupted my thought by staring right at Lingsha and declaring, in a booming voice that resounded throughout the entire party hall, “Lady Lingsha…you are beautiful!”

“Um…Johann?”

It was a shockingly straightforward declaration of feelings that even caught Lingsha off guard. She just stared back at him, her jaw dropped.

“Easy there, Johann, not so loud. Everyone’s staring.”

“Y-Your Highness! Forgive my rudeness. L-Lady Lingsha! Let me explain—”

“Johann…” Lingsha said. “You can be pretty dumb, oh yes.”

“Buh?!” Johann’s face turned blue.

But Lingsha had delivered her insult with a hint of a smile on her face.

I guess Lingsha wasn’t entirely unhappy to receive a compliment from Johann either…

I decided to hold my tongue and observe the pair from a distance.

During the festivities, other nobles came by to pay their respects, and we thanked them in turn. And as the party was starting to wind down, the commoners came to congratulate us too.

Our first guest was Mr. Nash, the owner of a very popular ice cream parlor in the capital and the caterer in charge of desserts for the party. This was our first time seeing him since we made use of his ice cream parlor to foil Algrene’s plot.

“Prince Eric, Lady Leia, so good to see you both again. Also, congratulations.”

“Thank you, it’s an honor,” I replied.

“Indeed. I heard you catered the desserts for this party,” Eric added.

Nash gave a sheepish grin and said, “Yes, actually, I invented a new dessert specifically for this occasion. It’s called gelato.”

“Aha, well, I’m eager to try it. Johann, could you fetch us each a serving?”

“Right away, Your Highness!”

Eric wasted no time sending Johann on a mission. Apparently, he was very curious about gelato.

“Here you are, Your Highness, gelato for everyone. They’ve been tested for poison, so they’re safe to eat.”

The gelato in Johann’s hands shone as bright as jewels.

Just the sight of it is getting me excited.

“How beautiful… Well, I hope they taste as lovely as they look,” Eric said.

“Yes, me too,” I echoed.

Nash beamed with pride upon hearing Eric’s praise. “I put extra effort into this batch to celebrate this special day… Well, bon appétit.”

I grabbed a spoon and took a bite. The cold velvety texture and hint of sweetness created the perfect eating experience. It was more delicious than anything I had ever tasted before.

Nash certainly was a master ice mage. His ice cream was already impressive, but his gelato was sublime.

“Oh yes, this is very good!” Lingsha cheered.

“Yes, I could scarf down a hundred bowls of this,” Johann agreed.

Seeing the two of them shovel gelato into their mouths, it was clear they were fans.

Nash smiled with satisfaction and said, “I’m glad you all like it.”

“Indeed, it’s very good. I mean it. I’m glad I put you in charge of desserts, Nash. And I would love to hire you again to cater our wedding.”

“It would be my honor. I will prepare my finest creation yet for you.”

“I look forward to it.”

Nash returned to the kitchen with a satisfied smile. I had a feeling he would really go places, and wherever he went, he would charm multitudes with his delicious desserts. Despite Algrene's nefarious intent, his patronage of Nash was a blessing in disguise.

That's why I need to come to terms with the incident that just happened…

The rest of the Elshaid Foundation Day festival concluded without incident.

After we changed clothes, we assembled in Eric's study. Eric and Johann looked relaxed as they sipped Lingsha's tea. But as for me, I was slumped over in exhaustion, finally freed from the pent-up nervousness of the party. Psychologically, I felt a hundred times more spent now than I did after a hard day of saintly work.

"Now that our engagement has gone public, things are going to get very busy around here," Eric said.

"Yes, I'm ready to weather the storm."

To shake off my exhaustion and start fresh, I sat up straight, sipped my tea, and looked at Eric.

I need to pull myself together. But still…

I didn't want marrying me to be a burden for Eric. I was the sister of a criminal—I needed to earn the respect of Elshaid's people so I could be a worthy bride.

I especially need to convince Margrave Linboldt. But how?

"Hm? Something wrong, Leia?"

"N-no, I'm all right."

"Thinking about Silbur Linboldt?"

"Yes."

What's wrong with me? I'm supposed to be optimistic. Back at the party, I resolved to face my problems head-on, but I guess it's easier said than done.

"I don't blame you for dwelling on him. He may be obstinate, but he's smart. Don't worry, I'll get him to accept you."

His expression was so reassuring, I could just feel peace wash over me. It made me feel that I was worthy to be by his side.

He's right... I shouldn't get down on myself. I need to trust Eric.

"Anyway, we're getting married in half a year. Let's make it a good one."

"Of course!"

We nodded to each other, then turned to look out the window. I felt that everything would work out. That all our obstacles would be cleared.

But Margrave Linboldt would not be so easily dealt with.

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"Margrave Linboldt, what is this?"

"It's a collection of signatures, Your Highness."

Some time after the Foundation Day festival, Margrave Linboldt came to the palace and requested a meeting with Eric. Naturally, Eric couldn't ignore him, so he agreed to meet. And Margrave marched up to him with a list of signatures from nobles.

"I assume your demand is the annulment of our engagement?"

"Correct, Your Highness."

The implications were crystal clear. At last, the civil unrest from the radical reform had subsided. Prince Eric could no longer ignore the reality that many nobles opposed our marriage. Margrave Linboldt knew this about him.

"Understood."

"Your Highness! Does this mean you agree to our demands?! Then let's waste no time and annu—"

"No, I meant that I understood your intentions. I'm marrying Leia. My decision is final. I will not be swayed."

Eric interrupted the margrave sharply, his voice resilient and willful. Linboldt's eyes opened wide in shock—it seemed this was the opposite of what he was expecting to hear.

“However, the bravery and sincerity needed to sign this petition is noted. In return, I will earnestly try to persuade you.”

“What, are you going to personally convince every single person who signed this?”

“Precisely. I’m grateful you’re so quick on the uptake, Margrave.”

Eric declared that he would face the opposition head-on. It was very like him. He treated the Margrave’s petition with nothing but the utmost respect and sincerity. He was so sincere that Linboldt was having a difficult time thinking of how to respond.

“Margrave, my actions will be governed by a simple premise: I will *never* give up my marriage to Leia. Keep that in mind.”

“N-no, Your Highness! This is the wrong move to make as crown prince! And I won’t be swayed either. I cannot accept this.”

Margrave Linboldt met Eric’s stubbornness with a bullheadedness of his own. I recognized the strong gleam in his eyes. I had spent the past several months gazing at a pair of eyes that gleamed as intensely.

After their confrontation, Linboldt made a habit of coming to the palace to argue with Eric. He had a villa in the capital, and he had been petitioning for support from the nobles who lived nearby.

As expected, most of the nobles around the capital backed Eric’s decision. The majority of them had witnessed my accomplishments firsthand, therefore they spurred Linboldt’s entreaties—but that wasn’t enough to deter the tenacious margrave.

“Margrave, you don’t know when to give up, do you? Have my words gone in one ear and out the other?”

“With all due respect, Your Highness, if you allow your feelings to influence your decisions, your subjects will suffer. I don’t let my feelings have the slightest effect on my decisions.”

“Well, if you insist on being so objective, should you not conclude that Leia is indeed worthy? I imagine hearing so many favorable opinions from those who live in the capital would make you feel that way.”

“Of course, I understand that she is doing stellar work as a saint. But not stellar enough to eclipse the sins of her family.”

Even after being exposed to new perspectives in the capital, he still refused to walk back his position. While he conceded that my achievements as a saint were commendable, that wasn’t enough to change his mind.

And so he continued to vex us over the coming months, trying to stop the wedding while we were busy planning it.

***

“The guest list? All right, I’ll have a look at it.”

One day, after yet another altercation with the margrave in Eric’s study, I was handed a guest list for our wedding. The dozen-or-so papers were filled with names—the names of everyone who hoped to attend our wedding.

“Hmm? What’s this?!”

Oh dear…

The Count and Countess Westoria, my parents, were on the list.

Under normal circumstances, they wouldn’t have needed to submit a request to attend. A bride’s parents would have been invited regardless.

But not *these* parents.

Especially my stepmother Catherine, who had antagonized us in more ways than one. The worst of it, of course, being that she refused to take any responsibility for what happened with Jill, feigned ignorance, and forced me to pick up the pieces. That was just too much.

To be honest, the very idea of being near her makes me sick. But I can’t leave things like this.

“What’s wrong, Leia? Something wrong with the list?”

Eric’s worried eyes pulled me out of my thought spiral.

“Oh! I’m sorry. Yes, well, you see…”

I proceeded to explain my dilemma. After all, stripping my family of their title was part of Linboldt's demands. If they attended our wedding, that would only stir up needless drama.

"I see. Yes, your parents are quite the troublemakers."

"You're telling me. And there's no telling what Margrave Linboldt and his supporters will say if we invite them…"

"Well, I'm going to change their minds by our wedding day, so it won't be an issue if your parents are there when the day comes. Then again…if you really don't want them there, we don't have to invite them."

Eric was sensitive to my needs. We certainly would need to change the minds of Linboldt and his supporters before the wedding if my parents were to attend.

Still, if we wanted a drama-free wedding, it might be best if we didn't invite them.

No, Leia. Don't take the easy way out.

This was a test of character that would follow me for the rest of my days. I had to face it directly.

"No, I think we should invite them. No matter the circumstances, it would look bad to not invite the family of the crown princess to her wedding. Besides, I want them to sit there and watch me on my happy day."

Eric looked startled for a moment. Then his eyes softened, and he said, "Hmm…all right. I understand. We'll invite the Count and Countess Westoria."

"Thank you."

After that, we went over the rest of the guest list together. Aside from the Westorias, nobody else on the list was problematic.

"All right, I think this should do. What do you say, Leia?"

"Yes, I say we return the guest list with our seal of approv—"

There was a knock at the door.

"Prince Eric, may I have a moment of your time?"

It was the minister of foreign affairs. He was the one who gave us the guest list.

Did he anticipate when we would finish?

"Sure, come on in. We just finished going over the guest list."

"Very good, Your Highness. Thank you so much for taking the time to look over it. And, well…Prince Eric, do you have a moment? There's another matter I wish to discuss."

"What other matter?"

He didn't come here just for the guest list. When Eric saw the grave look on the minister's face, Eric's voice lowered several semitones.

"You see, we just received a message from the Ren Empire addressed to you, Your Highness. I've brought it here. It's a reply to a wedding invitation."

From the Ren Empire?

I raised an eyebrow. The Ren Empire was the largest country on the continent. It was also the homeland that Lingsha fled as a refugee. The Ren Empire and Elshaid had an alliance and an exchange student program. We had sent invitations to the royalty of all the surrounding states—naturally, the emperor of the Ren Empire was among them.

I looked at Eric, and his expression hadn't changed. He merely stared at the envelope he had been handed.

"I'm going to go see Dale. Take a break and wait here for a while until I return, Leia."

Without even breaking the seal of the envelope, he left the room.

It was unusual for him to visit Dale. True, they had grown closer after the Algrene incident, but he had never gone to consult Dale first about this sort of thing before.

Does he have a bad feeling about this letter?

No amount of navel-gazing would yield any answers. And since the rest of the guest list was settled, I decided to just relax and wait for Eric to return.

Almost immediately after Eric left the study, Lingsha took his place.

“Eric ran out of here in an awful hurry. Is something wrong?” She was peering at me strangely, as if she sensed that something was off.

It’s probably best that I don’t tell her it concerns the Ren Empire, right?

“I’m not actually sure myself. We were just finalizing the guest list for the wedding when he left.”

“Ooh, yes, to make sure some weirdos don’t show up that I’ll have to blast away?”

“Y-yes…you could say that.”

Lingsha seemed satisfied by my answer. Indeed, her assumption wasn’t wrong. If anyone were to exhibit inappropriate behavior, either Johann or Lingsha would have to deal with them.

“Hey, *Leia*, in Elshaid, brides wear things called wedding dresses when they get married. I know.”

“Ha ha, yes, we do. And actually, I’m going to try on my wedding dress soon.”

My wedding dress was finally finished, so it was about time for a fitting. I was looking forward to trying it on, since I was very specific in my design request.

“Ooh, I see, I see. I’m sure you’ll be a beautiful queen, Leia.”

“You think so?”

My cheeks burned from the sudden compliment.

Me, a queen… Lately, my mind had been preoccupied with thoughts of the future. But my crucial first step to becoming queen was getting the people of Elshaid—starting with Margrave Linboldt—to accept me as Eric’s bride.

“I like to think I’m going to live up to their expectations…but I still have no confidence whatsoever.”

“No confidence? Hmmm… Well, the Ren Empire had twelve empresses, you see, so I’ve got no words of wisdom for ya there.”

Twelve empresses… That fact alone made the nations so culturally different that I couldn’t even imagine what it was like. The

Ren Empire's culture really was a world apart.

Lingsha's voice grew serious, "Lingsha's mother was an empress too, oh yes, she was. But she was more like my big brother's caretaker. That's because my big brother's mom was a higher-status empress than my mom."

"They treated their empress like a servant?"

In Elshaid, there had been a couple cases of daughters of lower-ranking nobles working as servants for higher-ranking noble families…but in the Ren Empire, both women would have been made empresses in that case. Their former statuses remained unchanged.

"Oh, yes. Lingsha's mom took care of Lingsha's big brother for his mom too. That's why we're like real brother and sister, even though we don't have the same mother!"

"My goodness, really?! Oh dear, I didn't mean to pry."

"No worries. After that, we were thrown in the dungeon because of my big brother, but it's all in the past! So it's no bother anymore, you see?"

Lingsha's story was terrifying, especially paired with the big grin on her face.

What I've been through can't begin to compare to the tragedy Lingsha experienced.

Talking to her made all my problems seem quite small. Which made her smile all the more heartbreaking—the fact that she had a happy life now in Elshaid felt like a miracle.

I hope I get to see her have a happy ending.

I yearned to stay and chat with her for a while longer.

Just then, Johann entered the study and said, "Pardon me, Lady Leia. May I borrow Lady Lingsha for a few minutes?" There were traces of panic in his expression.

"Er…of course you may borrow her. Is something wrong?"

"There's a small matter I wish to relay to her. Lady Lingsha, may I borrow you?"

"Ya can't borrow me! I'm not a thing!"

“Er, just a figure of speech… I mean, may I have a moment of your time? There’s something I must tell you.”

Something seems off about Johann…and Lingsha looks a bit peeved.

I cast a questioning glance at Lingsha. She nodded her head and said, “Okay. But tell me over there.”

Lingsha pointed to a corner of the room and made her way to it. Johann followed. They were whispering so I couldn’t tell what Johann was saying, but it looked like he was apologizing. Then Lingsha said something back…and puffed her cheeks up in anger.

What are they talking about?

I was dying of curiosity. Finally, Johann passed a small parcel to her which caused her to grin.

Aha. As I thought.

Lingsha and Johann seemed much closer since the Foundation Day party. While I was wondering if I should ask them about it, they walked back to me. I guess their secret conversation was finished.

“Leia, want me to make more tea?”

“Oh! Um, yes please.”

But then I sensed something—an unusual presence outside the study.

I opened a window. When I was Eric’s bodyguard, many assassins came to this very room. Because of that, my senses were always heightened when I was in here.

Behind that tree—somebody’s there.

I had thought that since we stopped Berklein and Algrene’s conspiracies, that there would be no more assassins…but could it be that somebody was still trying to take Eric’s life?

“Is something the matter, Lady Leia?”

“I sense a presence behind that tree. It might be an assassin.”

“An assassin?!” Johann yelped.

Eric wasn’t here, but we still needed to catch the intruder and identify them. “Johann, report to Eric at once.”

“Understood, but what about you?”

“I…I will catch the intruder!”

“L-Lady Leia?!”

I jumped out the window, cushioned my landing with wind magic, and sprinted to the tree.

“Trespassing on palace grounds is a high crime! Show yourself.”

“Wow, lady, I’m impressed. You sensed my presence. I didn’t think you could find me all the way out here.”

It was a man’s voice—and he did not seem inclined to comply. The palace wall was behind him, so there was no escape, yet the voice sounded confident. I steeled myself and took a step closer.

“Sorry, but I don’t feel like getting caught today. I’ll take my leave.”

And with that, the man jumped clear over the palace wall. I was at a loss.

Is that guy human?!

Flustered, I whipped a chain of light over the wall and scaled it in pursuit of the man.

“Interesting…Elshaid magic!”

The man sounded impressed, but he didn’t stop. He spoke with an accent; perhaps he came from another land. I raced along the top of the wall, desperate to catch him.

“O Wind Spirit! Make swift my stride!”

I cast a wind spell to make myself faster as I ran, but even at this speed, I still didn’t gain on the man. He was freakishly athletic.

“Whoa, lady, you’re good. Guess we can have some fun.”

The man climbed all the way to the highest point of the roof and turned to look at me. Illuminated in the moonlight, I could see him clearly now. He was a young man with almond eyes and a bob haircut.

And the clothes he’s wearing…are from the Ren Empire?

He was a foreign man that anybody would call handsome. I stood still, sensing something amiss about him.

“I don’t know who you are, but I’ll have you in chains.”

“Ha ha! Sounds like fun.”

I whipped my chain of light at the man. It flew too fast for your average intruder to dodge, but he easily jumped out of the way. As I thought, he was freakishly fast.

It’s like trying to catch a cloud. Just attempting to read his next move might break my spine.

“This isn’t over yet,” I warned him.

“Ah…you do have a way with magic.”

I threw my chain at him again and again, but he dodged it each time. If anything, the more I used my magic, the more amused he seemed to become.

How can he be so light on his feet?

Doubt shadowed my mind as I kept up my assault. In terms of speed, I was the equal of Eric or Lingsha.

“All righty, then…let’s put you to bed now.”

“What?!”

In the very next breath, he hit me in my abdomen at close range, blasting me away.

“Oof!”

He used his fist? No, he stopped short of hitting me at the last moment. Yet I felt this strange force hit me…

I was caught completely flat-footed. But the fight wasn’t over yet. I sensed his approach.

“Don’t worry, lady, I won’t kill you.”

“Well…thanks. I appreciate that.”

“Huh?!”

He didn’t see it coming. I swiftly drew a summoning circle and blasted his gut with a gust of wind.

“Bleh?!” He grunted as he collapsed in a heap.

Now’s my chance…

I prepared my coup de grâce, but he leaped back to his feet and beheld me with wide eyes. “Youch! Gee, lady, you’re tough. I didn’t know Elshaid had broads as brawny as you.”

“Huh?! Wait, your face…”

I scrutinized the young man’s visage—I had my suspicions. He looked familiar, like I’d seen him somewhere before…but I couldn’t remember.

“A pleasant surprise, getting bashed by a babe like you. What’s your name, lady?”

“Leia… Leia Westoria. I am a saint of Elshaid.”

“Ohhh, now I get it.” He smiled and clapped his hands together. “So *you’re* Leia…a holy saint, chosen by God? Ha ha. That explains why you pack such a punch.”

He’d heard of me. But who was he? I watched him warily, trying to suss him out.

“If you’re a saint, guess even I can’t knock ya out so easy. In that case, better make myself scarce.”

“And you think I’ll let you?” I shot out several chains of light in an attempt to bind him. But it was in vain; he dodged them all. This was the first time an intruder ever gave me such trouble.

“Ha ha ha! Sorry, Sainty, but that’ll never work. I already know all about your little trick.”

“I wouldn’t be too sure about that.”

I wasn’t so incompetent that I’d let him escape me over and over that easily.

You got it—I’d feinted so that he’d lower his guard.

Because I had friends. Reliable friends—

“Let’s blast ya all away, oh yes!!”

Jumping high in the sky, Lingsha swung her sword and descended, her eyes blazing like a demon’s. With a high overhead swing, she made her first attack.

“What the—?!”

The young man barely evaded Lingsha’s heavy swing. Not missing a beat, I shot out a chain of light. Unfortunately, he managed to evade that too, by a hair.

Seriously, is this guy even human? Who is he?

But before I could ask that question, Lingsha yelled, “Liu! *Ni zai gan shenme ne?!*”

Was she speaking Renese? It sounded like Lingsha knew this man.

Liu? Was that his name?

Lingsha’s sword kept slicing through the air, but not even her volley of attacks, though they were fierce enough to repel a small army, could hit him.

If anything, he smirked and playfully retorted, “*Lai jie ni huilai,* Lingsha!”

Lingsha’s eyes shot open. They were shouting at each other in Renese. I didn’t know what they were saying, but Lingsha looked shocked.

While I tried to make sense of what was happening, the young man made his move. Lunging through her flurry of attacks, he whirled behind her and raised a dagger.

No!!

“Lady Lingshaaa!!!”

With an ear-splitting roar, Johann flew in from the flanks and grabbed Liu’s dagger.

“Whoa there, boy! That’s some grip. I’m trying my hardest to escape, but you ain’t letting me budge, are ya?”

“Who the devil are you?” Johann growled.

Even in Johann’s hold, the young man’s movements were inhuman. He looked like a beast in man’s clothing.

“Johann, Leia, this jerk is Fang Liu. He’s my brother…”

That revelation knocked the air out of our lungs. Liu smirked at the sight of us.

This man is Lingsha’s…brother?

As disbelief seized my heart, I sized up the man standing in our presence.

-Jill’s Perspective-

MY DEAR SISTER LEIA,

I hope you are doing well.

Oh, how the time flies, for a month has passed since I've come to this convent. Mornings start early here. As soon as the sun rises, I, too, must rise and get ready for my day. During the time I have before breakfast, I pray to God. I spend quite some time doing this.



Then, I go to the morning service where I hear Sister Eleanor speak—she's my guarantor. She is a model nun for us novices, as she always stands straight and is a picture of pious dignity. (But the smile that sometimes sneaks onto her face is kind. She is a lovely woman.)

Once she has finished speaking, we have breakfast. We eat simple fare like bread, soup, and salad, and the menu never changes, so as you would expect, it's rather dull after a while. Sister Eleanor caught me thinking such things and she admonished me. She said, "Thank your meals for giving you life."

I had never even considered thanking my meals before, so I didn't understand what she meant at first. But over time, I think I understand what people mean when they say that meals taste better when they are eaten in good company. My fellow novices and I eat in silence, but the atmosphere is quite serene and cozy.

After breakfast, it's time to do laundry. We novices take charge of the laundry on a rotating schedule, and we each have our own roles to fill. Since I am new to the convent, I take care of all the miscellaneous tasks. I wash our clothes, dry them, collect them, and then I fold them.

I was so confused that I almost burst into tears the first time I had to do laundry because we always had servants do these chores at home. But I vowed that I would never cry again.

I ask the sisters for help whenever there's something I don't understand, and I keep challenging myself. And now…well, it was quite the ordeal to learn everything, but now I'm rather competent. It's a good feeling—like I've grown up a little.

After we finish the laundry, we are free to spend the time as we wish. We read books, we sew, we do whatever we fancy.

Then in the evening, we clean some more before getting ready for supper. We take turns cooking. When it's my turn, I'm so excited to rise to the challenge.

That being said, everything I cook is quite basic. Stew, bread, braised beans, and that's about it. Once a week, the sisters buy fruit for us to enjoy.

After supper, we perform our daily ablutions and spend the rest of the evening as we wish before bedtime. I've decided to spend that time praying to God. Ever since I memorized the prayer by heart, I have never

skipped a day. And since many of the nuns and novices spend this time of day praying, I am never alone. I have a couple of friends who often pray with me, and we prayed together this evening only a little while ago. Their names are Amelia, Elena, and Flora, and they are all around my age, so we've become quite close.

They are all devout believers and women of steadfast faith. I very much like the peaceful moments the four of us spend together.

"Phew… What else shall I write?"

I mulled over what else to say in my letter to my sister. I had heaps of things to tell her, but it was rather difficult putting everything on paper. Looking back now, I thought that I might have made crying and running from difficult tasks into a nasty habit.

"Oh, I know! I'll tell her what happened yesterday."

And with that, I picked up my pen again.

One day, dear sister, I was in my room, writing a letter to you, when I heard a flurry of frantic footsteps outside my door.

"Jill! You can use magic, can't you?"

"Sister Eleanor? Is something the matter?"

Sister Eleanor was running up to me, her face flushed with worry. She is usually calm and composed, so seeing her so flustered was a first.

"Please, come to the chapel immediately—there's an emergency!"

I could scarcely let out a confused gasp before she yanked my arm and dragged me to the chapel. It was full of nuns and novices, and they were in a furor.

"What in the world is happening?" I wondered, starting to feel worried.

Then Sister Eleanor said, "Some children in our care were bitten by a venomous snake while they were playing. Jill, I heard you can cast Anti-Poison—could you cure them?"

"Me, cure them, Sister? O-okay…"

The sisters led me to the front of the chapel. When I arrived, a little girl grabbed my arm and, clinging to me, said, "Oh, Sister, please help us…"

When I saw her face, I couldn't breathe. She was in such pain, yet she had put her faith in someone like me to save her.

"God as my witness, I will save you!" I thought to myself as I cast my spell.

"Anti-Poison!!"

The girls were enveloped in blinding light. I knew everything would be all right. I may not be much, but I do have a knack for poison-type magic.

"All the pain is gone... Thank you! Oh, thank you, Sister Jill!"

I was speechless. Nobody had ever said those words to me before because I had never before done anything worthy of gratitude.

"Jill, you have our gratitude. Well done." Sister Eleanor smiled and gently petted my head. I felt rather embarrassed, but I did not mind it.

I wondered to myself: Is this how the world always looked through my sister's eyes?

And it was then that I had a revelation: All those years I longed for the title of saint, I had lost sight of something very important. And even if you had never become a saint, my sister, you still would have acted like one.

You would have still devoted your life to helping others, just like this.

I wish to become like you, dear sister... I want to help people.

In hopes of coming closer to you, I've decided to put these feelings into a letter. This is what is in my heart right now. And I will work hard, so that someday, I will be able to hold my head high!

Chapter 2:
Envoy from the Ren Empire

“YOU ARE MISS LIN’S BROTHER?! But how could someone like you act in such a crass, boorish manner?!” I yelled without a shred of decorum.

But Fang Liu kept his cool and shrugged. “Yell at me all you want, but I was actually gonna leave quietly tonight, y’know? That is, until you sensed my presence, Sainty.”

“Then why did you attack me?”

“Well, it was your…vibes? I merely responded in kind.”

Liu awkwardly scratched his head. I couldn’t tell if he was joking.

I kept my eyes on him, wary of any sudden movements, sighed, and asked, “And? What’s your real reason for being here?”

Then a smile crept across his face. I could practically hear him thinking, *I thought you’d never ask!*

He still had the confidence of a fighter with a clear escape route in front of him… Either that or he was bluffing to try to lure me into exposing a vulnerability. Either way, I had to stay vigilant.

“Ha ha! You’ve got spunk, I like it! But you’ll have to wait till next time to find out why I was here. See ya, Sainty.”

He turned his back to us.

Running away? No… Not after everything you’ve done.

“If you think I’ll let you get away, you’re sorely mistaken.” For what felt like the hundredth time, I drew a summoning circle, manifested chains of light, and launched them at him in an attempt to entangle him.

“Hah. Perfect timing.” He couldn’t run to the left or right so he jumped straight up, above the chains.

His leaps are insane, but if he wants to escape, that was a bad move. Lingsha and Johann are both waiting for him.

As long as he wasn’t a bird, he would have to eventually come down. I was certain that this time, for sure, we had him.

But he had a devilish grin.

No…don't tell me he's got another trick.

"Summon Phoenix!"

Liu produced a strange paper talisman that floated in midair, chanted a spell, and summoned a bird of fire.

A phoenix? As in the mythical beast?

We floundered below as Liu hopped on the phoenix's back and flew high into the sky.

Are you kidding me?! I've never seen nor heard of such sorcery!!! I couldn't move as the world I thought I knew was turned on its head.

But Liu only grinned and said, "We'll meet again, Linny, Sainty!" And with that, Liu and the phoenix flew away.

I had never once let an assassin escape, and yet Liu had slipped right through my fingers…

He was powerful, that was true, but I also had my own shortcomings to blame. Maybe Margrave Linboldt was right—as a saint, I was little more than a novice, unworthy of Eric…

I could just feel my shoulders slump.

No, Leia, something else matters more than you right now.

"Miss Lin…" Her fists were clenched, and she was as still as a statue. "Are you all right, Miss Lin?"

"I-I'm fine, oh yes. Why'd that brother of mine show up now after all this time? I don't get it." She tilted her head, confused. She sounded like her usual self, but there was a hollow look in her eyes, like nobody was home.

"Lady Lingsha, please don't stress yourself. I shall explain everything to Prince Eric. You run along to bed."

"Thanks, Johann. But I can't do that, see. I can't make somebody else deal with my family drama. Oh, no." She was smiling, but there was still something off about her.

She knows her brother is up to something…

Lingsha, Johann, and I went back to Eric's study.

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“Johann informed me that there was an intruder, but I find it hard to believe that he got away from all three of you.”

Back in Eric’s study, the prince looked shocked to hear the news about Liu. And why wouldn’t he be? We had never once let an assassin escape before.

Liu possessed inhuman powers, and he was such a maniac for battle that it was hard to believe he was Lingsha’s brother.

Lingsha sometimes gets carried away in a fight, but it’s not like she enjoys combat for its own sake… I thought.

I looked over at Eric. He was also deep in thought, arms folded, chin down.

“Is something the matter, Eric?” I asked.

He jolted back to earth, made an awkward face and said, “Er, sorry. I just can’t get over the fact that the intruder was Lingsha’s brother. Fang Liu… Sorry I have to ask this, Lingsha, but can you tell us everything you know about him?”

“Oh, yes. Liu is the fourth eldest prince of the Ren Empire. Anyway, he…”

And so, Lingsha recounted to us the story of Liu. He was one of the most promising princes of the Ren Empire, and he was a son of the eldest daughter of the Fang clan. In the Ren Empire, only the emperor took the surname Ren; all his children took the surnames of their mothers.

“My mother, Xu Xiangling, was a domestic servant in the Fang house, so she raised me and Liu together, see?”

I’d previously heard that in the Ren Empire, it wasn’t uncommon for the emperor’s concubines to live in the houses of his other concubines as domestic servants. I had a hard time wrapping my head around a polygamous society, but I recognized that the Ren Empire had its own customs.

My Elshaidian sensibilities make it totally unfathomable…

According to Lingsha, she and Liu were not only raised together as brother and sister, but they had a rather close relationship despite only being half-siblings.

“I always thought of Liu as my real big brother, see. But after the head of the Fang clan, his grandpa, was killed, he changed, oh yes…”

Her face twisted with emotion as if she was reliving the moment. The Fang clan was a powerful noble house, but when its master was assassinated, their power gradually waned…and after the heirs were eliminated one by one, a young Liu wound up the master of the clan.

It was then that Liu got to work. To save his clan from total financial ruin, he made it his mission to gain the emperor’s throne.

“Liu pushed himself to the brink to blast away all his rivals, see. And before I realized it, we were surrounded by enemies…” Lingsha’s sad gaze cast downward.

According to Lingsha, only the greatest could become the emperor of Ren. It was a land where only the strongest and the most gifted had the right to rule. The emperor had eleven sons and fifteen daughters. They all formed alliances, and their struggles for dominance went from bad to worse.

Because Lingsha came from such a harsh world, she had to make some terrible decisions in order to survive. Surely, Liu must have also made a series of heartless decisions to realize his position of power.

But those terrible decisions had taken their toll on Lingsha’s family…

“Me, my mom, and everyone in the Xu clan were thrown in the dungeon, see…” Lingsha bitterly bit her lip.

What a gruesome existence. Hearing about the Ren Empire’s cruelty made me understand all the more why Lingsha had run away to escape the mayhem. Just imagining an entire family getting thrown in a dungeon made me shudder.

“But I managed to escape, thanks to my mentor. Oh, yes.”

Johann and Eric nodded solemnly. They knew everything Lingsha had been through to escape to Elshaid. In short, she had lived a gruesome life in the Ren Empire—barely escaping alive.

“Okay. So that’s the sort of man Fang Liu is. You see, he’s actually on the guest list for our wedding.” Eric said.

Our jaws dropped. This was the same intruder we had just fought and lost to. It was surprising enough that he was a prince of the Ren Empire, I never would have dreamed he was on our wedding guest list…

“Uh, Prince Eric, is it true that Prince Liu will be in attendance?!”

“Why would I tell such a lie? I told you I sent invitations to the royalty of neighboring states, remember? The Ren Empire’s imperial family is huge and cutthroat from what I’ve heard, so Liu is here as a representative of the emperor.”

As a representative of the emperor? Did that mean Liu was the last one standing from the intensifying dynastic struggle that Lingsha told me about? He did seem regal when we met. That feeling almost hit me as hard as when I first met Eric.

“In other words, Fang Liu is basically as close to the emperor as one can get,” Eric commented.

“Liu… So you kept up the fight, all this time…”

Lingsha’s eyes filled with conflict when she heard the words “close to the emperor.” She was literally a victim of Prince Liu’s quest for power. Her ambivalence was palpable.

“One more thing. Liu sent two letters in reply to the wedding invitation.”

“Two letters?”

Eric removed a letter from the envelope on his desk and handed it to me. When I unfolded it, a burst of light flashed and a voice intoned, “Illustrious crown prince of my beloved Elshaid, my name is Fang Liu. I am the fourth prince of the Ren Empire. I will visit Elshaid very soon as an envoy from the Ren Empire.”

“How…”

I wasn’t expecting the letter to talk to me. It felt like he was in the room, speaking to my face.

“It’s Ren Empire sorcery. I’ve heard they practice forms of magic unknown in Elshaid.”

“That would explain it. So if Prince Liu sent you this letter, why did he sneak into the palace like that?”

A part of me was still in awe of the Ren Empire's magic, while another part of me was confused by the contents of the letter. If he was in Elshaid as an envoy, why would he break in and cause a commotion?

I stared at Eric as these questions swam in my mind. He folded his arms and said, "Lingsha, what are your thoughts? Between this letter and the way your brother acted today."

"I…don't get it. Oh, no. But my brother does love a good fight, see. He's really good at making his opponents mad and beating them into submission. So maybe he wants to make you mad, Eric. He might be plotting something, see?"

There was a troubled look in Lingsha's eyes as she answered. And as somebody who knew the imperial prince inside and out, her words were quite convincing. But if she was right, then this mystery was making even less sense.

Wait a minute, what about that moment…

"Miss Lin, Prince Liu said something to you in Renese when you first saw him. What did he say?"

"He said something to me? Ohh, yes! Yes, he did. He said he was taking me back home."

Eric and I gasped in unison. If that was his objective…then we were in big trouble.

"In that case, he's aiming to cause even more chaos than we realized," Johann said.

"Yes, seriously… What in the world is Miss Lin's brother thinking?"

Johann and I exchanged glances. The air in the room was starting to feel quite heavy.

He replied yes to the wedding invitation, then he came to take Lingsha home with him. When you added in the nonsensical things he said, and the way he had just broken into the palace…my mind had already exceeded its processing capabilities.

"If Fang Liu's true objective is to start a war…then we're in big trouble," Johann grumbled, his countenance somber. "The Ren Empire is a vast country—four times the landmass of Elshaid. If we

go to war, Elshaid will be at a disadvantage both in military might and in wealth."

That came as no surprise. The Ren Empire far surpassed Elshaid in military force alone. I doubted he thought that war would break out tomorrow, but it was important to consider the worst-case scenario. After all, he had already made his first move, and we had no idea what his intentions were.

"Elshaid's internal conflict came to a stop only recently. We'd like to avoid war at any cost," I said.

"Yeah. Fang Liu is here as an envoy—we should approach him from that perspective for now. According to Lingsha, he doesn't necessarily want war."

"Yes, which means our diplomatic approach with him is going to be all the more crucial," I replied.

Eric and I nodded to each other in agreement.

What would Prince Liu's next move be? The thought was a little terrifying. I needed to steel myself, so that no matter what the reckless prince told me, I wouldn't do anything rash.

"And to your point, Leia, I want you in those diplomatic meetings," Eric said, his eyes grave. "What do you say?"

I wasn't expecting such a question, so I didn't know what to say. "Do you really think I would be useful in such discussions? I have no experience in diplomacy whatsoever..."

"Oh, you can leave the diplomacy to Johann and myself. Besides, this wasn't our original plan all along. I was going to run the talks with Dale, since he's the most knowledgeable in the affairs of the Ren Empire. But as you just made contact with him earlier, Leia, your testimony might become crucial."

To dispel my worries, Eric smiled gently at me.

Okay, if all I need to do is give my testimony when Eric or Dale asks for it...

I gave a nervous but firm nod in reply.

I need to be his rock.

"I will do everything I can for you."

"Good. I appreciate that."

And thus, Eric and I decided to take the diplomatic approach with Prince Liu. If Liu attempted to harm Eric, I would dust off my bodyguard skills and leap to the defense. This time, I would not suffer such humiliation.

“Now hold up! If you’re talking with Liu, you need a Lingsha with you, oh yes!”

Lingsha jumped up and announced her desire to join in. It was understandable, since this was her brother we were dealing with. If I were in her shoes, I would have done the same. I knew from experience that families could do that to a person.

With everything that happened with Jill lingering in my mind, I glanced at Eric.

“Sorry, Lingsha, but you’ll have to sit this one out. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you and Liu to see each other for a while.”

“Why not?! Nobody knows what’s on his mind better than me—nobody!” Lingsha raised her voice in protest. The image she projected was a far cry from the bubbly girl I usually saw.

Noticing this, Johann came to the rescue. “Lady Lin…please, take a breath.” He rested his hands on her shoulders. “His Highness surely has his reasons.”

“But…”

“And we’re doing this for your sake, Lady Lin. If you meet directly with Fang Liu when we still don’t know his true objectives, you might get hurt. None of us wants that.”

“Well…if you say so, Johann… Okay. I’ll stay out.”

Johann somehow managed to convince Lingsha—well, more like forced her to sit on her hands.

Fang Liu—he really is an enigma. Why is he acting so brazenly? And what is his true objective…?

I considered Prince Liu. That stubborn smirk on his face, like he was always ready to pick a fight with somebody and win. Berklein and Algrene were secretive with their treachery as they worked from the shadows, but this guy acted boldly, out in the open. That was the one major difference he had from our previous foes.

And what was his aim? I had no idea but I did have an ominous feeling about the near future.

“Johann, I doubt he’ll try to break in again, but increase the guards, just in case.”

“Right away, Your Highness,” Johann replied promptly. His gaze was as harsh as ever.

“Now, Leia, Lingsha, sorry to have kept you both up so late. Rest up tonight. And Leia, if Fang Liu shows up again, take care of him.”

“Will do. Goodnight.”

“We certainly earned a good night, yes.”

We bowed and departed for our rooms. Johann and Eric showed no signs of leaving the study.

Things are going to get chaotic again. But I should just focus on being there for Eric.

He was counting on me, so I had to rise to the challenge. There were so many unknowns about Liu, but I would just have to do my best.

***

A few days after that fraught night, Prince Liu officially arrived in Elshaid as an envoy from the Ren Empire. This time, he was accompanied by bodyguards, as one should.

His official reason for visiting was to attend our wedding, but the ceremony was a long way off. It was obvious to anybody that he was there far too early, even as a foreign envoy.

“Thank you for coming all this way. I am Eric Elshaid, crown prince of Elshaid. I extend a warm welcome to you, Prince Fang Liu of the Ren Empire.”

“Well, well, Crown Prince Eric. Thanks for the personal meet-and-greet. Oh! And congrats on the wedding! The emperor says hi, by the way.”

Prince Liu spoke just as unceremoniously today as he did that night. Eric smiled coolly and let it slide. I thought he was being

awfully chummy with the crown prince of a kingdom—it made me wonder if he really was trying to anger Eric on purpose to start a fight.

"Thank you for the blessing. I am a little surprised that you would arrive so soon, but you have my thanks for being here."

"Well, you've taken great care of my baby sister. It's only natural that I'd want to drop everything and come over when you invited me. Put 'er there, buddy!"

While Eric radiated tension, Liu casually slipped out his hand for Eric to shake, to which Eric obliged, but there was no smile on his face.

He mentioned Lingsha. Is that really his aim then? Taking her back home?

Uncertainty hung in the air. As I stood there, my heart racing, another voice chimed in.

"Master Liu, don't you think your language is discourteous? You are addressing the crown prince of Elshaid."

"Aw, Tailong, you're such a killjoy. Elshaidian's a tricky language—I can't help it. Crown Prince Eric…this is Koh Tailong, assistant to the prime minister, and my watchdog."

"'Watchdog' is a bit harsh. The prime minister merely arranged for me to be your aide on this trip."



Tailong spoke Elshaidian flawlessly. He was assigned to be the imperial prince's minder.

That's a relief. We'll have more luck talking to Tailong.

The sight of Tailong, a bespectacled man who seemed a textbook-perfect government minister, put my mind at ease a little.

"Prince Eric, I apologize for Master Liu's impertinence. I will be in attendance at today's council alongside Master Liu, if that is permissible."

"Of course. You'd be doing us a favor by attending."

"I deeply appreciate your consideration, Your Highness." Tailong respectfully bowed his head.

There were a handful of bodyguards standing behind him, but they would not attend the meeting. I was still a little surprised that the Ren Empire would send one of their princes to Elshaid as an envoy... The timing felt especially odd.

If their aim was to put pressure on us, that might have been a strategic move, but it made no sense otherwise. Perhaps that was yet another way in which our cultures differed, since they had so many heirs to the emperor's throne.

"Prince Liu, it is an honor to have you here as our guest. I am Dale Elshaid, second-eldest prince of Elshaid. I will accompany my brother to today's council."

"Cool. Nice to meetcha, Prince Dale."

"Thank you. Now, shall we go?" With his usual peaceful smile on his face, Dale gripped Liu's hand cordially. Then he escorted Liu and Tailong toward the reception room.

In the reception room, we promptly took our seats at the table. Representatives from Elshaid sat on one side, the Ren Empire on the other.

"Now, I'd like to get straight to the heart of this meeting...but first, Prince Liu, you trespassed on palace grounds a few nights ago. Why did you, an envoy, do such a thing? We need an answer."

When Eric said this, everyone in the room tensed their muscles, me included. None of us thought he would pounce so

soon. But this was very true to form for direct Eric. He probably wanted to give his opponent a strong poke and see his reaction.

"Trespassed? Dunno what you're talking about. Since arriving in Elshaid, I haven't set foot out of my lodgings."

Liu sat across from us, looked us straight in the eye, and lied without shame.

I was right. We had to be hyper-vigilant around this man… I scrutinized Liu with my gaze.

He smiled like an innocent angel and watched us, clearly enjoying our reaction.

Maybe he really is provoking us on purpose, trying to make us angry…

"Well…Leia here testified that she not only witnessed your trespass, but she also engaged you in combat."

"That's news to me. Besides, I've got no reason to come here without permission."

Even when pushed, Liu calmly played dumb. Eric's eyes sharpened a little at the sight of him—perhaps Liu's attitude had angered him a little.

Eric…hold it in, I silently prayed.

He couldn't succumb to his anger now. He had to keep a cool head while dealing with Liu, or these talks would be a complete wash.

"Crown Prince Eric, why dwell on whether I trespassed or not? It doesn't matter."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, isn't Elshaid dealing with a much more serious problem right now? I'm referring to the twelfth imperial princess of our empire, Xu Lingsha…and how you kidnapped her."

Eric and I exchanged horrified glances. We imagined that he would bring up Lingsha, but to say that she—a political refugee—was kidnapped was quite audacious.

"I don't understand what you're saying. Besides, that matter has already been settled. Elshaid has given Lingsha asylum—the

Ren Empire's minister of foreign affairs signed off on that. There should be no further concerns on the matter."

"Crown Prince Eric," Tailong said, "I see where you're coming from. However, the aforementioned minister of foreign affairs and his subordinates have all passed away, so we cannot confirm the veracity of your claim."

His assertion was indeed reasonable...but the details were absurd. The minister of foreign affairs and all his subordinates died simultaneously? That was impossible.

"Mr. Tailong, do you honestly believe that's a valid excuse?"

"It isn't a matter of validity, Your Highness. The concept of defecting to another nation does not exist in the Ren Empire, so we must discuss the very premise of Princess Lingsha's citizenship first before we can make any progress elsewhere."

"Wow, you're just making up rules left and right, aren't you? You really expect me to swallow that premise of yours?" Eric glared at Tailong with rage in his eyes.

But the latter calmly brushed the prince's anger aside.

I was naive to think we'd have more luck communicating with Tailong. He's just a different flavor of obstinate...

As for Liu, he glared balefully at us, arms crossed.

"May I interject?" Dale raised his hand. Tailong glanced in his direction. Even in such a cutthroat atmosphere, Dale maintained his tranquil demeanor. I would expect no less from the man who spent most of his life winning the trust of the four most powerful noble houses while covertly acting on Eric's behalf.

"Go ahead."

"Thank you. As you said just now, in the treaty between Elshaid and Ren, both states signed a pact of mutual non-interference in the matter of immigration. Interfering with Princess Lingsha's immigration to Elshaid would be in violation of that treaty."

Dale calmly refuted Tailong's claim. His voice was placid yet firm. He would not take no for an answer. Dale was well-versed in Renese affairs, which was why Eric had asked him to participate in these talks.

If memory served, Dale studied abroad in the Ren Empire because he was fascinated by the culture. He was even wearing a bespoke suit made by a Renese immigrant.

Good. Looks like Tailong's struggling to find a good comeback.

Tailong inclined his eyebrows and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "On the surface, you make a very sound argument, Prince Dale… But how sound is it, really?"

"Smooth, Prince Dale! You've certainly learned a lot during your studies in the Ren Empire…" Liu took on a challenging tone and added, "But doesn't that mean you're familiar with Renese negotiating tactics?"

"Your negotiating…tactics?" Eric asked.

"I am well aware that the Ren Empire sometimes employs forceful tactics in their negotiations," Dale said. "However, I must say that fabricating the kidnapping of a princess is a bit extreme."

"Oh ho. Fabricating, you say?"

"Prince Dale, watch your mouth. Our claim is no fabrication," Tailong snapped. "The Ren Empire considers it a kidnapping—that's the truth."

Did these guys really kill the foreign minister, the one person who knew about and could verify Lingsha's refugee status, so they could twist the truth to their own ends?

Liu grinned like a cat while Tailong's expression remained the same. They were equally terrifying.

"Why do you gotta be like this, Dale? Linny is my sweet baby sister. If you don't admit it was a kidnapping and return her to me soon…I can't guarantee bad things won't happen."

In an instant, the room was icy cold. It was little wonder—interpreted in a certain way, he just threatened military intervention. Naturally, we all knew that it was nothing more than an idle threat but his aura of absolute authority made us lose our nerve.

Oh, Eric…what are you going to do about this?

I looked over at Eric. His arms were crossed as he appraised Liu.

“Prince Liu, I don’t care what you say, Lingsha is a citizen of my kingdom now. I won’t let your threats push me into giving her up.”

“Ooh, look who’s playing tough.”

“I’m not playing tough. There is nothing I hate more than injustice. If anyone tries to unjustly force my citizens to emigrate, then it is my moral imperative to protect them.”

Eric’s proclamation was firm. In it resided an unshakable conviction. Eric was a man who fended off endless assassins without ever compromising his moral compass. He wasn’t about to fold now. Eric’s convictions would never allow that.

“So the rumors were true. You have a stubborn obsession with justice. Damn, talk about a killjoy… Y’know, if ya don’t loosen up, you’ll never be able to run your kingdom.” Sarcasm dripped from Liu’s voice; his smile was confident.

This guy really was inscrutable…

“I don’t have the right to criticize your methods,” Eric said. “Your ideals and my ideals are simply at odds.”

“Got a point there—we see things differently, Crown Prince Eric. But I’m not backing down with Lingsha. I’ve got people in my own empire to consider. I can’t come home to them empty-handed.”

“Your problems are of no concern to us. And let’s not forget, you have yet to apologize for trespassing on palace grounds.”

He strayed off the topic of Lingsha, but it was warranted after the terrible commotion Liu had caused.

But no matter what he does, he can’t erase the truth.

It baffled me that Liu assumed he could just pretend it never happened. Eric would never accept that sort of excuse.

“I don’t care what you say—Leia witnessed it. She is a saint of Elshaid. She cannot tell a lie.” Eric glared sharply at Liu.

“Ooh, a saint, eh?” Liu leaned forward and stared hard at my face.

“I-is something funny?”

“Well, I was just thinking that I’d never forget a pretty face like yours. But this is definitely my first time meeting you. Didn’t know you were a saint.”

“What?!”

He was just being so crass that I couldn’t find the right words, which amused him even more. The way he talked and acted was calculated to push people’s buttons. He probably did so to deliberately agitate people and make them vulnerable.

Jill had used such tactics unconsciously, but Liu was far more wicked because he did so intentionally.

I just can’t… This jerk throws me off.

I forced myself to look away from Liu and looked at Eric instead, but he was faring no better. His expression had the same scowl that it had when we sat down at the table. And although his face wasn’t red, I could tell he was boiling up inside.

I knew Eric and this was the sort of personality that aggravated him most.

“Is it just me, or is it really stifling in here? I don’t like it when it’s stifling.”

Liu had the audacity to mock us openly. He had already done his fair share of mocking before, but now the air in the room turned to ice. We were utterly disgusted by his attitude, but the first to speak up was an irate Tailong, his brow furrowed.

He said, “Master Liu, get a hold of yourself! We are here to negotiate peacefully. This is no time to pick a petty fight with the Elshaid Kingdom!” His voice was raised in anger.

And that anger was justified. His liege was talking trash this entire meeting.

But Liu looked neither affected nor remorseful. “Once more, I don’t want to fight. I was just trying to lighten the mood with a joke.”

“This is neither the time nor the place for levity. If this doesn’t go well, the prime minister will scold me, not you.”

“Yeah, yeah, I know… Okay, Elshaid friends, why don’t we cut the crap and get to business.” Liu paused, his gaze sharpening again. Not a hint of his flippant attitude remained; he looked like a different person.

His gaze was war hungry, just like the night I met him. Instinctively, I knew he was dangerous. I braced myself for whatever crazy demand he would make.

“If Eric Elshaid makes Princess Xu Lingsha his wife, then we will drop the matter.”

There was a collective muffled gasp from our end of the table.

“In other words…if Crown Prince Eric marries Linny, problem solved.”

What’s he playing at…?

It didn’t make sense. Liu’s demand was so out there that it was impossible to comprehend.

Why does Lingsha have to marry Eric? Didn’t this guy come here to attend our wedding? No, wait, maybe that’s why he came here so far ahead of schedule…

With all these thoughts, I was too confused to even speak…

“Prince Liu, do you realize what you’re saying? I find it hard to believe your little jest has a point.”

Nevertheless, Eric remained calm. If he got emotional, he would play into Liu’s hand. So he chose his words carefully, but Liu brushed past it and said, “How can a crown prince be such a dumbass? Of course I have a point. If Linny marries you, the future king, her social standing will rise. It’s clear that just having her here in Elshaid would sweeten the deal for the Ren Empire.”

The prince of the Ren Empire was a pillar of confidence. What he said had some merit. Lingsha was a Renese princess—a political marriage to the crown prince of Elshaid was highly desirable.

In other words, Liu’s true aim with this absurd accusation of kidnapping was to arrange a political marriage. He was trying to make Eric marry for political reasons. After coming to Elshaid under the pretense of attending our wedding, this proposition was beyond insane.

“Oh, and while we’re at it, if the royal family of Elshaid were to give Linny their full backing…that would empower the Fang clan quite a bit. Two birds with one stone! The best of both worlds, wouldn’t you say? Ha! Ha! Hah!”

Liu's shrill laughter echoed through the room. There was no low this guy wouldn't stoop to in his quest for power.

Well, there's no way I can accept Lingsha being used as a bargaining chip like this.

Without realizing, I was shaking and I'd balled my hands up into fists. I couldn't stand it any longer.

"Prince Liu! Don't you feel the least bit remorseful that you're using Lingsha like this?! I know you don't share the same mother, but she told me that you were raised together like true siblings! Where's your brotherly love?!" I shouted, unable to contain my rage any longer.

Prince Liu grinned at me. "Oh, what a disturbing accusation. I have plenty of love for her. That's why I've done everything I did to gain power for my clan. Could you blame me? Lingsha was kidnapped because I was weak. If the Fang clan had been more powerful, she would be living the good life in the Ren Empire right now."

I couldn't believe my ears. Lingsha's imprisonment was indeed the result of a power struggle, but forcing her into a political marriage to atone for that was simply outrageous. If he really loved her, there was no way he would do such a thing.

"Well, I guess it's a feeling you wouldn't understand, Sainty. In the Ren Empire, power is everything. Gotta use any tool ya got to get power. If we mix Elshaid's blood into our dynasty, the Ren Empire will grow even more powerful. This is how we've gained power for generations, by joining together a myriad of bloodlines..."

His words were met with silence, so he continued. "And it's a good deal for Elshaid too. If Eric makes Linny his wife, the Ren Empire will support Elshaid in all matters. Naturally, the opposite will be true if you refuse. The political gains from this union are huge. You know that, don't you?"

I'm not even sure what I should say. Huge political gains... Given my position in all this, I'm not sure if it would be appropriate for me to say anything.

But one thing was clear: No matter what happened, I would take Lingsha's side. Once she found out her own brother was trying

to use her like a bargaining chip, she would be hurt. And when that happened, I would need to be there for her...

"So, Crown Prince Eric...do you accept my offer?"

Just as before, his gaze was intense—murderous, even. Like a predator stalking its prey. But Eric was not the sort of man who would bend easily. He looked Liu dead in the eye, inhaled slowly, and said, "I refuse. Why do you feel the need to undermine my wedding?"

Liu looked surprised, as if he didn't expect Eric to say no. "Er, well, I know about your upcoming wedding, and I support your union. So, what's the problem? If you also marry Linny, I won't have any complaints."

Dead silence filled the room.

Uhhh...could it be that Liu doesn't understand how marriage works in Elshaid?

His countenance was sober when he suggested that Eric should simply take two wives. Ignorance of our marriage customs seemed quite likely.

"Um...Prince Liu, my brother cannot marry two women," Dale told him gently. "In Elshaid, a man cannot take more than one wife, even if he's royalty. We aren't polygamous like the Ren Empire."

"Oh! Oh, really?" Liu angled his head, perplexed. He really didn't know. "Hey, Tailong, did you know that? Even a king can't have more than one wife in Elshaid!"

"It's common knowledge, Master. And I would appreciate it if you didn't embarrass yourself like this during negotiations."

Tailong stared daggers at Liu. Apparently, he was done with Liu's ignorance—and I didn't blame him one bit. I was losing patience faster than Eric, and it was taking everything in me to not lose my temper.

"Sorry about that, Crown Prince Eric. Wow, I had no idea your kingdom had such silly hangups about marriage."

"No, it's quite all right. This is a good opportunity for you to learn about another nation's culture. I'm not offended." Eric smiled suavely.

Yeah, he's about to explode.

Even Eric couldn't contain his anger when Elshaid's royal family was mocked to his face.

"Well, I'm glad to hear that, but I really do feel bad. I mean, it's your special day! It was wrong of me to suggest you swap out your bride at the altar after you marry the first one. Well, let me rephrase: Crown Prince Eric, break your engagement with Sainty here and marry Linny instead. Can ya do that for me?"

Liu wasn't giving up.

"Out of the question!"

"Okay then, I'm taking Linny back to the Ren Empire with me."

"I adamantly refuse that as well!"

Eric didn't back down. He couldn't back down.

"Say…Crown Prince Eric? Marrying someone else will be a boon for your kingdom and you can avoid needless war. And think of how your subjects will benefit. C'mon, what's your reason for marrying some daughter of a count or a saint or whatever? You're going to be king, aren't ya?"

To Liu, it was an innocent question. If you were to rule a nation, it was only logical that you put your nation's prosperity first. But the more Eric listened to Liu, the angrier he became.

"What's my reason, you ask? My reason is that I love Leia Westoria! Nobody in this world could replace her! And that is why I cannot accept your demands!"

"Uh, Eric?"

Hearing him shout that he loves me so passionately in front of all these important people was making me feel hot all over.

It's so sweet…but I'm still really embarrassed.

I loved Eric with all my heart, so I was, of course, happy to hear him say he loved me back with such conviction.

"Hmmm, you've made yourself quite clear… I'm a little disappointed in you, Crown Prince Eric. Y'know, I hope to rule my own empire someday too…"

Silence.

“If you’re gonna rule a nation, you need to be willing to make sacrifices. The prosperity of your nation comes first. The way I see it, a guy like you who can’t give up on some broad isn’t fit to be king.”

Liu condemned Eric with his words and with his harsh gaze.

Liu’s way of thinking might be the correct way for the ruler of a nation to think. But still—

“It’s a difference of opinion, that’s all,” Eric told the prince calmly. “The way I see it, if a man can’t make one woman happy, he can’t possibly bring glory to his nation. An unjust human being is incapable of protecting their people.”

“Ooh…shots fired.” Liu sounded impressed, like he realized that it had taken Eric a lot of resolve to make his decision. For just a moment, his steely glare faltered. “Well, the world has all kinds of philosophies. Who’s right, you or me? In this case, it doesn’t really matter.”

Liu rose to his feet and slowly approached me.

I wondered what he was planning to do. He smirked at me and said, “Hey, Sainty, wanna come to the Ren Empire? Let Linny have your place on the throne beside this crown prince. You’re a smart girl—surely you understand that a princess like Linny is much better suited for the life of a queen than you, the daughter of a mere count. Do us all a favor and bow out gracefully.”

“H-how can you say such a thing to me?!”

Unworthy of being a queen—hearing the very words that had been gnawing away at my self-confidence brought my anger to the surface.

No, Leia. You have to stay calm.

I held Liu’s gaze without letting my emotions get the better of me.

“Ooh, I like that look in your eye. You’re tough. Now I like you even more.”

I continued to stare.

“See, the Ren Empire doesn’t have saints. If you came to my nation, I would petition the emperor to treat you well. And when I become emperor, I would make you my primary wife.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I will not go to the Ren Empire with you. And as Eric told you, neither will Lingsha.”

I couldn’t accept Liu’s proposal. I had to be firm. If I was unworthy of Eric, then I needed to make myself worthy. If I couldn’t do that, I should never have accepted Eric’s proposal in the first place.

I’m not backing down. No matter how much he wounds my ego, I can’t bend the knee to him.

“Ha ha! Ooh, you’re breaking my heart,” Liu chuckled. “But I’m not gonna give up. I’ll keep waiting until you say yes, Sainty.”

“Don’t waste your time. I won’t let anyone else have Leia,” Eric snapped.

The imperial prince’s face remained as smug as ever. He even looked amused. “Okay…then I guess you and I will have to work out a deal, Crown Prince Eric. As a fellow aspiring ruler, I look forward to Elshaid selecting its next king.”

A provocative smirk spread across Liu’s face. I got the sense he wasn’t going to back off easily. We would need to take more extreme actions to reject his demand.

“Naturally, we don’t expect you to reach a decision in haste,” Tailong added calmly. “Master Liu has come here to attend the wedding—that has not changed. We shall stay in Elshaid until then, so take your time to give your answer.”

Bottling up my anger was a true ordeal. *The nerve, mentioning my wedding in the same breath!*

While Tailong did seem more reasonable than Liu, he was just as intractable at the negotiating table. It was painfully clear that their demands were representative of the Ren Empire.

“Well, that is all we have for today. Master Liu, it’s time to go.”

“Ahh, fine, fine. But before we go…” Liu leaned in and whispered in my ear, “Hey, Sainty, ya got me fired up with that speech of yours. Renese men love broads with a spine. Now I really want you.”

I was screaming on the inside. He left the room. I had no idea if he actually meant what he said. All his actions reeked of duplicity—he couldn’t be trusted.

What is he even thinking? I can't figure this guy out.

"Leia, don't worry yourself over this. Dale and I will take care of everything."

Eric's gentle smile pulled me out of my thought spiral. His eyes were so soft and strong. Ever since Eric took me away from my family, his kindness always eased my troubled mind. My days had become so much more colorful since we met.

I needed my happy ending with him, no matter what obstacles stood in our way.

"Yes, we will handle everything, Miss Leia," Dale said encouragingly. "I've actually got a knack for negotiations like these, so please rest assured."

They're right. I can't fall into despair...

Eric and Dale would work together to resolve this mess. I knew that everything would work out in the end, no matter how dire the situation looked. All I needed to do was trust in them and help where I could.

"Eric, Dale, thank you for your kind words. But I am not unrelated to this matter, so if there's anything I can do to help, don't hesitate to tell me!"

"Leia, you got it, thank you."

"You truly are a strong woman, Miss Leia."

The two princes answered my impassioned plea with brilliant smiles.

That's right, Leia, wallowing in self-pity and making others take care of you isn't your way. You're going to marry the crown prince. What kind of wife will you be if you can't support him now? I thought as I looked at the door that Prince Liu had used to make his exit.

***

"So how did you find the talks, Prince Eric?"

We returned to Eric's study only to find Johann and Lingsha fretting. They fidgeted and paced about the room, desperate to

learn what had transpired during the meeting. Lingsha in particular was eager to know what her brother had to say.

“Well…where do I even begin?” Eric said, unsure how to proceed. I didn’t blame him—Eric was aware that the news would crush Lingsha. Though he was prone to misunderstandings, he was a deeply sympathetic and kind man.

“Eric, don’t worry about my feelings. Just tell me everything, yes?” Lingsha responded. No matter how much trepidation Eric felt, this matter concerned her family directly, so he had to tell her.

“Okay, I’ll start at the beginning. Fang Liu demanded that…”

We told them everything about Liu’s mission to forge an alliance through a political marriage between Lingsha and Eric and his threat to take her back with him if we refused. And we spoke of how Liu tried to intimidate us with the implied threat of war and his aspiration to become the next emperor… We told her everything.

When we finished, Lingsha let her head droop and stammered, “Th-that jerkface, Liu…I can’t believe he actually said that…”

Her hands were balled into fists and shaking. There was not a bit of calm left in her body. She probably had an inkling that this would happen, but the scale of the demand was too much for her to handle.

I’ve never seen Lingsha so shaken up…

She was always so strong, so fearless, that I was somewhat taken aback to see her like this. Only one person in this room was shaken up even more than her—Johann.

“So, what happened?” he demanded. “I hope you didn’t agree to Lady Lin’s extradition!”

Ordinarily, Johann knew Eric would never do such a thing, but seeing Lingsha so emotional must have caused him to snap.

“Of course I didn’t agree to it. But the other side didn’t yield any ground either. The meeting ended in a stalemate.”

“Did it now? Well, I suppose that’s for the best. If you had made such a foolish decision, Your Highness, I would have resented you for the rest of my life.” Johann breathed deeply.

Were Johann and Lingsha together? No, that was a question for another time.

“Johann, what’s come over you?” Eric asked, concern visible on his face. “This isn’t like you. You should know I would never do something like that.”

Johann grunted and looked away uncomfortably. “Forgive me. I know… I know that, Your Highness, but I simply had to make absolutely certain.”

“Well, it’s all right. Just remember, when I agreed to give Lingsha asylum, I promised to take full responsibility for the consequences. And I can say with confidence that not a day has gone by where I’ve forgotten that promise.”

“W-well…”

“You haven’t forgotten that promise either, have you?”

“Of course not, Highness! It was I who brought Lady Lin to the palace!” Johann argued, flustered.

I didn’t know that. So Johann was the one that brought Lingsha here.

“Would you mind telling me more about that?” I said. My curiosity got the better of me. I’d only been living in the palace for a year, and there was still so much I didn’t know about things before my time.

“Yes, you might as well know. If I remember correctly, Johann had that day off, and he was walking around town when he found a carriage carrying refugees. Do I have that right?”

“Yes, Your Highness. I spotted the carriage purely by chance, but I’m grateful. Lady Lin wouldn’t have been rescued otherwise.”

Johann got a dreamy look in his eye as he recalled that day. A carriage with refugees… I had seen them riding through town now and then, carrying refugees looking for a place to live.

Okay, so that’s when Lingsha and Johann met…

“And that day, a gang of masked men attacked the carriage,” Johann continued.

“Yes.”

“The refugees abandoned the carriage and ran, but the masked men chased after them. Then Lady Lin tried to fight them off, but she was greatly outnumbered, and the masked men were all excellent fighters.”

Johann stopped there, his face twisting into a bitter mask. If I was reading between the lines correctly, those were Renese assassins sent to deal with Lingsha. I was shocked to hear they had made it all the way to the royal capital.

“That’s when I stepped in,” Johann said. “She and I fought side by side to send the masked men running. Then I asked Lady Lin who she was and what she was doing here. And she answered—”

“I said I was a Renese princess, in broken Elshaidian. Haha! Johann’s panicked face was so funny, oh yes.”

Eric chuckled, but Johann’s face remained serious. Either he was embarrassed by what had happened that day or embarrassed by his outburst in front of Eric earlier. Either way, I couldn’t help but feel for the guy.

“Johann came to me for help, and I agreed to hide Lingsha from her assassins. I suggested giving her asylum at the palace.”

“So that’s how it happened…”

“Then Lingsha stayed at the palace, learned the language, and earned her place in my royal guard. If Johann hadn’t intervened on the street that day, she wouldn’t be here now. Rescuing refugees on his day off—Johann, you truly are a great man.”

“I am unworthy of such praise, Highness.”

Eric beamed with pride at Johann, who, unable to conceal his joy, blushed crimson.

“Lingsha is forever grateful to Eric and Johann, oh yes. But that’s why I don’t want to burden you. You’re my saviors.”

Lingsha’s voice became dark with remorse as she spoke. The determination in her eyes revealed how worried she was about Johann and Eric.

“That’s why I’ve decided to go back to the Ren Empire. I love you all too much to stay here.”

Her decision took grit. It showed just how the kindhearted Lingsha couldn't bear to watch us get entangled in her family drama…

But Eric shook his head and said, "No, I can't let you do that."

"Why?!"

"Remember what I said? I took full responsibility for you when I gave you asylum. Besides…you're family to me. It would go against my moral code to send you away."

"But, Eric?!"

"Of course, if you want to leave, that's your prerogative, but I won't let you leave on our account." His eyes serious, Eric proclaimed, "You're staying here, no matter what it takes."

"Your Highness…I feel the same way," Johann agreed. "You are very important to us, Lady Lin. We cannot let you go without a fight."

Lingsha's eyes opened wide in shock.

"Lingsha, I understand that you don't want to trouble us, but I don't care," Eric said. "I can't let them take you."

"Eric…" Lingsha's face was clouded with worry.

Eric cares deeply for Lingsha—that's why he won't let up on her.

"Lady Lin, I won't let you refuse my help," Johann told her. He smiled softly. "You may burden me to your heart's content. I will do anything for you. As a man of the sword, I cannot even fathom leaving you behind."

"Johann…thanks," Lingsha said. Tears welled in her eyes.

It was clear that she wanted to stay just as badly as we did. But she was from the Ren Empire—that was a fact that could not be changed, and Lingsha knew that the rules would not be bent for her.

But now that I knew her backstory, I couldn't find any fault in her. I remembered how, when I was struggling with my own family problems, Lingsha had told me that after the harsh life she led in the Ren Empire, she considered Elshaid to be her home now.

In that moment, I understood that she could only say that because of her desperate bravery. It had taken a lot of blood, sweat,

and tears for her to call Elshaid her home.

I wanted Lingsha to find happiness in Elshaid. It was an earnest wish for the kind soul who had given me courage when I needed it.

“Okay…I understand. Your Lingsha isn’t giving up. I’m staying in this fight with you, oh yes!”

Lingsha bowed her head, popped back up, and flashed a sunny smile. That she could smile at a time like this was a testament to her strength.

“Good. We’re in this fight together,” Eric said.

“You can come to me for anything, Miss Lin.”

“Sure! Thanks, Leia!” With a smile, Lingsha clasped my hands. Her hands were so small and soft, but they radiated warmth. We stayed like this, smiling at each other.

But everything was still far from settled. In truth, all of our problems had yet to be solved.

“Anyway, no panicking allowed. Got that? If we panic, we’ll lose our composure and invite failure.”

“Quite right, Eric,” I said. “Let’s keep a cool head and take our time to think this through.”

“Yes, I’m sure there’s a way to smooth matters over. Dale is on the case too. So please…just trust us and give us some time.”

Lingsha answered Eric’s gentle smile with a firm nod. Then she and Johann left the study together.

As soon as they were gone, Eric said, “Phew…now what do we do, Leia? When you saw that Liu character, what was your impression of him?”

It was unusual for him to seek my opinion on political matters.

“To be honest, I don’t really get him. He’s unlike anyone I’ve ever met. The only impression I have is that he loves to pick fights.”

Eric nodded. “Indeed, there was a wildness, an intensity to him. Now that I say it, he has that in common with Lingsha…”

He paused to gaze out the window. His eyes were shadowed with grief.

What's Eric's impression of Liu?

He put on a brave face for Lingsha, but I could tell that Liu frightened him. Liu was just that dangerous and enigmatic.

"However, when Liu got a rise out of me, I managed to learn one fact about him."

"Hmm? And what's that?"

"When he was provoking us, it seemed like he was looking for something. My guess is that he wanted to see how we would react."

"Really?! But what could he possibly hope to learn from that?"

Eric's theory surprised me because I hadn't gotten that impression from Liu at all. I thought he simply enjoyed getting a rise out of us, nothing more.

"I'm not sure yet, but whatever it is, it might be the key to a peaceful resolution to our negotiations. Nonetheless, we can't let our guards drop. We'll need to be on the highest alert whenever he's about."

"I couldn't agree more, Eric."

There was no telling what Liu might try to do to us. We needed to be hypervigilant…

"That being said, let's focus on gathering intel on Liu and his entourage for now. We need to find something we can use during our negotiations."

"Aye aye!"

And so, we began to scheme. This was shaping up to be another tough fight…

***

Negotiations with the Ren Empire were at hand, and tension hung thick in the air, but our wedding preparations were still underway.

Today, we were to visit the church where the ceremony would take place. I had suggested postponing it, but Eric rejected such a notion and insisted that we would not allow the Ren Empire to

pressure us into changing our plans. Thus, we went to the church as scheduled.

"I'm sorry, Leia. I understand why you wanted to postpone this." Worry crept into Eric's voice as he sat beside me in the carriage.

"It's all right, Eric. I think you were quite right to adhere to the schedule."

And I meant it—Eric had been quite convincing on the matter. With our wedding date fast approaching, continuing our preparations unimpeded sent a strong message to our adversaries. Eric wanted to show his strength during negotiations, I was sure of it.

"Thank you, Leia. I'm ever grateful for your kindness and flexibility."

"Oh, don't be silly. I'm your future wife; it's the least I can do," I answered with a smile.

"Haha! You really are too modest."

Eric gently caressed my right hand. It seemed like he was touching my hands a lot these days. Was it because our hearts had grown so close? I hoped so.

I'm still not used to it, so it makes me so nervous when he touches my hand…but it feels good.

"We're here. Are you ready?"

"Of course, Eric."

"Good. Then let's go."

With a satisfied nod, Eric helped me out of the carriage. We were at the chapel of the Aegis Church where I had been ordained as a saint. In the very building where I gained my sainthood…Eric and I would vow before God to be husband and wife.

"This place is just as serene as I remember it," Eric remarked.

"It certainly is."

The church was a grand edifice that evoked times long past. The ceiling was high, and sunlight shone through stained glass.

This church really is unlike any other.

I felt the same sort of holiness when I was ordained as a saint here. And it was certainly holy. This church was one of the sites where God manifested according to the Aegis Faith. The clergy, holy servants of God, maintained the church. Besides prayers, their duties involved daily cleaning and maintenance to preserve its holy atmosphere.

In this holy place, Eric and I will be wed…

Feeling a sense of awe and gratitude, my mind raced to the not-too-distant future where the ceremony would take place.

“Welcome, Prince Eric, Saint Leia. Please come in.”

When we entered the church, a man dressed in a bishop’s robes greeted us. He was in attendance at my saint’s exams and one of my most trusted associates. Because of that, I felt safe entrusting our entire wedding to him.

“Thank you for having us today, Father.”

“But of course. Now let’s get straight to it.”

He escorted us to some seats. Then the bishop opened a holy book and explained the sequence of the wedding to us.

“First, you will both read your vows. Then you will exchange rings…and lastly, you will kiss. Is that all right?”

“Yes, Father,” Eric said.

“I’ve no objections, Father.”

After he received our consent, the bishop cleared his throat and resumed speaking.

Ahh…I knew we were going to kiss, but I just now realized that we were going to kiss in front of everyone during the ceremony. I knew that this was typical for weddings, but…it still felt kind of embarrassing.

Just the thought of it made my cheeks burn.

“Once you have the rings, you should send them to me as soon as possible. One time, the groom lost his ring and there was a huge scandal. Naturally, I know neither of you would do such a thing, but we still like to take precautions.”

“That makes perfect sense,” I said. “Rings are indeed very important.”

“Yes, the ceremony can’t start without the rings,” the bishop laughed awkwardly.

“Well, we can go over more specifics of the exchanging of rings on the big day. Today, I merely wish to review the general flow of the ceremony.”

“Understood, Father.”

After that, the bishop walked us through the steps of the ceremony until we had it memorized.

“Now, Prince Eric, Saint Leia, that will be all for today.”

“Thank you, Father,” Eric said. “Leia, we’re going back to the palace.”

“Oh, all right. I have a fitting next, right?”

“That’s right. We still have time to spare, but I want to get you back early just in case.”

“Understood.”

“Good, let’s go.”

We left the church, got back in the carriage, and headed back to the palace.

“We arrived sooner than I expected. I’m going back to my study. What about you?”

“I suppose I’ll stay with you until it’s time for my fitting.”

As soon as we stepped out of the carriage at the palace, someone called out to us.

“Prince Eric! Lady Leia! Have you just now returned?!”

“Oh, Nash. Didn’t know you were here.”

It was Nash, the dessert chef. “Yes, Your Highness. I’m going to be providing dessert at your wedding reception, so I’ve come for a consultation.”

Eric and I exchanged our greetings with Nash. I last saw him at the party, and I noticed that his gaze was now stronger, more cheerful.

“All right,” Eric nodded. “Well, as long as you’re making the desserts, I know they will be great.”

“Yes, I can’t wait to taste everything.”

“Thank you, I’ll try to live up to your expectations. Well, I must be on my way.” Nash gave us a quick bow and pivoted toward the palace gate—but he suddenly stopped in his tracks. “Um…Prince Eric? I know it would be out of line for me to seek your advice, but you see…I have this nagging suspicion that somebody has been watching me for the past several days.”

When we gave him a curious look in reply, Nash took a determined breath and said, “I feel like someone’s watching me.”

Someone watching him? Well, that’s something we can’t ignore.

“You think you’re being spied upon?” Eric asked.

“Yes. Actually, I felt like I was being tailed on the way to the palace just now…” he continued, worry crossing his face. “At first, I thought it was remnants of Algrene loyalists who have a grudge against me, but I didn’t feel like I was about to be attacked. It was just creepy.”

Nash’s theory wasn’t entirely far-fetched. There were surely some Algrene loyalists in the nobility who had suffered a great loss and resented Nash, now that their leader was stripped of title. But surely, those people would resent Eric and me even more, and we hadn’t felt like we were being stalked—which made this all the stranger.

“All right. Well, inform us immediately if anything else happens. And be vigilant. I’ll send a few guards with you.”

“Oh, thank you, Your Highness. You are too kind.”

Eric arranged a few bodyguards for Nash to accompany him safely back to his shop and to stay with him for a while after. He should be safe for a while, but who in the world could possibly be spying on him?

We sat on the sofa in Eric’s study and went over what just happened.

“You don’t suppose it’s really Algrene loyalists, do you?” I asked.

“I find that questionable as well. It’s a bit late for that, I think.”

“I see what you mean. Yes, it has been a while since the rights of dukes were reformed. If they were going to try something, they would have done so during the unrest.”

“Exactly. Well, let’s just keep our eye on him for the time being. We have a wedding to plan, and we need to make some progress on negotiations with the Ren Empire as well.”

“Yes, we sure do…” I nodded emphatically. I was excited about our wedding, but we had a mountain of problems to conquer first… An ominous chill hung in the air all around us.

Goodness, everything is already so uncertain and the mysteries keep piling up.

“I just remembered,” Eric interrupted my musings, “you said you’d visit your sister on your next day off.”

“Yes. She sends me letters about how great life at the convent is, but I’m still worried about her. It’s just, with everything that’s happening, I’m not sure if tending to a personal matter would be responsible.”

“Fair enough. But you want to make sure your sister is doing well, don’t you?”

“Well, of course I do.”

“Then you should go see her. Don’t worry, it will be fine.”

“All right. Thank you.”

Eric gave a slow, approving nod. He clearly understood my feelings. “Don’t worry about it. Now, aren’t you supposed to go try on your wedding dress?”

“Oh! That’s right… Well, I’d better be off.”

Discussing Nash’s mystery had taken longer than I realized. With a bow to Eric, I left for my fitting. It was to be held in another room in the palace.

When I arrived at the room, a maid greeted me at the door. “Lady Leia, we’ve been expecting you. Everything is ready. Please come on in.”

“Thank you.”

I followed the maid inside.

“And this is your wedding dress, Lady Leia.”

“Oh my heavens, it’s beautiful.”

I was utterly enchanted by the gorgeous dress. I couldn’t believe I was about to wear a dress so opulent and yet so dignified. Of course, I already knew what the design would look like, but seeing the real thing with my own eyes had so much more impact.

“Now let’s try this on.”

“Yes, please.”

The maids helped me put on the wedding dress. This was probably the only time in my life I would be able to wear such a dress.

“Lady Leia, it suits you beautifully.”

I looked in the mirror at myself wearing the wedding dress. The white gown was smooth to the touch and beautifully made. It was made of the most luxurious materials of any dress I had ever worn. Nothing was as beautiful and comfortable.

“What do you think, my lady?”

“I think it’s absolutely divine!”

“So glad to hear that. And I know Prince Eric will love the sight of you in it on your special day.”

Our conversation was blissful, and I felt completely satisfied with my wedding dress. With all the burdensome problems weighing me down lately, this was a welcome respite.

I can’t wait for Eric to see how I look in this dress.

As I stood before the mirror, thinking about the special day, I heard a knock at the door.

“Yes? What is it?”

A maid answered, “Lady Leia, so sorry to intrude on your fitting, but if you’ve finished, Prince Eric requests your presence in the study. Margrave Linboldt is there, you see…”

“Margrave Linboldt? Understood. I’ve just finished, so I’ll change and be right out.”

I quickly changed back into my normal clothes. My little break from reality was over all too soon. But with Linboldt waiting, there was no time to rest.

“All right…let’s go.”

I returned to Eric’s study. Margrave Linboldt sat across from Eric…

“Sorry to have kept you waiting,” I said as I entered. Linboldt’s expression was as severe as ever, and he didn’t even raise an eyebrow at me, so I turned my gaze to Eric.

“No need to apologize, Leia,” Eric said gently, gesturing for me to sit beside him. “You were at a fitting, and the margrave came unannounced.”

He may have come unannounced, but the fact remained that I had kept him waiting. I still wanted to apologize.

“A fitting, you say? Very good, yes. Did that satisfy you? Now that you’ve tried on a dress made by a master tailor of the royal family, you have a memory you can treasure.”

Of course, when the margrave finally deigned to speak to me, it was to deliver a cutting remark. He sounded convinced that I would never be wed, and he wanted to make sure I knew that. Clearly, he was still opposed to our wedding.

“Margrave, that’s a tad impertinent. I told you that nobody is better suited to marry me than Leia.”

“No, there indeed is somebody! The twelfth princess of the Ren Empire—Xu Lingsha!”

Eric and I exchanged horrified glances. Why did the margrave bring up her name out of nowhere? Had Liu made contact with him?

“Don’t think I’m ignorant—I was just made aware of a wonderful proposal,” Linboldt said. With a smile on his face, he elaborated, “You could marry the refugee princess and strengthen relations between both countries. It’s an offer you cannot refuse.”

From his perspective, Liu’s harebrained idea sounded rather appealing.

“What the devil are you saying? I can imagine nothing more dishonorable than letting a foreign prince threaten me into changing who I wed.”

“Prince Eric, isn’t it a bit rude to Prince Liu to call it a threat? He presented you with a generous offer for an alliance through political

marriage. From a geopolitical perspective, it will clearly benefit Elshaid. I implore you to think as a crown prince, Your Highness—then you'll know which choice is best."

He could be right. I couldn't possibly see how Elshaid would benefit more if Eric took me as his wife instead of the princess of a greater nation. Regardless, I still wished to marry him.

And maybe…maybe that was a selfish wish.

"You're wrong. With Leia as my wife, I would become the best king for Elshaid. No other woman could bring out the best in me. I don't care about short-term gains; there is no brighter future than the one in which I marry Leia."

"Oh, Eric…"

"The first day I met her, she bravely rebuked me for my unfair judgment as crown prince. She has an unyielding moral code; that's why I have faith in her. When compared to a faith so great, improving relations with an empire is trivial."

My eyes stung with tears at his words. I didn't realize how deep Eric's faith in me went. Now that I knew how much he trusted me, I felt ashamed over my petty self-doubt.

"Are you suggesting personal feelings matter more than positive relations with an empire? Open your eyes, Your Highness. I cannot conceive such words coming from you—you are far too intelligent."

"You're wrong, Margrave Linboldt. The words I just said were quintessentially my own. I value trust above all else. I trust you too. Which is exactly why I have faith that if I explain myself like this, you will eventually understand."

"Your Highness!"

The margrave's stony expression finally cracked. Eric had apparently gotten through to him somewhat.

"Margrave Linboldt. Please, trust me. I would never betray your hopes for me, and that is exactly why my bride must be Leia Westoria." Eric's speech was logical, passionate, and soft-spoken. His gaze was strong, without any doubts.

"I…cannot believe this! Prince Eric, Lady Westoria is the sister of a criminal. I cannot believe that a woman like that could possibly

be of such great character!" Linboldt jumped to his feet and glared at me. Even Eric's impassioned speech was not enough to change his rigid mind. "However, I now understand that your trust in her far exceeds anything I imagined. I'll take my leave for now." He bowed deeply to Eric and left the study.

From the very start, I was the one that the margrave could not trust. I needed to earn his trust myself, otherwise, he would never approve of our marriage.

But how do I even do that?

Not even Eric could convince him. How would I get him to understand? I was at a loss for an answer.

-Jill's Perspective-

THE PAST FOUR MONTHS since I arrived here had simply flown by. Every day, I reflected on my past deeds…and repented for the great harm I had wrought.

It feels strange saying so myself…but I truly am a dreadful woman.

Honestly, I still found myself to be a loathsome human being.

How had my personality grown so warped? I couldn't even understand my own mind. Did I feel unworthy to stand beside my sister Leia, since she was so perfect? No, I was jealous of Leia—that much was clear. But how did I come to hate her so?

Prince Dale once said that my mother was to blame, but I now believed that the cause of my hate wasn't so simple. Sometimes I thought that I should let myself be consumed in the flames of jealousy…but none of the answers I came up with seemed to strike me as true.

That was why I prayed to God. I prayed that he would forgive such a terrible sinner as myself.

I must pray to God again today.

I opened the door to the chapel and peered inside. There, I spotted a familiar silhouette.

A woman knelt in prayer, and her beautiful golden hair flowed behind her—my sister Leia. With her eyes closed and her hands clasped, she prayed with intensity.

The moment I saw her, my heart jumped in my chest.

I'd sent my sister letters regularly ever since I came to this convent, and she never wasted any time in replying.

She always told me: "Nothing makes me happier than seeing you face your sins and find the path that leads to your happiness. Stay on your own path."

My sister's words now echoed in my heart. I didn't know why I had never listened to her before.

I would read her words over and over, carving them deep into my soul. Every day, I thought*, I don't want to worry my sister...so I must do my best here.*

Her most recent letter said, "I'm going to come to the convent today to see you..."

That is why I was waiting here—for my sister.

I haven't seen her since the day we said goodbye... Now I feel nervous.

I felt my heart pounding in my chest.

My sister finished praying and turned to look at me. The moment I saw the look on her face, I had a revelation.

I worshipped my sister so wholeheartedly... I wanted to be like her but believed I never could. That was the true source of the corruption in my soul.

"Jill...long time no see."

"Y-yes..."

"Is something wrong?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Good... Well, let's have some tea."

"All right."

I nodded and followed my sister back to my room, where we had tea and a lively conversation. My sister felt kinder and closer to

me than she did before.

Still, I'm surprised I found her praying, even at a time like this... She truly was made to be a saint.

"You really have changed, Jill. I was speaking with Sister Eleanor, and she told me you pray diligently every day."

My sister took my hand and smiled at me. I felt bashful at the sight of her smile.

"Have I changed? I'm not sure. I still often feel that I am weak-willed."

My sister giggled, "Oh, don't be modest. Your self-awareness is ample proof that you've grown so much. You should believe in yourself."

My sister's words made my eyes burn hot with tears. I couldn't believe my sister cared for me so deeply. She truly was a kind person. Yet I felt such hideous feelings toward her...

It truly does hurt, coming to terms with the wrong you've done...

Of course I couldn't voice this thought out loud. But I could promise never to make the same mistake again, so that I could become more like the sister I idealized.

My sister and I spent some time chatting after that. But one thing was eating away at my thoughts: Why was Leia so pale?

Is something troubling her?

My sister rose to her feet and looked out the window. For some reason, her eyes seemed sad.

"Sister...is something wrong?"

"Huh?! Um, yes... Well, no, it's nothing. Um... Am I acting strange?"

My sister looked startled for a moment, then she shook her head and regained her smile. But the smile didn't reach her eyes.

"Well, um, I just noticed that you look depressed." I blurted out.

"I see... You've got sharp eyes, Jill. I thought I was doing a good job hiding it."

“So I was right. I wouldn’t have noticed a few months ago, but now I can tell when you’re feeling sad… After all, I was usually the cause of your sadness all those years,” I murmured, finishing with a self-deprecating chuckle.

My sister looked at me with wide eyes. Then, after a long pause, she looked deeply into my eyes. Her gaze was dead serious. I felt my spine straighten to attention.

“You see, I’m actually wrestling with a very difficult dilemma. I just don’t know what I’m supposed to do. That’s why I’m depressed…so depressed, I’m unable to hide it.”

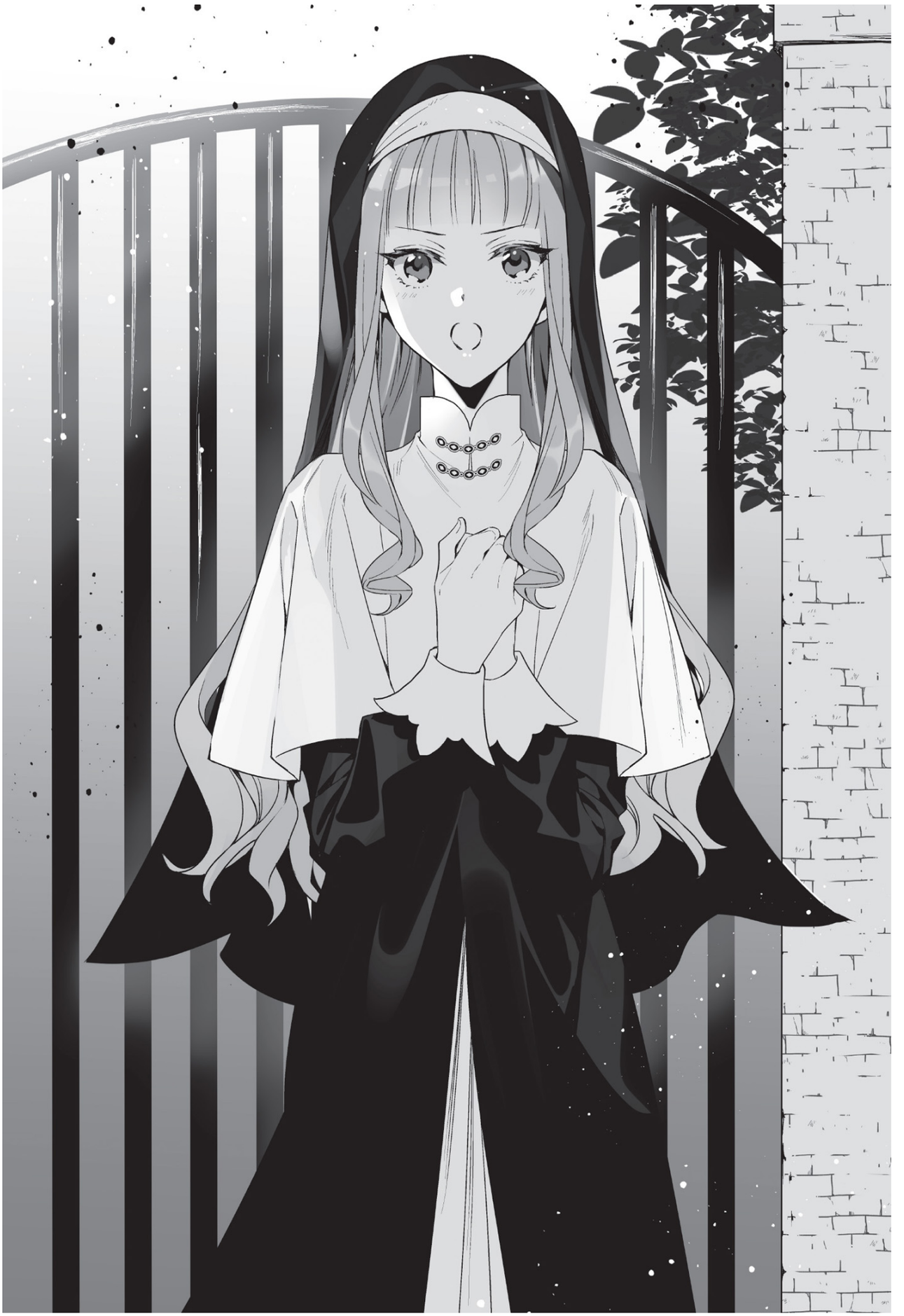
“May I ask, what sort of dilemma?”

“Well…I’m sorry to worry you, but I can’t tell you what it is. It’s something I have to solve on my own.”

When my sister said this, I heard the evening bell ring outside. I knew what it meant.

My sister has to leave now…

With a lingering sense of loneliness, I started to walk my sister out of the convent. And when we arrived at the front gate, I couldn’t contain myself any longer.



“But, Leia…you’ve always broken through any walls that stood in your way! I know you can do it again!”

“Jill…”

“That’s who you are, and that’s why I long to be like you. I’ll be praying for you. So keep fighting, dear sister.”

“Thank you. Why, Jill, I feel much better now,” Leia said with a sweet smile. But as she stepped into her carriage, I heard a large gust of wind slice through the air.

“Wh-what’s that?!” My sister looked up, transfixed by the sight above her.

“Hi, Sainty! Fancy meeting you here…”

I cast my gaze upward to find a man seated atop a crimson bird that appeared like it was on fire.

That man doesn’t look like he’s from Elshaid.

The moment I saw him, I knew he was no ordinary gentleman. He landed his crimson bird and walked over to my sister.

“Prince Liu, do you have business with me?”

With a suave smile, the man said, “Business? Nah, pure coincidence. I said, ‘Fancy meeting you here,’ remember?”

My sister sighed uncomfortably and said, “Please just stop lying to me.”

Did my sister just call him…a prince? Could this gentleman be from the Ren Empire?

At that moment, I had an epiphany: This man was the cause of my sister’s worries…

Chapter 3:
Aiming for a Happy Ending

"NO, REALLY, it was a coincidence. I just happened to be flying by. And you were so beautiful, I couldn't help myself. I had to say hi."

Liu punctuated his speech with playful chuckles—and it was cringe-inducing.

But since my flat stare didn't faze him one bit, I realized there was no point in arguing.

He's full of it. But if I lose my cool, I'll just play right into his hands.

I decided to play along. There might be something to gain from it.

"Fine. If you say it's a coincidence, then I'll take you at your word."

"Whoa, you're gonna trust me? That won't do, Sainty. You shouldn't trust people so blindly. Of course I was lying. It wasn't a coincidence—I came here to see you."

W-wow...is this guy actually a master aggravator?

When I tried to play along, he acted surprised and provoked me again. I thought that Jill had conditioned me to such treatment, but Liu really had a knack for driving me mad. He was intentionally abusive, which made it even worse.

Grin and bear it, Leia. Think about it—at least he's being rational.

If I let my emotions run wild, I would hand Liu all the power. I shared a roof with my little sister for over ten years. If there was one thing I was good at, it was grinning and bearing it.

"I'm honored, Your Highness. But my, between this and your nighttime excursion, you do seem to enjoy acting solo... Perhaps I'm speaking out of turn, but might I suggest you try cooperating with those around you more?"

"What?! Ah yes, well, 'nighttime excursion' doesn't ring a bell... but when having a secret tryst with a pretty woman, I like to avoid prying eyes."

I took a pointedly cool tone with him, but undaunted, he tried to blindside me with flattery. He was flirting with me even though he knew I was engaged to the crown prince. I was sure this was another one of his special manipulation tactics.

"A tryst? Please, enough of the tasteless jokes."

"Haha! But I'm not joking. I just think you're pretty, and ever since I first saw you, I wanted to chat over some tea."

"Is that so? Well, I must be on my way."

I really couldn't stand to play along anymore. I turned my back to leave when I heard a frantic voice behind me.

"Ah—hey, wait!"

I turned around. "What is it?"

"Sainty…when I heard you were a saint, I did some research on the saints in this kingdom."

Now he was talking about saints, of all things.

"Saints perform miracles with God's powers to help the faithful. So you're like goddesses, right?"

"I'm not sure you could call us goddesses…but everything else you said is correct. What about it?" I didn't understand where he was going with this.

"Well, it's just that…there's heaps of people in my own nation who need help. Remember what I said earlier? We don't have saints in the Ren Empire."

"Yeah…" I sighed warily.

"So, I have an idea."

Liu stopped talking there and pulled a piece of paper from his pocket. It had a seal on it just like the one on his letter to Eric.

The seal glowed red, and just like before, the paper spoke: "Wanna come back to the Ren Empire with me? Let's save thousands of lives together. I want you to be the Ren Empire's first saint."

Why did he have to use magic to tell me that? I'm right here…

"This is a form of love letter popular in the Ren Empire. So—what d'ya say, Sainty? Have a change of heart?"

I didn't care that it was popular. It just seemed like a waste of magic to me. And I was astounded by how many tactics this guy kept using on me.

Is Eric right? Is Liu spying on me? Or is he only doing this as a diversion to hide his true intentions?

I had a vague feeling that something was amiss, so I put up my guard. "As I told you before, my answer is a firm no. I have no desire to be with you whatsoever."

"Awww! But why?!"

"Why? Where do I even begin… First and foremost, I'm engaged to Eric. Secondly, I find your overtures utterly bewildering."

I turned him down firmly, then went in on the offensive. Even if Eric wasn't the crown prince, I was still engaged. I wasn't going to run into the arms of some other man. But Liu probably didn't understand that.

"Hmm…okay, I get it. But listen, Eric marrying Linny will definitely be best for both nations. If you really care for him, then let him go. Besides, Elshaid has three saints. And if they hold more exams, they can always get more… Surely they can make do without you."

"Please stop saying such ridiculous things…"

"Anyhow, just felt sorry that you're getting left out and thought I'd let you be my wife. Everyone wins! Don't you think that's a perfect happy ending?"

I was at a loss for words. At least he knew there were three saints—I'd give him credit for doing the bare minimum research. I still couldn't accept his assertion, however. I was beyond infuriated—I was exhausted.

"Um…did you say that sincerely?"

"Of course! Polygamy is the norm in my nation. Nobody would bat an eye if I added you to my harem."

I was about to break. There was only so much humiliation I could take before I had to push back.

I haven't lost my temper yet. But—

"I hate people like you."

I had to at least say that. It'd save me the trouble of pulling the wool over his eyes down the road.

"Whew, that's too bad. But at least you're blunt and principled—that's what I love about you, Sainty."

As I stifled a scream, I felt my body freeze like ice. I knew that sensation—it was the rabid ferocity of a monster when it spotted its prey. That's what I felt from Liu: a primal rage similar to bloodlust.

"Ooh! Did I finally push your buttons, Sainty?"

"It's your fault."

"Haha! Aw, don't snap at me, babe. I'm actually proposing the most peaceful solution I can think of. A solution where everyone's happy, see?"

He extended a hand to me. And as I stared hard at his hand, another wave of confusion hit me.

Bloody hell... I really don't know when this guy is being serious or not.

"Um, I'm afraid I'm rather lost, but..." Jill suddenly spoke up, stepping between Liu and me. "Prince Liu, the solution you're proposing will not give my sister a happy ending."

Even though she wasn't fully appraised of the situation, she had still listened to every word.

"So...you must be Sainty's little sister, Jill. You're cute, I'll give ya that, but you're not a saint, so I don't want you."

With just one glance, Liu lost interest in Jill. To see him treat her like this after all the grief he gave me, it made me believe his mission in life was to pick fights with people.

Jill was very hurt by the fact that she couldn't become a saint. Just a few months ago, she would have burst into tears if Liu had taken that tone with her...

I glanced at Jill and was surprised to find she was calm and composed.

"You're right, I am not a saint. However, I can still help others. That is how I spend my days now, and I quite enjoy it, so your opinion of me doesn't bother me one bit."

I never thought I'd see the day when Jill would say something like this. She really had grown up.

Yes, I need to take a page from Jill's book. I have to stay positive. I can't give up. There's a way to make everyone happy…and I'm going to find it.

As I watched Jill, I made this silent vow to myself. Then, Liu clapped Jill on the shoulder and smirked.

"Huh. Okay, okay. You're a good girl, Jill. Even after you committed a crime and brought dishonor to your family, you haven't lost your optimism."

"Wha—how did you know about that?!"

"Oops, slip of the tongue."

What's going on here? Does he actually know about Jill's crime? Is this really the same guy who didn't understand Elshaid's marriage customs?

I looked at him, perplexed.

Then I realized something: Liu acted like he didn't know my name—or maybe he really didn't—but he did know Jill's name.

Deflated, Liu sighed and quietly shook his head. "Dunno why, but I feel really bummed out… Sainty, if I can't change your mind, go ahead and do what you want." Then he looked over his shoulder and said, "Tailong, you're there with a friend, aren't ya? Come out."

"Ah…so you noticed, Master Liu. How long did you know?"

Tailong popped out of thin air. Then another person joined him. It was a redheaded man, staring silently at me—Silbur Linboldt. What were they doing here with Liu?

So, our suspicions were correct. That's why Linboldt came to give his appeal the other day.

"Hah! Ya boy Liu sees all. Hey, Tailong, is this the guy? Margrave Linboldt, the famous lord of the marches, of realms far from the capital?"

"Correct, Your Highness," Tailong said stoically. "I heard he was a fierce opponent of Crown Prince Eric's marriage to Saint Leia, so I thought we could use him to help hasten the negotiations." He didn't even bat an eye.

I was right—I have to be vigilant around this guy.

"Lady Westoria, as I told you the other day, this is a very good deal. Prince Liu tops the short list of candidates for emperor. You should convince Prince Eric to accept his offer. He will understand if it comes from you."

"Margrave Linboldt? I would never—"

"Now, now, hear me out. I acknowledge that you are a gifted saint. And I apologize for being rude to you all those times. But if you really are a gifted saint, then you'll know it's best that you take the utilitarian approach and go to the Ren Empire rather than marry Prince Eric."

A saint devoted her life to her kingdom and had a duty to use all her talents in service of it. Margrave Linboldt was technically correct. If my marriage to Eric would harm Elshaid, then I was obligated to bow out gracefully.

"Right on, Margrave! You're just as righteous as the rumors say. Dang, you're much more convincing than I am."

"Prince Liu, I apologize for the belated introductions. Your associate Mr. Tailong informed me that if Prince Eric married your sister, Princess Lingsha, relations with the powerful Ren Empire would be strengthened. Can I hold you to those words?"

The margrave gave Liu a sharp look, seeking reassurance. He cared about the people of Elshaid just as deeply as I did. If war broke out between Elshaid and the Ren Empire, the borderlands that the margrave ruled would be the first to be invaded.

That was precisely why he wanted me to agree to Liu's proposal, even if it meant giving up on marrying Eric.

It really hurts…having logic used as a weapon against you.

The weapon Eric had brandished so proudly was now pressed against my throat.

"Of course you can hold me to those words, Margrave Linboldt. So enough with the evil eye—we're friends."

"Friends…you say? Well, no matter. You are a prince—I doubt you would break a promise, even if it's just a verbal agreement. I will believe you."

Liu chuckled and clapped the margrave on the back. “I like you! You’re so much easier to read than Eric.”

The margrave sneered in discomfort.

“Well, then, allow me to further negotiate with Lady Westoria now, Prince Liu. Rest assured, I will guide her to the correct path and—”

“Yeah, no, can we put a pin in that? That crown prince will blow his top if we sneak behind his back.”

“Hm…yes, I suppose you’re right.”

I was surprised that Liu stopped him. I just assumed the margrave would proceed to trap me into making a promise then and there…

I’m sure Eric would blow his top if he knew about this, but it still doesn’t make sense for Liu to back off. Not now.

“Anyway, we’re done for now. See you later, Sainty… Summon Phoenix!”

Before I could answer, Liu pulled out a scroll and sang an incantation. His phoenix appeared in a burst of light.

“I’ll give ya a ride home, Margrave. Where’re ya staying?”

“M-my villa in the capital.”

Even Linboldt was intimidated by the resplendence. I didn’t blame him—not even saints could cast spells like that.

“Then hop on! I’ll getcha to the capital in no time.”

“Very well…”

The margrave timidly followed Tailong and Liu onto the phoenix’s back. Then the trio flew straight up into the sky and out of sight.

In the end…I never found out why exactly Liu came to see me.

I let out a sigh as I watched them disappear into the distance. Liu must have had some hidden agenda in coming here.

“E-excuse me, Sister…”

“Jill?”

“Um, are you all right? I hope I haven’t endangered your marriage in some way.”

Jill looked genuinely worried. It was likely that she figured out her role in all this from that conversation.

“Thanks, Jill…but I’m all right.”

I can’t let something like this get me down. Besides, Jill was finally starting to take her life in a positive direction. I didn’t want to worry her needlessly.

“Well, if you say so, then all right… But um, if something does happen to you, do come to me. I may not be able to help, but I’m here for you.”

“I will, thank you. But I’ll be fine. I have Eric and other people I can depend on. I can’t be defeated that easily.”

Eric said he believed in me and that I would bring out the best in him when he would ascend the throne…

I had to have faith in him and stay by his side, no matter where life decided to take us. And I knew Johann and Lingsha had our backs too.

But I can’t believe Liu made a connection with Linboldt…

I had to tell Eric, and fast. I hurried into the carriage to ride back to the palace.

***

When I arrived at the palace, Eric was waiting for me. I wondered if something was wrong, if he came all the way out to the gate to meet me.

“Leia! Did you see Linboldt at the chapel?”

“Huh?! How…do you know?”

Eric sighed, “So my hunch was right… I had a spy follow Tailong, and the spy informed me that Tailong met with Linboldt and they went to the chapel together.”

That’s my Eric. I hadn’t thought of assigning spies to Liu and Tailong.

That’s why he was waiting for me…he had a bad feeling.

I nodded. “Yes, Margrave Linboldt and Tailong approached me at the chapel, but Prince Liu found me first.”

“What?! Wait, I shouldn’t be surprised. Liu probably ordered Tailong’s meeting with Linboldt. Anyway, tell me what happened.”

Eric looked surprised at first, but he quickly understood. We were on the same page that the imperial prince was surely pulling all the strings and Tailong was acting under his orders. Eric and I moved over to a terrace in the outer garden to continue our conversation.

“What did he have to say to you, Leia?”

“Well…first, Prince Liu proposed to me again, and he asked me to go back to the Ren Empire with him.”

“I thought so… That bastard, how dare he treat my Leia like that?!” While Eric did not lose his cool, there was a tremor of rage in his voice.

I wasn’t at all surprised. A man would only ambush an engaged lady when she’s alone and propose if he wanted to pick a fight with her fiancé.

Still…I know it’s improper to think this, but I’m kind of flattered that Eric is so furious.

I didn’t tell him so, but I could feel the love behind his unabashed anger.

“I can’t quite put my finger on it, but when he proposed to me, I got the feeling that he had an ulterior motive.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“I can’t express it very well, but…I felt like his words and actions were only half sincere. It seemed like he was testing me—yes, that’s it! It’s what you were talking about the other day. I feel like he’s spying on me.”

“Ahh. Hmm…that’s very intriguing.”

I had always felt something was off about Liu. He kept asking me to go back to the Ren Empire with him, but there was always something insincere about it. At first, I thought he was merely shallow, but I started to wonder if there was more to it than that.

“It seems that Prince Liu proposed to me because he saw the political value in having a saint, myself, in the Ren Empire. But now I think there’s more to the story.”

“More to the story, you say? You don’t think he cornered you when you were alone to convince you to back off so I would marry Lingsha?”

“Yes, I thought that might be his motive at first, but as soon as Margrave Linboldt showed up, he dropped that angle. Then again, that was for the best. Jill didn’t catch on that she played a part in this mess…”

“Wait, Jill Westoria was there? Could it be then that Liu was actually—” Eric was astonished. Perhaps he had a clue as to Liu’s true objective.

“Did you figure something out, Eric?”

“Yeah. Liu’s real reason for going to see you might have been to observe.”

“What?! W-well yes, I suppose that’s possible. Though I do believe he also wanted to reconfirm my feelings.”

I tilted my head, perplexed. After all, this was a major assumption. Liu wanted to observe what kind of person I was…and that was why he was following me around. But I was surprised that Eric would go out of his way to point that out. Was there some other meaning behind it?

“No, Leia, that’s not quite what I meant. Sure, Liu may have also wanted to observe you, but I think it’s possible that his true objective was to observe your sister.”

“What?!” I shrieked in surprise. He wasn’t after me—he was after Jill.

No, wait…there is some evidence to back up that hypothesis.

There was one thing that made me agree with Eric’s theory, and that thing was the source of my feeling that there was something off about Liu…

“That’s right…Liu knew Jill’s name. Back at the meeting, he didn’t know my name—or perhaps he was only pretending he didn’t know it…”

“So, you noticed. Yes, if Liu’s actual objective is Jill Westoria… then I wager he’s after someone who can cast Death Poison.”

“Ah, that does make sense…”

Death Poison was taboo magic. A caster could produce enough poison to kill a person just by touching a liquid. Berklein had taught Jill the spell, hoping to assassinate me with it, since Jill had a natural talent for it.

“Only two people in this kingdom can cast the Death Poison spell. One of them is Jill Westoria, and the other is a man with a former magic scholar for a father—Nash Hoffman.”

“Wait a minute, Nash said he felt like somebody has been spying on him recently!”

That’s right. He said he felt that somebody was watching him. It was highly likely that his spy was under Liu’s command.

“He stopped Linboldt from speaking with you any further because he had already distracted you from his true objective. Besides, he could have talked to you until he was blue in the face yet accomplish nothing—our engagement cannot end without my consent.”

“I remember him saying it was pointless to talk. But wow, I didn’t expect Death Poison would come up again. Why do you think Liu wants it?”

While I did see the sense in Eric’s theory, it only invited more questions. I couldn’t understand why Liu would make his own plan so complicated.

“I have a theory regarding that,” said Dale as he approached us, book in hand.

“When did you get here, Dale?”

He had been listening in on our conversation and was well-informed on the state of the Ren Empire, so he very well could’ve had an idea as to Liu’s motivations for acquiring Death Poison.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but I was looking for Eric when I happened upon you two together.”

“You were looking for me? Did you find something?”

“Yes. I determined that the one spying on Nash is from the Ren Empire and, just as you said, it’s likely they’re after Death Poison.”

Nash had told us the other day that he was being watched, and besides Jill, he was the only mage in Elshaid who could cast that spell.

“Okay, so it’s the same story with Nash then…”

“Yes. First, let me explain why he might want Death Poison.” Dale tucked a long, silvery lock of hair behind his ear and slowly began to explain. “The Renese regard Death Poison as a legendary secret weapon. In the Ren Empire, political power and assassinations go hand in hand, so of course, they have many assassination methods.”

“Yes, I’ve experienced that firsthand.”

Perhaps nobody knew more about assassinations than someone like Eric, whose life was targeted nearly every day.

There was a glimmer of gloom in Dale’s eyes when Eric said that, but his expression quickly returned to normal as he continued, “Anyway, poison experts are the most highly prized assassins in the Ren Empire. After all, poison is nearly impossible to trace. And Death Poison—a poison that doesn’t linger in the body—is the perfect weapon for an assassin.”

“I see. So you believe that’s why Liu wants Death Poison.”

“Yes. His interest is likely personal as well, but it’s probable that the emperor wants it and ordered Liu to bring it to him.”

The dark side of the Ren Empire reared its ugly head. It was an extreme form of meritocracy, where “Might makes right” was the law of the land. Those who followed that rule went to any length in their quests to gain power.

But if all of this is true… I felt an unease in my heart.

“If the Ren Empire’s true target is not Miss Lin, but Jill and her Death Poison spell, then we really can’t afford to ignore the situation.”

“Yes, exactly,” Dale agreed. “If we let sleeping dogs lie, Jill and Nash might be in danger.”

We exchanged glances and nodded. If Dale's theory was correct, we were in big trouble.

But I'm even more confused now…

If Liu was after Jill, one question still remained.

"Um, why do you think Liu went out of his way to show himself to me first, then? If he's after Jill, wouldn't it be more effective for him to just kidnap Jill without even showing his face?"

There was no need for him to wait until I visited Jill. If he hadn't done that, we wouldn't have figured out their true objective.

"Hmm, you've got a point there, Leia. Perhaps he wanted to learn something of the real Jill by observing her behavior around you, perhaps to find a weakness he could exploit," Eric theorized.

"You know, I did get the feeling that Liu was sizing her up."

I reflected on my visit with Jill. Liu seemed like he was trying to goad Jill. If he was doing that to see how she would react, that made sense. Basically, Liu was testing Jill to see if she was the sort of person who would bend to his will.

"If this were the same Jill who was easily fooled by Berklein's flattery, Liu would have flirted his way into kidnapping her," Dale said with a cynical smirk.

If Jill really were that gullible, he would have already approached her in some way.

Jill is different now, though. I don't know what was on Liu's mind when he showed up at the chapel, but I doubt Jill will fall for flattery ever again.

Despite that, we weren't out of danger yet. Even if Jill wouldn't be fooled, there were still many ways Liu could use her. For instance, someone could kidnap her and use the threat of violence. Anyone desperate enough could force her to obey them one way or another.

"Leia…I understand that you're worried about your sister. They did their research…then they feigned ignorance and came to us with the Lingsha proposal to misdirect us from the truth. Their plan is much more ingenious than we originally thought," Eric said, bitterness seeping into his voice.

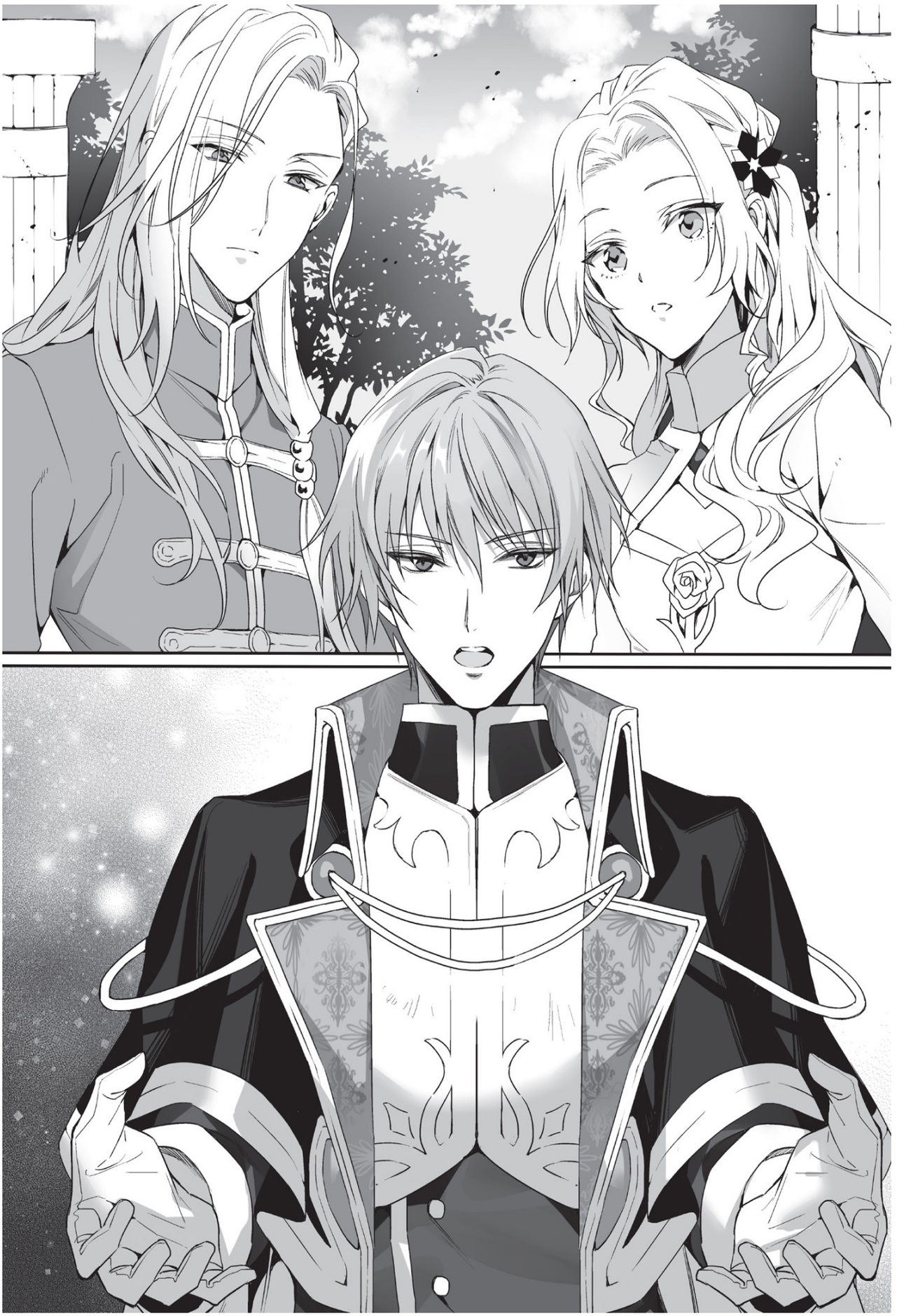
The only other time any of us had been manipulated so hard was when Algrene tricked Johann into getting himself suspended. Then again, Algrene's antipathy toward us and his goals was so obvious that it was easy to hammer out a strategy to defeat him.

Liu's case was different. He didn't care if we caught on to his plot. His flippant, bellicose attitude made him a particularly pesky adversary.

"Liu said he wanted to be emperor. I am also going to rule a nation in the future. I can't let him play me any longer."

There was no despair in Eric's voice this time. If anything, there was a fiery determination in his eyes—and I felt the same way. I would not let our enemy call the shots. That wasn't my nature. No matter how powerful the enemy, I wanted to face him head-on with everything I had.

"That's why I need you both now more than ever. Please help me."



Saying this, Eric extended his hands to us. When I took his hand, he squeezed mine firmly back.

He truly was an amazing man. He overcame so much hardship, and through it all, he learned to rely on others.

Eric has changed. I know he will be a perfect king.

I had to work hard to be just as perfect a queen.

Linboldt wasn't after the Death Poison. We could trust him to act in accordance with one goal alone: breaking our betrothal. I needed to take pride in myself as a future princess, and I needed to steel myself so that I could repel any horrible things he said to me.

"I'll take my leave now," Dale said. "I'll use the information you just gave me to see if I can predict what their next move will be."

"Understood. We'll get to work as well."

And with that, Dale left us to do some research, and Eric and I departed for his study.

***

We entered Eric's study to find Johann sitting ceremonially on his knees, waiting for us.

"Johann," Eric said. "What is it?"

His strange appearance made me tense up a little.

"Prince Eric, I've come to give you this letter!"

"Letter? Regarding...what? W-wait, are you—?"

Eric noticed Johann's sword was set down on the floor in front of him, along with the letter. Eric picked up the letter, read it, transfixed by the contents.

"What's wrong?" I asked. "Let me see." I scanned the words "What?! Johann, are you serious?"

It was a letter of resignation.

This must be some sort of joke.

Johann was Eric's childhood friend and his most trusted captain of the guard. Why would he suddenly quit?

“What is the meaning of this?” Eric demanded.

He had a right to be confused. Johann was his closest friend—he would not take his resignation without a fight.

“Well, actually…this is something I’ve been mulling over ever since Prince Liu requested Lady Lin’s return. I believe tensions between the two nations must be resolved…so I request permission to accompany Lady Lin to the Ren Empire! And I would go knowing that I would probably never return!”

As Johann bowed to us, Eric and I exchanged glances. Neither of us had dreamed he would request to run away with Lingsha.

Wow…things are really getting out of hand.

Johann probably planned to solve Lingsha’s problems once they were in the Ren Empire, which meant there was no guarantee he would be able to return. If Lingsha was stuck in Ren, he would vow to stay by her side for the rest of his life and watch over her, leaving him with the heart-wrenching decision to leave Eric.

It doesn’t matter how noble Johann’s motives are if Eric doesn’t allow it.

To Eric, Johann was so much more than a bodyguard. It was hard to imagine Eric letting him go.

“Wait, Johann, slow down. I know you wouldn’t joke about such a thing…but it’s just so sudden that I can’t believe it.”

This was too much even for Eric. I had never seen him in such a panic. After all, he trusted that Johann would stick with him through anything. He never once doubted the man.

“I knew you would say that, Your Highness. I did promise to stay by your side until you made your ideal vision a reality.”

“Johann…”

“Nevertheless, I will not be swayed. If you cannot forgive me for breaking my promise…then by all means, take my sword and kill me where I kneel!”

A firm and passionate look in his eye, Johann lifted the sword off the floor with both hands and presented it to the prince. Eric flinched ever so slightly.

He's ready to die for this. So I was right about Johann and Lingsha…

Johann had someone he was willing to die for—Lingsha. That's why he was prepared to lay down his life in penance for breaking his promise to Eric.

"Sir Johann, pardon me for asking, but are you and Miss Lin together?"

After a long pause, Johann said, "Yes, Lady Lin and I are romantically involved. It started this year…around the Foundation Day Festival."

"I see. I thought that might be the case. You two seemed a lot closer lately."

Ever since Johann's house arrest, he seemed attracted to Lingsha. I had a gut feeling that something might have happened between them a little while ago, but I didn't expect to be proven correct…

Eric, who was still quite green in matters of romance, gave a perplexed look and said, "Hmm, I see. I didn't notice at all." But surely, he had thoughts about the matter, as his eyes looked lonely.

"The powerful dukes who wanted you dead, Berklein and Algrene, have been thwarted. All your enemies are defeated, Your Highness. And most importantly, you now have Lady Leia to protect you, and she is much stronger than me."

"Johann, I—"

"I already know how you feel, Your Highness. But I wish to devote my life to being a shield that guards my beloved. This is my chivalric code."

Eric stayed quiet for a time, letting Johann's words sink in. He then took a deep breath and walked up to Johann. The dismay and confusion from earlier were gone, replaced with an expression of dignified majesty.

Eric took Johann's sword and turned the tip to Johann's throat.

Eric, you can't be… No, that's not what you're doing. I know it's not.

As swift as my thought came to my head, Eric swung the sword. The blade was but a flash, impossible to see with the naked

eye.

“No—Johann, I need you. I can’t let you go…I can’t let you die either.”

His resignation letter fluttered to the floor in two pieces before Johann’s eyes. This was Eric’s display of intention: He would never abandon Johann.

“Your Highness! B-but I—”

“This isn’t only about you. I’m not letting them take Lingsha either, so I can’t accept your resignation.”

Eric handed Johann his sword and smiled gently.

Johann stood up, took a step back, held his sword low, and swung it twice. “Lady Lin told me that this is the Renese ritual that one does to express the desire to be killed by someone they respect.”

Then he swung his sword high, and I immediately took a defensive stance. That was just how vicious, how severe Johann’s devotion was.

Johann really is prepared to die.

I’d only known Johann for less than a year, but I knew. I knew that Johann Olbrun’s convictions were never half-hearted.

“Johann, what are you doing?”

As Eric was a longtime friend, there was no way he would miss Johann’s conviction. Even so, he knew what Johann was prepared to do, and he couldn’t stop himself from asking why.

“I defied your orders, Your Highness. I was going to desert. If I cannot be forgiven, then strike me down for treason where I stand!”

“What a stupid thing to say!”

At that moment, Lingsha blasted through the door and smacked Johann with a flying jump kick. Caught flat-footed, Johann fell on the spot.

“Bluh?!”

Remorseless, Lingsha mounted him, grabbed him by the collar, and shook him. Johann’s eyes rolled back in their sockets—she must have really taken him by surprise.

“What the hell are you thinking, Johann?!” she snarled. “If you die, you won’t be able to eat anymore!”

“W-well, true, but—”

“Then why’re ya doing this?”

Johann let out a defeated whimper and said, “I’ve never been good with relationships…so this was the only way I could think to protect you, Lady Lin.”

With a wild smirk, Lingsha rolled him over and said, “But there’s a much easier way, oh yes!”

“L-Lady Lin?”

Lingsha grabbed his hands and yanked him to his feet. Then she flung her arms around him and squeezed tight. Not only was Johann surprised, so were we.

“We can do this the Renese way: Blast ’em all away till they do what we say!”

Unable to handle her over-the-top sincerity any longer, Eric burst into raucous laughter. “Ha ha ha! Lingsha, what kind of plan is that?”

Johann joined in the laughter. “That’s my Lin… It’s your straightforward, wholehearted ferocity that I fell in love with.”



“Ooh, really? Well, all I did was speak my mind, see?”

They gazed into each other’s eyes and smiled. The sight of them softened the harsh features of Eric’s face.

“You two, you cannot simply blast away an adversary like the Ren Emperor. I have a plan—I’m sure you’ll want to know what it is, but I ask that you both keep a low profile for a while.”

“If we must,” Lingsha said stoically.

“Your Highness…” Johann said, “words cannot convey my remorse. I let my emotions rule over me and in so doing, caused you great dismay. I beg of you, please cut me down.”

“Don’t be absurd. If I decide to kill you now, then what was the point of restraining you in the first place? But if you insist on some sort of punishment, then I’m happy to work you to the bone. Work for me, Johann.”

“Wh-what a merciful soul you are, Your Highness! I am beyond grateful and fortunate!”

As Johann got on all fours and rubbed his head on the floor in an extreme bow, Eric smiled and forgave him.

Well, I guess that’s one crisis averted. No… I sense a presence!

“Howdy, Crown Prince Eric. I’ll let myself in.”

In the time it took me to see the window get thrown open, a phoenix carrying Liu and Tailong on its back flew into Eric’s study. None of us could hide our shock, the trespass was so brazen. But nobody was more shocked than Johann and Lingsha. They immediately assumed battle stances as they eyed Liu warily.

The imperial prince seemed frustrated. “It looked like you guys were having an interesting conversation, so I watched from outside, and I was astounded to learn that Linny has a boyfriend. Thanks for introducing him to your brother, by the way.”

He watched us from outside? Maybe he knew how to read lips like Eric.

I followed Liu’s gaze over to Lingsha, whose eyes burned with fury as she glowered back.

“Oh, shut up! You don’t deserve to be introduced! Anyway, I’m gonna kick your butt for breaking in here!”

“Whoa there, is that a way to treat your long-lost brother?” Liu asked while he effortlessly dodged Lingsha’s flying fists.

I was right about this guy. He’s freakishly powerful…

Despite all Lingsha’s strength, she couldn’t beat him. The gap was just too wide.

“Miss Lin!” I cried as I frantically stepped in to help.

“Lady Lin!!!”

Johann reached her first. Without hesitation, he drew his sword and slashed at Liu. Liu’s blade was ready—he parried the assault and kicked Johann away.

“Aww, what a bummer. You’re only at Linny’s level?”

“Don’t underestimate me!” Johann dodged Liu’s strike at the last moment and countered with a roundhouse kick that knocked Liu off-balance. Liu fell to the floor, and the point of Johann’s sword met his throat. It happened in an instant—nobody could have stopped him.

Liu grabbed Johann’s sword just before it could pierce his neck. A daredevil smile spread across his face. “Whew…not too shabby, Captain. Figured you had to be strong to protect the crown prince from all those assassins.”

“What?! You bastard!”

“Stop it, Johann! Don’t let him provoke you any further!” Eric bellowed at the enraged Johann. He obeyed, albeit bitterly.

Liu looked at me and Eric with an expression like he was appraising goods at a store. “Oh dear, oh dear, Crown Prince Eric, what sort of training are you giving your bodyguards? I almost got hurt there, you know.”

“I see no issue. It’s only natural for a bodyguard to attack someone who broke through a window, wouldn’t you agree?”

“Ha ha ha! Touché. But I’m a prince of the Ren Empire. Shouldn’t you show some hospitality?”

“Of course. But if you behave inappropriately, then I’ll admonish you accordingly.”

Liu’s brow furrowed. Then he snorted and turned to Johann. “I’ve been a bad guest, I’ll give ya that.” Liu held up a finger, “Okay,

how ’bout I offer something to Crown Prince Eric and his gifted bodyguard, as a sign of goodwill.”

His face exuded villainy. Instinctively, I knew his “offer” couldn’t be anything good.

“We’ll resolve this in the Renese fashion: Blast me away and force me to submit. Hey, you…Johann, or whatever your name is. Fight me. Winner gets Linny.”

A duel?! This man defied expectations at every turn. What was the meaning of this? If they were fighting with Lingsha on the line, did that mean if Johann lost, he would have to let her go?

Liu’s eyes radiated confidence.

You know…I think he resembles Lingsha in almost every way.

Even if it was a stupid proposal, I wouldn’t put it past him to make it.

“One month from now, me and Jojo here will have a duel. If he wins, he may do as he wishes with my little sister. I’ll go back home without another word.”

Liu drew his sword and swung it in a grand arc, signifying the duel between him and Johann for the fate of Lingsha.

But it’s just a gentleman’s agreement…and I don’t think a duel between a soldier and an imperial prince would even be allowed.

I gave Liu a dubious look when Johann said, “Prince Liu, I’m flattered by your offer…but with all due respect, I cannot put any stock in a verbal agreement.”

His point was completely rational. It would be strange if he trusted Liu’s word.

“Haaah! Hah! Hah! Yeah, I don’t blame you. We don’t trust verbal agreements in the Ren Empire either! Very well… We’ll put it in writing.”

Liu produced a paper from his pocket, scribbled some words on it, and handed it to Johann.

“Wh-what’s this? Prince Eric, you need to see this.”

Color drained from Eric’s face as he read the paper.

“If Johann Olbrun wins the duel, the Ren Empire will indefinitely rescind all claims to Xu Lingsha.”

Liu had signed the paper with a drop of his blood and the imperial seal of the Ren Empire. It was a formal contract, undeniably.

I gulped. I never thought Liu would take it this far...

What is he thinking? This is too extreme to be a joke...

“Here are the rules: We fight to the death or until one of us surrenders. We will use swords. That okay with you?”

“I take it you’re serious?”

“Hell yeah, I’m serious! I want to be emperor someday. If I back out of a promise with another nation, I’ll destroy my chances for good. Don’t worry, Jojo, if you win, I’ll keep my promise.”

The smile returned to Liu’s face. Deep in his eyes, the flames of war burned.

“Master Liu, I must protest!” Liu’s assistant Tailong fiercely objected. “This contract is too dangerous! Please don’t make such a foolish wager!”

He was right. But no matter how rational his argument was, Liu wouldn’t be swayed. He turned to Tailong, frowned, and said, “Of course it’s foolish. I was given a silly assignment, so let me kill my boredom with some mindless entertainment, okay, Tailong Koh?”

“Uh...b-but we just got the margrave on our side! It will all have been for nothing.”

Liu glared at Tailong so severely that I broke out in a cold sweat just from standing a few feet away. Tailong seemed just as overwhelmed—he couldn’t make a sound and simply hung his head.

in silence.“Sure, Margrave Linboldt shares our goal—part of it, at least. But that guy’s rigid to the core. He would never betray Elshaid’s royal family.”

Silence.

“In other words, in the end, he’ll always take Crown Prince Eric’s side and oppose us. Though if our crown prince here is torn between two choices, that’s another story.”

Liu didn’t seem to entirely trust Margrave Linboldt. From his limited experience with the margrave, the imperial prince knew he

wasn't heartless enough to betray his own prince.

He's right. Eric has always trusted Linboldt too.

I glanced at Eric. He was glaring at Liu, arms crossed. "Okay, now I think I understand. Liu, are you trying to strike a deal with me?"

Liu smirked and said, "That's my crown prince—quick on the uptake. If we lose, we will withdraw. But if we win, either Linny comes back to the Ren Empire with us or you marry her. You must promise to do one of those two things."

In other words, this duel didn't only have Lingsha's freedom on the line, but our wedding as well. Liu was taking advantage of Eric's faith in Johann to win a duel and force Eric's hand into giving him everything he wanted.

But Eric saw through the scheme. Surely, he did.

"I agree to your terms."

Eric wasted no time in grabbing the quill and signing the contract. That's the sort of man he was. Once he made a judgment call, nobody could stop him from following through on it.

"In the Ren Empire, we seal contracts with a drop of blood taken from the thumb. What do you say we seal this pact with our blood, as a sign of mutual trust?"

"Mutual trust? I never thought I'd hear you say such words in earnest. No matter...will this suffice?"

As per Renese tradition, Eric bit his thumb and pressed it to the contract.

Seeing the blood, Liu smiled and said, "You really are exactly the sort of man I took you for. I shall cherish this contract always." With a satisfied smile, he took the contract from Eric. "There, Tailong. Take a gooood look. I got Crown Prince Eric's word. Now if I win, everything will go smoothly. Sometimes you have to win a battle to win the war."

Liu seemed so proud of the contract with Eric that he was rubbing it in Tailong's face. Even I had to admit, it was well played. Liu knew Eric's personality well. Annoyingly so.

“Sorry to rain on your parade, Master, but I believe it’s possible the crown prince will back out of the contract if he loses, insisting that it was a farce and not legally binding.”

“Hmm?! Whoa, Tailong, is that what you’re worried about? It’s okay. There’s no chance that’ll happen.”

“What?! How can you be so confident, Master?”

“Breaking a contract goes against his moral code. His moral compass is like a second heart to him. He would sooner die than go back on his word.”

Liu was right, Eric would never break a contract.

Prince Liu…what a terrifying man you are. You would use Eric’s own moral code against him.

After a few moments of dubious frowning, Tailong finally relented. “Ah…is that so? Very well, then. If things proceed as you designed, Master Liu, then I shall have the prime minister tell the emperor what a fantastic plan it was.”

Liu smiled and said, “Cool, cool. Glad you understand, Tailong. Well, make sure you follow through on your promise when we get back home, ol’ buddy,” he whispered after wrapping an arm conspiratorially around Tailong’s shoulder.

So even Tailong went along with Liu’s pushy plan in the end… But is he genuinely on board with it?

The emotionless man in question removed Liu’s arm from his shoulder and looked our way. “Well then, allow me to confirm the rules of the duel between Master Liu and Sir Johann. The fight will only end with death or surrender, and the only weapon to be wielded is the sword. Is that correct?”

“Yeah, I don’t mind—they’re my rules anyway. What do you think, Jojo?”

“I consent to these rules.”

The duelists agreed to the terms. Johann was the epitome of cool. Meanwhile, Liu’s daredevil smile was confidence incarnate.

“Very well, the duel will take place one month hence,” Tailong said. “Let’s hold it in the wasteland on the outskirts of the royal capital. You’ll find it here on the map…”

“Hold up, wouldn’t the palace training grounds be a better place for a duel?” Eric interjected. “And why wait a month? That’s far too long.”

I agreed with Eric; it seemed unnecessary to hold the duel so far from the palace.

“I see your point, Crown Prince, but holding the duel on the palace grounds would be somewhat inequitable.”

“Inequitable, eh? How so, Mr. Tailong?”

“Johann lives at the palace and trains at its training grounds. Wouldn’t that put Johann at an advantage?”

“I see your point… You think Johann might cheat.” Eric put a thoughtful hand on his chin. Though he didn’t show it, there was a hint of rage simmering in his voice. He probably took Tailong’s remark as a slight against Johann’s honor.

“Hellooo, Tailong, buddy? I’m fine either way. No matter where we have the duel, I’m gonna win.”

Liu’s devil-may-care optimism was a stark contrast to Tailong. He knew just how strong Johann was, so his preemptive declaration of victory revealed how much self-confidence he had.

“No, Master Liu. Your pride may be an asset, but it is also your weakness. We mustn’t cede any ground here.”

“Aww…well, if you insist…”

“Thank you, Master. Sir Johann, what do you think?”

“I am fine either way.”

Johann didn’t seem bothered by the idea of fighting in the wastelands. He probably thought arguing over the details was the real bother.

“As for the remote date of the duel, this time will prove necessary for both parties,” Tailong explained. “Whether Princess Lingsha is taken back to the Ren Empire or she stays here and marries the crown prince, either scenario will sow discord, will it not? A month from now, there will be envoys from other countries in attendance—this will make matters much easier to explain.”

Tailong’s words made it clear that he assumed Liu would win. He wanted to put our wedding on the line too.

“On that note—Crown Prince Eric, do you agree to these terms?” Tailong asked.

Eric nodded. “If Johann agrees, that’s good enough for me. I still don’t see why there has to be a delay, but have it your way.” He probably gave in to Tailong’s demand because he trusted Johann.

“All right, it’s settled. We’ll take our leave now. See you in a month.” Liu tossed a paper talisman out the window to summon the fiery bird of myth once more.

I’m always awestruck by that phoenix, no matter how many times I see it.

If Liu used his phoenix in battle, Johann wouldn’t have a prayer. Liu had promised that he would use swords only, but he could still use his phoenix anyway…

If that happens—I’ll just have to use every card in my deck to stop him.

I clenched my fists as I watched the pair fly off into the distance on the phoenix’s back. Even in a pure swordfight, Liu seemed confident that he would beat Johann. Johann was just as confident that he would win too, but the thought that it was a fight to the death made the whole thing terrifying.

Each passing day heaped new sources of stress into our lives.

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With Liu and Tailong gone, Johann bowed deeply to Eric and said, “Your Highness, thank you for not only approving the duel with Prince Liu but for signing such a contract as well!”

It was clear from the look in his eye that his gratitude was heartfelt. Liu seemed to assume everything would go his way, but the contract was still a boon for Johann.

After all, he’s found a tangible way to protect Lingsha.

He was prepared to die for her—there was nothing he feared.

“No need to thank me. I just felt obliged to give a strong expression of my trust in you. Johann…let me see you protect the

one you love. I wouldn't want a captain of the guard that wasn't capable of that."

"Oh, Your Highness…simply receiving those words from you makes me feel so…so…" Tears flooded his eyes. Seeing him like that lit a fire in my heart.

This reminds of the day Eric dueled the captain of the royal guard for Johann's sake…

Eric's desire to express his trust in Johann likely came from that moment as well.

Lingsha, who had kept quiet until now, said, "But Liu is freakishly strong, oh yes, you can bet on it. Can ya really beat him, Johann?"

"L-Lady Lin?! Do you not trust me?!" Johann sputtered, appalled.

Liu was indeed bizarrely powerful, but Lingsha was Johann's love. I was confused, because she didn't object to the duel, and so I assumed that she thought Johann would win.

"Of course I want you to win, Johann. But I want you alive even more than that. And my brother's a better fighter than me…"

Lingsha hung her head. I rarely saw her depressed, but Liu's talents were indeed genuine. His effortless control of Lingsha was proof enough of that. And that was the man Johann would face in a fight to the death—it was beyond foolhardy.

We can't deny the fact that Johann might die.

And for all Lingsha's posturing and promises of blasting their opponents into submission…deep down, she was soft, and she cared for Johann's safety.

"Pfft! Hah hah hah! Oh, Lady Lin, you had me worried there! I promise you that I won't be beaten. My victory is assured in a contest of the sword, as I am the heir to the Olbrun school of fencing."

"D'ya mean it?"

"Of course," Johann said, puffing out his chest. "My sword is the best in all the land. So please, have faith in me."

"Hee hee… Oh yes, you're right. I know you won't lose."

When she saw the pure confidence in Johann's expression, Lingsha finally broke out into a smile. All traces of gloom had vanished from her eyes.

I'm sure Johann's voice reassured her...

We all had faith that Johann would win, but it was still important to ward off any anxiety we were feeling. We still had a whole month until the duel. It would be cruel to let Lingsha suffer all that time.

"Lingsha, you have my word too," said Eric. "I don't know a stronger warrior than Johann. That's why I trained at the Olbrun school."

"Thanks. I know he's strong too. Oh yes...I just know my Johann will blast away that stupid Liu for me."

Eric's vote of confidence finally persuaded Lingsha to believe in Johann's victory. She even stuck out her hand for him to shake as a show of support.

And Johann gripped it firmly.

***

Johann and Lingsha left the study, leaving me alone with Eric.

"To be honest, I was a little surprised when you accepted Prince Liu's proposal. Why did you?"

I felt like I was betraying Johann a little, but I decided to blurt out the question that had been nagging at my thoughts. Eric had a poor impression of Liu since their first meeting, so I wondered why Eric ceded any ground to him.

"Because I trust Johann. Is that not enough?"

"Oh, it's more than enough. I know you wouldn't have agreed to those terms if you didn't trust Johann. And I was moved by the depth of your trust."

Eric smiled with satisfaction. "But...I feel like you're saying it's not that simple."

He seemed to understand what I was trying to express. And he was asking me, knowing what it was.

I nodded slowly and said, “Yes…I agree that Prince Liu gave us a tempting offer. If Johann wins, everything will be resolved. But… that’s exactly why I think you should have been more cautious in agreeing to it.”

He laughed. “Ha ha… You know me well, Leia. Yes, if the duel goes well, everything will work out perfectly for us. But it’s natural to be suspicious—it’s too good to be true. After all, this is Liu we’re up against…”

“Then why did you agree to his plan, Eric? Is there some other goal you’re after?”

“Well…you could say that. Sorry, but I don’t exactly have a goal. It’s just that, watching Liu, I can’t help but see myself in him. He wants to do things on his own terms…walk the path he believes in to become emperor.”

Eric paused and peered out the window.

Eric sees himself in Liu. I never even considered such a thing.

Yes, Liu also aspired to rule a nation. His readiness to fight and his forcefulness were probably necessary qualities to acquire in pursuit of his goal. Everything served his ascent to the throne…

“Now that you mention it, you can be quite forceful and quick to fight yourself, Eric.”

“Well, that was blunt. Though I can’t deny it…”

“Hee hee! Sorry, but that’s what I love about you. I mean…if you hadn’t forcefully dragged me away from my home, I never would have wound up with you.”

“Leia…”

Eric let his moral compass guide him and push him relentlessly through any obstacle, and I loved him for it.

That’s why I decided to devote my life to helping him. I wanted to fight for what I believed in too, just like him.

But what did that have to do with the problem we were facing now?

“I’ve made some mistakes, yet I still thought my sense of justice was my strength. But I came to know that if I was going to

succeed on the path I chose, I would need a different kind of strength."

"A different kind of strength?"

Eric smiled peacefully and answered, "The strength to trust others."

He was probably right—having people in your life whom you could trust made you stronger. That was something Elshaid would need in the future.

"I believe that Liu has the qualities of a king, so I thought I'd show him something I have that he doesn't: the power to trust. This battle is just as much between me and him as it is between him and Johann. It's a battle over the virtues of those who would rule."

"All right, now I get it."

"Good. And Leia, this goes without saying, but I'm counting on you being there for me if I need you."

Eric reached out and touched my hair, caressing it tenderly. I was a little too shy to look at his face this close up, so I cast my gaze downward.

"Leia, having you by my side is another pillar of faith for me."

I looked up to find Eric's gentle eyes just inches from mine.

S-so close…our lips are almost touching…

My heart raced and my cheeks burned—I was about to close my eyes and surrender when, apropos of nothing, Eric shouted, "Eureka! I think I know the underlying motive for the duel!"

"Yaah!" I yelped as I turned to stone from embarrassment.

What's come over Eric all of a sudden?

"That wasteland where they wanted to hold the duel…"

Eric studied a map in silence for a while. His eyes were the definition of serious. The gears in his head were turning.

God…now I feel silly for getting my hopes up.

But I loved that look in his eyes. The way his eyes sparkled as they drew everyone and everything into them, I've always loved that about him.

“Whoa there, sorry about that. We were in the middle of a conversation, weren’t we?” He apologized as soon as he remembered that I existed.

“It’s all right, I don’t mind. Did you discover something?”

“Yes, take a look at this map.”

Showing me the map, he took a deep breath and began to explain. He didn’t sound entirely sure of himself, but he had settled on a theory. And that theory was…

“But, Eric! That’s a little too outlandish, isn’t it?!”

I yelped when he finished telling me his theory. It just seemed too ridiculous…and it made everything that happened up to this point nonsensical.

But Eric’s eyes remained dead serious. This wasn’t his idea of a joke.

“I don’t blame you for being surprised. Even I think it’s only a hypothesis, nothing more. So please don’t tell anyone else about it,” Eric said.

It was certainly not the sort of theory a person should blab about loudly, even just between the two of us. Besides, it was impossible for me to believe.

“If my theory is right, then, Leia…there’s something I need you to prepare for. As a saint.”

“As a saint?”

“Yes. First, you’ll need to…”

Eric then proceeded to explain. He would need my help as a saint, and if his theory did indeed turn out to be true, my saintly status could come in handy.

Eric looked at me with worry. “Something isn’t right about making a saint a bodyguard again. However—”

“It’s all right. It’s a saint’s duty to serve her kingdom. Besides, I think your method ensures the safest outcome, Eric.”

I agreed. It was something only I could help him with. After Eric told me his plan, I immediately left his study and began preparations exactly as he instructed.

We only had one month left until the duel.

***

"Well, let's get going, shall we?"

I was worried about Liu's duel with Johann, but I was more concerned with Jill's safety in the event she was in danger. So I received permission from Eric to visit her at the convent, and I was just now headed to my carriage at the palace gate.

That was when Dale, documents in hand, called out to me.

"Oh, Miss Leia, going out?"

"Dale! Yes, I was on my way to check in on Jill."

He was still investigating the Ren Empire's actions behind the scenes.

"You're going to see Jill? Aha, I think I know why."

"Um…Dale, did you make any progress?"

I knew that he was to report to Eric if he learned anything, but curiosity still got the better of me. Dale gave it a moment's thought and handed me a letter.

"What's this…? Information regarding Margrave Linboldt? You were looking into him as well?"

"Of course I was. We can't ignore the fact that Tailong approached him for help. I've been spying on his every move."

So that's why. Hearing it like that, it makes perfect sense.

Linboldt might have opposed me, but he was loyal to Elshaid. It didn't seem like he would do anything that would harm the kingdom…

"Has the margrave done something wrong?"

"No, quite the contrary. He's done nothing wrong. If he had, I would have reported it to my brother already."

"W-well, yes, I suppose you would. But then, why did you give me this?"

"He hasn't done anything wrong…which struck me as odd. If you were the margrave and you had a prince of the Ren Empire in

your back pocket, wouldn't you have used that power to try and influence Eric?"

"Oh! Now I see."

Indeed, Linboldt had been quite aggressive when he first tried to get us to break off our engagement, but he hadn't come to speak with Eric once ever since—which could only be perceived as odd.

"Of course, it's possible that as a gambler, Liu wanted to take the margrave off the game board just to make things more exciting," Dale said.

"Yes, I wouldn't put it past him."

"Indeed. He's difficult to read."

Dale took the letter back with a sly grin. "Anyway, please be careful, Leia. Tell the same to Jill."

"I will, thank you."

Dale left, smiling serenely. Even if Johann's duel with Liu went well, we still needed to convince Margrave Linboldt to approve of our marriage.

"Oh well… I guess I'll just have to solve each problem in turn."

As I got in the carriage and took off toward the convent where Jill now lived, all I could do in the face of so many problems was sigh.

"Oh, Sister! You've come to see me again! I'm so delighted."

After I arrived at the convent and said my prayers, Jill came flying into my arms, a big smile on her face. I was finally used to the different person she had become. I really was starting to think a big part of what had warped her soul was Catherine.

"You're looking well, Jill."

"Yes, I'm quite healthy, thank you."

"I see… Well, has anything been different lately?"

"D-different, you say? No, nothing in particular. Is something different with you, Sister? Oh no, I hope that gentleman from before didn't give you trouble again."

Jill's gaze was so sincere with worry—an expression I never used to see from her. But at least it seemed that nothing had happened to her since my last visit. Even though we had several bodyguards stationed with Nash and at the convent, it was a relief to hear from Jill's own lips that she was safe.

"Oh, no, I'm fine," I assured her. "Anyway, I'm just glad to hear nothing's happened to you."

"I see..." Jill fell silent for a moment, staring at me thoughtfully. "Um, Sister, please tell me. What is...what's happening to you right now? I know I'm not much help, but it hurts to not know what's going on."

"Jill..."

I realized then that Jill had never taken an interest in anyone other than herself before. I had kept Jill in the dark because I didn't want to worry her, but I might need to finally tell her everything.

"All right. I'll trust you and tell you all of what's happening to us right now."

"Oh, Sister..."

And then I told her. I told her everything about Liu without omitting a single thing.

"In other words, you think he might be after my Death Poison," she said.

"Yes. There's no proof of this, so don't tell anyone."

"Got it."

After I explained everything, Jill looked worried, understandably enough. Nobody would feel calm after hearing that they were a target.

"Don't worry, Jill, we have several bodyguards stationed here around the clock."

"Thank you, I'm not worried. It's just...if a bad person tries to use me for evil again, I'm prepared to go to Heaven before that can happen. If I use Death Poison, I can accomplish that easily."

"J-Jill...how could you?"

Her eyes were sincere. If somebody tried to use her, she was prepared to die by her own magic.

I can't let that happen.

"Don't worry, Jill...I promise you that it won't ever come to that. That's why I've visited you today."

That's right. I had another reason for coming to the convent—and it would likely be a secret weapon we would reserve until it was our last resort.

***

Amid all our struggles, we still had a wedding to plan, which made the month fly by. And before we knew it, the day of Johann's duel with Prince Liu had come.

We assembled at the wasteland Tailong had designated for the duel. Liu and Tailong were already there when we arrived, with several guards in tow.

"So you didn't skip town after all, didja, Jojo?"

"Why would I back out of the duel? You are not only Lady Lin's older brother, but you are also a prince of the Ren Empire. I regret to inform you, however, that I am taking this duel most seriously—I will not hold anything back."

Liu chuckled, "Good. I won't hold anything back either."

And there they stood, across from each other in a martial stance. Johann was the future master of the Olbrun School of fencing and Eric's captain of the guard. He was regarded as one of the finest swordsmen in Elshaid.

But Liu was nothing to sneeze at either—he was talented enough for Lingsha to say he was stronger than her. I had faith that Johann would win, but I knew it would be no easy task.

Eric silently watched the two men size each other up, a dubious expression on his face.

"Eric, is something wrong?" I asked.

"Linboldt hasn't come to see me once this entire month. But my spies told me that, aside from meeting with Tailong three times, he hasn't done anything otherwise suspicious."

"Yeah, Dale also told me he wasn't acting suspiciously."

I subscribed to Dale's theory that Liu had ordered the margrave not to do anything that would interfere with the duel. If Liu won the duel, my marriage to Eric would be canceled, just like Linboldt wanted, and if that happened, it would be easier for Linboldt to steer Eric in the direction he wished.

"From what we know about Linboldt, don't you think he would urge Johann to withdraw from the duel? He would never approve of a commoner like Johann picking a fight with a prince like Liu. He would try to stop the duel before Liu got hurt. Besides, if Johann admitted defeat without fighting, that would increase Linboldt's chances of getting what he wanted."

"Oh?!"

I hadn't even thought of that, but it was true. Linboldt was even more righteous than Eric—he would never approve of this duel.

Furthermore, if Johann were to win, Liu had promised he would give up on bringing Lingsha back home. If Linboldt heard about a duel that threatened the peace between nations, there was no way he would keep quiet about it.

"All right, wanna get started?" Liu asked.

"Yes. May the best man win."

While my brain was busy whirring over Eric's question, the men were just about to start the duel.

Okay, Leia, for now, concentrate on praying for Johann.

I stopped my thought spiral temporarily and poured all my focus into the duel.

Liu and Johann pulled their swords from their sheaths, then they quietly took their stances.

"All right. Let's have some fun."

Liu made the first move. He closed the gap between himself and Johann in a flash with a sharp stroke. Johann jumped back to dodge it.

"Hah!!"

Liu's attack didn't end there. Maintaining momentum, he turned a somersault and slashed again.

“Ngh!”

Johann managed to block it, but the impact made him skid back a little.

“I’ve got more!”

As Liu continued to slash at him, Johann shrank back a little, blocking each strike. Then, when there was a gap in Liu’s defenses, he lunged with a counterattack.

“Yah!”

“Too slow!”

But Liu saw it coming. He did a half-spin and slashed back at Johann. Then he used the force from his recoil to attack again without hesitation.

“Ugh—what agility!”

In the face of the tempestuous wave of linked attacks, all traces of calm left Johann’s eyes. It looked like Johann was stuck keeping pace with Liu’s intense speed.

Incredible… Even after the onslaught of chaotic attacks, Johann is still holding his own.

Liu’s movements were too fast for me to follow, but Johann managed to keep up.

I spoke to Eric beside me, “Eric…Johann really is an incredible warrior. Liu is faster than him, yet he’s blocking everything.”

“Johann has extensive combat experience. It’s given him extraordinary battle instincts.” Eric’s eyes looked joyful as he watched Johann fight. “Plus, Johann is fighting for Lingsha today. It’s given him a boost. Your sword swings much harder when it’s for someone you love.”

“Yes, I see. He’s swinging his sword…for Lingsha.”

Curiosity overcame me, and I looked at Lingsha. Her hands were clasped in front of her chest in prayer. Prayers always looked the same, regardless of country.

“Miss Lin…do you think she’s all right?” I asked Eric.

“Well, let’s just trust Johann to see to that.” Eric kept a protective eye on Johann.

Noticing our stares, Lingsha turned around. “Leia, something wrong? Are ya worried about me?”

“Er, not worried, per se.”

“I’m not worried about Johann. He promised me, see. He promised he would win.”

“Did he…”

“Besides, I trust Johann, so I’m not worried one bit!” she said with a serene smile. She really did seem to believe that Johann would win—she didn’t doubt that for a second.

“You’re better at this than I thought you’d be, Jojo!”

While we were talking, the combatants were parrying and riposting back and forth—and both of them had wounds that dripped with blood. The longer the duel lasted, the greater the risk to their lives.

“But you’re still not good enough that I’ll let you have my Linny,” Liu jeered.

Did Liu just reassess his feelings for Johann?

All the back and forth thus far was likely enough for Liu to judge Johann’s abilities. He was now throwing everything he had at Johann to whittle down his strength.

“I don’t appreciate you talking about Lady Lin as if she were an object. And you will not defeat me! I vowed to protect her with my life!”

“Nice! That’s the spirit.” Liu grinned like an angel and lowered his stance. Glaring at Johann, he said, “This will probably be the last attack. Let’s neither of us have any regrets about it.”

“As you wish.”

Johann also readied his blade. His face was graver than I’d ever seen it, but it strangely didn’t frighten me.

His were the eyes of a man willing to die for his love. Johann took a quiet breath in and out, then tightened his grip.

“Olbrun arcanum…Lightning Dash!”

Johann vanished in a plume of dust—but not literally. The dust cloud allowed Johann to swing his sword at Liu’s blind spot.

Liu gasped, “How’d you get there?!”

“You won’t beat me!” Johann roared.

As Johann came at him with impossible speed, Liu really appeared to hold his own. But Johann slashed his sword at the very last millisecond and caught Liu in the chest.

It was a move that anybody would call divine.

“Ya cut me… Ruthless… Phew, take care of Linny for me.”

“Prince Liu, you’re bleeding!”

Crimson blood welled up from Liu’s chest, but he stayed upright and stared hard at Johann. “There’s something you should know about me: I don’t know how to give up. I was waiting for ya to take that step.”

“Guh?!”

Despite a critical wound, Liu counterattacked with a lunge. Johann immediately leaped back, but Liu’s sword impaled his chest. Blood sprayed and Johann stumbled, but he plunged his sword into the earth to steady himself without dropping to his knees.

Liu wheezed as he said, “Whenever…*huff huff*…m-my opponents think they’ve won…*huff*…I trip those fools…a-and send them to their graves… It worked on…*huff*…so many…but not…you.”

Still smiling, Liu collapsed. It almost looked like he had bowed down to Johann to honor his victory.

“Johann! Are you okay?!” A frantic Lingsha ran over to him. He was bleeding all over, but the sight of her made him smile weakly.

“Forgive me for worrying you, but I managed to survive. Lost a bit more blood than I’d like, but never mind that. I know it was a duel…but I killed your brother. I didn’t mean to.”

Lingsha’s eyes widened. Then she shook her head slowly. “Liu was happy you beat him, Johann, so don’t worry about it.”

“Lady Lin…”

“Johann…thank you for fighting for me. You’ve made your Lingsha so happy…”

Lingsha squeezed Johann’s hands as tears streamed down her face. Seeing this, Johann’s eyes also flooded with tears.

As I watched them, I thought to myself, *Everything turned out all right…*

I knew the couple would make it. They would live a long, happy life together in Elshaid, forever…

I walked over to Johann. “Johann, please let me use a healing spell on you.”

Liu was slain. Since they signed a contract, I doubted the agreement would be broken…but I still worried as I treated Johann’s wounds.

The lacerations went deeper than I thought. If the battle had lasted any longer, he really could’ve died.

“L-Lady Leia…so sorry to trouble you. I’m fine now.”

“It’s no trouble at all. This is why I’m here. You’ve lost a lot of blood, so you may be weak for a little while, but all the wounds have closed.”

Healing Johann’s wounds was my duty—a duty entrusted to me by Eric.

Eric addressed Tailong. “Now, Koh Tailong. Your master is dead.”

He crossed his arms and smirked. “I never imagined Master Liu could lose.”

“I hope you aren’t going to nullify the contract.”

“No…unfortunately, a contract is a contract. I cannot oppose it.”

“Phew…” I sighed in relief.

But barely a moment later, Tailong uttered some terrifying words.

“But I would be dishonored if I returned home empty-handed. I require a parting gift.”

“What kind of…parting gift?”

Tailong, usually so stoic, twisted his lips into a cruel smirk. Then he pulled out a paper talisman. The next thing we knew, a terrifying burst of magic flew from his entire body. As a small tornado whirled about him, a giant phoenix burst from the talisman.

“Oh no! Why is Tailong summoning a phoenix?!” Lingsha shrieked.

None of us imagined that Tailong would have Liu’s talismans.

This was terrible. We would lose everything we’d gained.

“So sorry to startle you all. I acquired these spells from Master Liu. Without his permission, of course. I had them at the ready so I could return home the moment I completed my mission…my mission to acquire Death Poison and to assassinate Master Liu.”

We stared on in horror.

We were right… The Ren Empire wasn’t interested in either Lingsha or a political marriage—they were after the Death Poison! To think they plotted to kill Prince Liu as well…

Tailong’s eyes gleamed with determination. He was at long last about to chase after his true goal.

Eric was right, this matter wasn’t going to be settled easily…

-Tailong’s Perspective-

ALL THIS LYING IN WAIT had taken its toll on my psyche. I was utterly sick of Master Liu’s foolish games.

I had only one mission: Death Poison—the legendary spell that could turn any liquid into an instantly lethal poison with a single touch. This poison left no trace in the body—perfect assassination magic.

“Master Liu, there are two people in Elshaid who can cast Death Poison. One is Nash Hoffman, the owner of a dessert parlor. The other is Jill Westoria…the younger sister of Saint Leia Westoria.”

“Ooh, that’s interesting.”

“Come, let’s abduct them and end this quickly. The longer we take, the more we risk them catching on to our true objective.”

But Master Liu just smiled playfully in reply. I’d always hated that smile. When he smiled, nothing intelligent would come out of his mouth.

“But kidnapping is so barbaric. I wanna go about this with some class. See, I’d love to bring Linny back home with me while we’re at it.”

“We can just force Princess Lingsha to marry Elshaid’s crown prince. Even if the negotiations take a sour turn, we can use the cover of the ensuing pandemonium to obtain the Death Poison. Master Liu…I highly recommend handling this swiftly.”

Master Liu had several of the best soldiers in his employ working as bodyguards. Kidnapping two people was child’s play. And yet, he had his men spy on them instead, never making a move to abduct them. He seemed particularly obsessed with bringing his little sister Lingsha home for some reason.

“I mean, it looks like separating Crown Prince Eric from Saint Leia is gonna be impossible, so wouldn’t Lingsha be happier if she was by my side when I become emperor? She might be happy here for now, since she has friends, but she’s a refugee. There’s no telling when danger will find her.”

“Understood, Master… What would you have me do, then?”

“Well, stand by, I guess? I wanna take a better look at things for a bit anyway.”

So I complied and stood by, only for that stupid man to suggest a farce of a duel later. I was impressed that Master Liu had gotten the crown prince to agree to our terms if he won, but he still had a policy of inaction regarding the Death Poison spell.

One month was more than enough time to prepare. Now that Master Liu’s death was imminent and my plan to obtain the Death Poison spell was complete, it was finally time for me to act!

I would abduct Nash Hoffman and Jill Westoria.

The wasteland I chose for the duel was equidistant to both of them. Once I received word of their capture, we would retreat.

I felt pity for you, Master Liu, but I had my own mission to accomplish. No matter what, you had to die. As you were next in line to the emperor’s throne, the prime minister had wanted to be rid of you for some time now.

He left the details of the grisly task up to me. First, I considered framing your death as a phoenix accident. Summoning

magic was ultra-high level. One wrong move and the spell could blow up in your face. So I waited. Watching you like a hawk, I waited for a chance to strike.

I never dreamed that you would die before I had the chance to kill you, but now that I had control of your phoenix, I could always burn your body to cinders.

Of course, I could eliminate all those witnesses in attendance while I was at it.

“I owe you my gratitude, Johann Olbrun. Killing Master Liu was the one bothersome chore I had left on my to-do list.”

“Y-you wanted to kill him? Why?!”

“He was in the way! He could have just shut his mouth and followed orders—that would have made the lives of the prime minister and me so much easier! But that idiotic prince had to let his emotions take him on a fool’s errand!”

The prime minister hated Master Liu for not rolling over and following orders, precisely why he sent him on this mission.

“Was this the emperor’s bidding?!” Johann demanded. “To kill one of his potential successors?!”

“Ha ha! It wasn’t the emperor’s bidding. The prime minister wanted this done. You played your part well, Mr. Johann. You played right into the prime minister’s hand.”

Johann was clearly in a panic. I didn’t blame him; his chivalric spirit was used for our nefarious plot. He was mortified that the sanctity of honorable mortal combat was tarnished or some such nonsense. Elshaidians were so damn simple, it made me sick.

“Well, my men should bring along Jill and Nash any minute now. Once I have them, I’ll be on my way.”

I had accomplished my mission with flying colors. All that remained was to leave. I didn’t expect what happened next.

“Lord Tailong! We failed to capture the Death Poison spell!”

“Y-you what?! But our spies said they were lightly guarded!”

This was impossible.

We were the mighty Ren Empire. How could we fail to capture two people?

I knew they had guards, but only a handful. And my opponents only *suspected* we might be after the Death Poison, they didn't know for certain.

Unless something changed? Perhaps one of their guards was particularly skilled—no, that would mean they were already on to our scheme.

Was one of these peons actually that smart?

"Sorry, Tailong, but nefarious conspiracies and sordid plots are run-of-the-mill for me. I knew you were after Nash and Jill. Your scheme was exacting in detail, but I'd say you made a careless mistake when you set the halfway point between your targets as the site of this duel. Not that it matters; I would have figured out your plan regardless."

Crown Prince Eric looked at me like he saw straight through me. I hated to admit it, but I'd suffered an embarrassing defeat.

Damn it! Should I have not gone after Nash and Jill? No, even if they were wise to my plot, there was no way our esteemed soldiers could have lost to a handful of their guards!

"I knew your lot brought in the cream of the crop as your soldiers, but I still wasn't quite sure of your aims. That's why instead of sending a horde of guards and raising your suspicions, I sent one person to Nash and one to Jill—I knew they could guarantee their safety."

"Guarantee their safety… Does such a bodyguard even exist?"

That was an absurd notion. And yet here I was, my plot foiled.

Where did I go wrong? This was just so far outside my calculations.

"Oh, they exist. One even served as my bodyguard… I'm talking about a saint."

"A s-saint?! But your saint is standing right there!" I pointed at the lady beside Eric.

She was the saint of Elshaid. I'd heard that she had protected the crown prince from numerous assassins…but she'd been standing here the whole time. It was impossible for her to protect two people far away.

“Have you forgotten? Elshaid has three saints.”

That’s right! The number three was sacred to the Aegis faith. Therefore, there were three saints.

If I recalled correctly…there was one in the royal capital and two in the borderlands. Together, they protected Elshaid.

But he couldn’t have used the other two saints as bodyguards…

“I, Saint Leia, used my authority to request that the other two saints protect Jill and Mr. Nash. Eric couldn’t have done so, since your men were spying on him.”

I had indeed been distracted by the crown prince’s marriage and Johann’s duel. I had spies watch Leia as well, but when they told me she had done nothing suspicious during the past month, I called them off.

Every day, Saint Leia went about her duties. She did go to the church a lot, but that wasn’t suspicious.

That means that, when she went to the church all those times…

“Are you telling me you met with the other saints whenever you entered the church?”

“Exactly. The other two saints protect the citizens living in the south and north of Elshaid. It was a struggle to ask them to leave their posts, but this was a national crisis, so they helped of their own volition.”

It was perfectly natural for a saint to enter a church several times a month. And the other two saints had completely slipped my mind. I overlooked that they had openly stationed two very powerful bodyguards at the church.

But neither Johann nor Lingsha breathed a word of this. Did Leia do all of this in secret?

“Goodness!” Johann grunted. “The nerve of you, doing that without consulting me.”

Eric shrugged. “I wanted you to focus on your duel.”

Curses! I was right, Johann had received no orders from Eric whatsoever. The crown prince simply waited for me to blunder.

And like a fool, I'd walked straight into their trap. I never thought I'd taste such humiliation.

But it wasn't over yet.

I could hide the contract and take Master Liu's body back home. Then we could use the murder of our prince at the hands of an Elshaidian as a pretext for war. The vastly more powerful Ren Empire would never lose a war to Elshaid.

I could just sweep my little failure under a rug. This was my only way out. I panicked too soon. I still had an endless supply of firebirds.

"'First, I'll kill everyone here, then I'll take my master's body back home with me…' Tailong, buddy, don't tell me that's what you're thinking."

I doubted my ears when I heard that voice, and when I looked to its source, I doubted my eyes.

How?! Didn't Johann kill him?!

"Hey ho, Tailong the Traitor. What an amusing story. I especially liked the part where you thought you could kill me."

Master Liu, covered in blood, stood up and smiled icily.

Curses…he didn't die after all. That damn zombie.

Well, no matter. Killing everyone here was always part of the plan. I'd just have to kill him too.

Chapter 4:
And Now, Our Happy Ending

WHEN TAILONG SET THE DATE of the duel one month in the future as part of his plot, I met with the other saints and begged them to take some time out of their packed schedules to help us.

I hadn't seen either of them since the day I passed my saint's exam. I was nervous, but these were gifted and virtuous women who exceeded me in both experience and ability. And so, to protect the nation and its people from danger, they agreed to protect Nash and Jill.

Everything was going according to plan, but I hadn't anticipated Liu coming back from the dead after Johann defeated him.

The conversation played out once more:

"I owe you my gratitude, Johann Olbrun. Killing Master Liu was the one bothersome chore I had left on my to-do list."

"Y-you wanted to kill him?! Why?!"

"He was in the way! He could have just shut his mouth and followed orders—that would have made the lives of the prime minister and me so much easier! But that idiotic prince had to let his emotions take him on a fool's errand!"

"Was this the emperor's bidding?! To kill one of his potential successors?!"

"Ha ha! It wasn't the emperor's bidding. The prime minister wanted this done. You played your part well, Mr. Johann. You played right into the prime minister's hand."

Liu had cast his voice-capturing spell to seal the entire conversation onto paper, securing proof of Tailong's betrayal.

"Tailong, old buddy, now I've got proof of your sinister plot with the prime minister."

"M-Master Liu…h-how…"

"You really let me down, Tailong. I only had to lie down and die for a moment for you to go singing like a bird."

Tailong swore under his breath. “Wh-when did you and Johann conspire all of this?”

From the confidence he exuded, even I wondered if Liu and Johann were in on the act and Liu had just faked his death. But Liu’s chest was most certainly cut open—he was still bleeding freely.

“We didn’t conspire. I just knew that Johann was the real deal. And when I lowered my sword and swung twice to show him I was willing to die…he used discretion on me. Still, he cut me real good, and I truly did come close to death. I even lost consciousness for a spell.”

Lowering your sword and swinging it twice…that was the Renese ritual to show that you were willing to be killed by someone you respected. Had Liu given Johann such a signal during their duel?

“Johann, is this true?” Eric asked.

“Yes, he did perform such a gesture,” Johann said. “And indeed, I held back a little in response. Then this man, with his very last breath, ran in for the kill…”

That’s right, Liu had fought back until the very end. Because of his ferocity in the duel, I never noticed that he’d shown Johann such a gesture of respect.

“Well, Jojo, I thought you’d dodge that attack easy.”

“I’ll have you know, I almost died.”

“Ha ha! Well, who cares? You’d just have Sainty here heal ya.”

Liu might have found the whole thing amusing, but Johann was undeniably almost killed. And the imperial prince was every bit as wounded as Johann. It was a miracle that he could even speak right now.

“I-impossible… How could my plan fail so horribly?”

“Sorry, but your plan was full of holes,” Liu smirked. “That’s why all I had to do was wait for you to screw up.”

“L-lies! You were in the middle of a duel! And you really did nearly die! You’ve got to be out of your mind!”

I actually agreed with Tailong. There was no communication beforehand, and it was all so haphazard—you could hardly call it a

brilliant strategy.

“Yeah, probably. But I figured if I had to die, I wouldn’t mind if it was Jojo who killed me. Remember what I said? My signal was a longshot. All I needed was for him to let down his guard for a second, and I’d succeed. It really is reassuring, to know that Linny chose such a strong man as her partner. That’s what I cared about most. My life was secondary.”

What an enigma. Did he really just happily put his life on the line…without any forethought? What sort of environment would produce such a mindset? I couldn’t imagine it.

“If Jojo were a wimp, I’d have my work cut out for me, but he wasn’t weak, ya see.” Liu said, as blood continued to drip. “And the cherry on top was that your plan got foiled by the crown prince and Sainty here. Take the L, Tailong. We lost.”

Tailong was rendered speechless.

For somebody who almost died, he sure talks a lot…

Johann won the duel, ensuring Lingsha a permanent place in Elshaid. Meanwhile, I’d foiled the Death Poison kidnapping plot behind the scenes by enlisting the help of the other two saints.

In short, our Renese guests had no choice but to return home empty-handed.

“Ah… Well, Crown Prince Eric, Saint Leia, you certainly handled this splendidly. If I didn’t have one last trick up my sleeve, I would have lost. Ha ha… But you see, I captured a hostage for just such an occasion: Margrave Linboldt.”

At Tailong’s signal, two masked men appeared at the top of a ridge, holding a tied-up Margrave Linboldt. One of the masked men held a knife pressed against the margrave’s throat.

“Eric…” I murmured uneasily.

“Something’s off,” Eric replied. “I also had my spies watching Margrave Linboldt, and none of them mentioned anything about him getting tied up.”

He was right—we did have spies watching Linboldt. But now he was here as Tailong’s hostage. How could this have possibly happened?

As Eric and I exchanged bewildered glances, Tailong's smug confidence returned. "I guess you were so preoccupied with using the saints to protect the people who can use Death Poison that you failed to notice that the margrave was swapped with a body double a while ago."

Eric and I gasped when we heard Tailong say "body double." That had to have been why Tailong met with the margrave on three separate occasions.

"Prince Eric! I cannot begin to apologize!" Linboldt cried. "I was only trying to ensure the eternal glory of Elshaid, but I'm such a disgrace! Please let them slit my throat—just stop that bastard, Tailong!"

His face twisted with bitter remorse, Linboldt begged us not to rescue him. He felt responsible for this predicament, and he was willing to sacrifice himself to atone for it.

"Leia, I know he's been awfully rude to you, but the margrave is one of a kind. I don't want to lose him."

"I understand, Eric. I'll save him."

The margrave might have opposed our marriage, but he only did what he thought was best for Elshaid. Deep down, Eric and Linboldt shared the same values.

And even if that wasn't the case, I'm a saint—I can't let someone die on my watch.

Even if Linboldt were a horrible person, it would be no different. If someone was in danger, I rescued them.

It was the virtue most important to a saint: clemency.

"Ha ha ha ha! Oh, are you actually going to try to save the hostage?! Those masked men are Renese elite, not to mention that I have this phoenix. Saint Leia, Crown Prince Eric, if you really value the margrave's life, then—"

"O Chains of Light, bind the margrave!"

In no time, I traced a summoning circle and sent chains of light all the way out to the margrave and his captors, binding the former and yanking him toward me. The masked man who had held him at knifepoint just watched the whole thing happen in a stupefied daze.

“Saintly Wind, pierce!”

Then I produced a gust of wind at my back that pushed me toward the margrave.

“Lady Westoria! You rode on a wind attack; you could have killed yourself!”

“Margrave Linboldt, run as far away as you can. I will stop your captors.”

Just as I landed with the margrave a few meters away and set him safely on the ground, the masked men caught up to us. I swiftly produced another summoning circle to cast another Light Chain spell—

“We’re Renese warriors! No Elshaidian wench is gonna beat us!”

“Mrmf?!”

It took everything in me just to tie up the man with the knife. Meanwhile, the other man kicked me in the stomach, and I almost fell to my knees.

“D-don’t protect me, Lady Westoria… Just let them kill me!”

“I’m fine, Margrave—Saintly Winds, pierce!”

“Garf!”

I pushed through the pain and blasted the other man away with a spell. The gale caught him and smashed him against a boulder, knocking him out.

“Curses! After all that trouble, our hostage turned out to be useless. But my soldiers are the elitest of the elite! Men, kill them all!”

Silence.

“Er—wh-when did all my soldiers…”

The soldiers with whom Tailong originally came here were splayed on the ground. And of course they were. If I was fighting, that meant my friends were also fighting…

“Don’t forget about us, Tailong.”

“Lady Leia’s magic healed me back into fighting shape, you see.”

“Oh yes, I finally got to blast someone away!”

The trio of Eric, Johann, and Lingsha made short work of Tailong’s soldiers. Judging by his devastated expression, he had probably underestimated them.

“Curse you! How are the crown prince and his bodyguards that good? Well, no matter, I still have my phoenix. I can just use it to kill everyone—problem solved. I’ll start with the saint and the margrave! You two get to die all cozy together!”

Regaining his composure, Tailong ordered the flaming bird to attack. A flurry of fiery feathers rained down on us.

It still strikes me with awe—but that won’t keep me from stopping it in its tracks.

“Margrave Linboldt, stay back! O Ice Spirit, entrap everything before you in ice!”

It had been ages since I unleashed my magic’s full potential like this. As a saint, I never stopped training. I couldn’t let so many people be sacrificed before my very eyes.

To protect the people of Elshaid—that’s why I honed these powers!

I managed to block the fiery feathers with a wall of ice, but the smug look returned to Tailong’s face. “Ooh, I’m impressed. You actually blocked the phoenix feathers… But a phoenix is eternal—do you really think you can protect everyone forever?!”

He was right. This was only a temporary shield.

“I can, and I will! As a saint, I cannot let any of my people die before my eyes!”

“Lady Westoria… No, I should say, Saint Leia…”

The phoenix was indeed immensely powerful. But I was powerful too—powerful enough to be one of only three saints in the entire kingdom. I had the pride of someone who’d protected her kingdom as a saint for years. And while I was only in Eric’s service as a bodyguard for a few months, I saved him from all those assassins as well.

“You betrayed your allies; you took a hostage—you’re a monster who would stop at nothing to achieve his ends. I could

never let you defeat me!”

“Ooh, you’re pretty tough. No wonder Master Liu said he wanted to bring you home with him. But you’re only delaying the inevitable.”

“A delay is all I needed. After all, Elshaid is blessed with someone who is strong, just, self-sacrificing, and who will rule as king in the future.”

In the middle of his grand feat, Tailong forgot something very important: I was not the only one fighting. Since the others took out his soldiers in the blink of an eye, his fixation on me was beyond careless.

“Lingsha! Johann! Do the thing!”

“On it, my lady!”

“Oh, yes!”

Eric used Johann and Lingsha’s hands as a springboard to launch himself high in the air.

“What the?!”

Eric flew over Tailong’s head and thrust his sword against the traitor’s back.

Now the tables had turned.

Tailong’s plan went down in flames. He had no more cards to play.

“Koh Tailong… Your violence against my fiancée, Leia Westoria, and my vassal, Margrave Linboldt cannot be overlooked. You are under arrest! If you fail to comply, I’ll kill you where you stand.”

Eric growled the word *kill*. The threat in his voice was more than enough to show his conviction.

“Urgh! I-I see your reputation as the courageous and daring crown prince of Elshaid is not without merit. I never thought this is how it would end. Though it vexes me, I’ll admit defeat. It would seem I am not worthy of this power.”

With a look of resignation, Tailong quietly lowered his hands, sending the phoenix to the ground. Apparently, Eric’s quick wit and readiness to act had taken him completely by surprise.

“So this paper is the key that summons the phoenix? Sorry, but I’m confiscating this.”

“Do as you wish with it; the scroll belongs to Master Liu anyway, not me.”

“Johann, restrain this man.”

“Aye!”

With the talisman of phoenix summoning gone, and his hands bound by Johann, Tailong was now powerless.

With a glance at the traitor, Eric turned to Liu and said, “Prince Liu, the subordinates you brought along are under arrest for attempted kidnapping. We’re going to put them in custody as well.”

“Well, well, well, do whatcha gotta do. Tailong not only committed crimes, but he was also a pain in the ass.”

“Wow, you’re taking this rather well.”

“Well, I did succeed in my mission… I mean, I wanted to take Linny home with me, but it’s clear she doesn’t need me anymore.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, confused by his mention of a mission. I thought the Ren Empire was after Death Poison, nothing more…

“My mission was to get evidence that I could show to the emperor proving the prime minister and Tailong were traitors. And ya see, when I heard the prime minister wanted Death Poison, I suspected he was up to no good.”

In other words, Liu’s true foe wasn’t us—it was Tailong.

“So…you played me, Master Liu?” Tailong muttered blankly. “No, that’s impossible. If this was all a ploy to trap me, why submit yourself to a fight to the death?!”

“I guess I did kinda play you?” Liu said as he limped over to Tailong. “But I fought to the death because there was something I wanted to find out. Yeah, guess it wasn’t my smartest strategy.”

Liu was still bleeding—he was probably in danger. I was approaching him in order to heal his wounds when a voice from behind stopped me.

“Lady We—Saint Leia! Why did you save me? I was a hostage! You were supposed to ignore me! Then Prince Eric wouldn’t have

needed to endanger himself!”

Linboldt wobbled over to me, scolding me with a frightful look on his face. Was he angry with me for saving him? I was reluctant to justify my actions, but it sounded like he needed to hear it.

“Sir Johann and Miss Lin were near Eric, so I deemed he was not in any danger. Meanwhile, you were in mortal danger, Margrave, so I chose to save you instead.”

If Tailong deemed Linboldt was no longer useful as a hostage, he would have killed him. That was a fact. It was only natural that I would act to save him.

“Mm-hmm. Well, I understand your reasoning,” The margrave said. “But I opposed your marriage. Wouldn’t it be to your benefit to leave me to my fate?”

“Uh, you realize I’m a saint, right? I swore an oath to protect Elshaid and its people in God’s stead. Breaking my oath to God is one thing I absolutely cannot do.”

“Your oath to God? Ahh, I see.”

The day I became a saint, I swore an oath before God that I would give my body to the people of Elshaid. To let someone die would be, to borrow a metaphor from Eric, like stepping on the wrong path. How could I ever do such a thing with God watching?

“I’m just happy to see that you are safe and alive, Margrave.”

“W-well yes, I am all right… But that man kicked you and hurt you. A-and your arm—”

“This burn isn’t a problem. I’m good at healing magic.”

I practiced martial arts to some extent in my training to become a saint, so a kick to the stomach only resulted in a minor bruise. And while the phoenix flames scorched my arm a little, it was nothing I couldn’t heal with a bit of magic.

“Saint Leia…I do believe I was too exacting with you. I never bothered to ask myself why Prince Eric wanted to make you his queen, but now I think I understand.”

“Margrave?”

“Your optimism and your pious life as a saint. And your love for Elshaid. Yes, now it’s obvious why he wants you to be queen.”

He nodded over and over, having finally been convinced. It sounded like he was praising me, but the sudden change in him was difficult to process.

Looking at me with a penetrating gaze, the margrave continued, “But there are still nobles on the peripheries of the kingdom who disapprove of you as crown princess.”

“Yes, I am aware. But I have faith that they will come to accept me in time, and I’m going to do everything I can to support Eric until then.”

“Yes, I know you will. Hmm…allow me to help persuade the naysayers. I’ll tell them no other woman is better suited for the prince. I can say so with confidence now!”

His declaration was so unexpected that my jaw dropped. I didn’t think Linboldt was the sort of man who would change his opinion of me just because I saved his life. I didn’t know what inspired him to make such a promise…but I felt a hot swelling in my chest.

“Thank you so much, Margrave. It’s very reassuring having you on our side.”

“Oh, it’s the least I can do to atone for my rudeness toward you. Can you ever forgive me?”

“There’s nothing to forgive. You only said what you did out of love for Elshaid; Eric and I both knew that.”

“Goodness…I really am unworthy of your grace—both of you. Now I simply must live as long as possible. I want to see where you two take this kingdom.”

With a big grin on his face, the margrave bowed to me, then walked over to Eric.

Thus, the heightened tensions between the Ren Empire and Elshaid came to an end. Tailong and his men were all arrested, and Liu would also briefly serve a house arrest.

For a minute there, things were looking pretty grim.

I sighed in relief. And as for the others—

***

“Prince Liu, could you oblige us with an explanation?”

Several days after the duel, we were in Eric’s study so Johann could question the imperial prince.

“Yeahhhh, I guess I do owe you one…though I already told you everything you needed to know.” Liu studiously avoided Lingsha’s gaze as he explained, “The emperor tasked me with a secret mission: to expose Tailong and the prime minister as traitors.”

“The emperor personally tasked you? Why would he do that?”

“To save his hide, of course,” Liu answered calmly. “The prime minister’s been acting fishy ever since Tailong became his aide, so the emperor wanted to get solid proof of their treachery.”

Thus, the emperor had personally entrusted Liu with the task of exposing the traitors and saving his life.

“Then again, seems like it was Tailong behind the treacherous scheme, not the prime minister. He was gonna get the prime minister on the throne and then control him like a puppet.”

Now it made sense. After Tailong duped the prime minister into committing treason, he would then make a more substantial power play.

What a power-hungry monster.

I was amazed at the extent of Tailong’s dark ambitions. It reminded me of the other two great noblemen before him whose plots we had foiled. I supposed that every nation had people whose lust for power brought about their downfall.

“But that wasn’t what I was asking about,” Johann said. “I meant our duel, Prince Liu. I was under the impression the duel was real, but if bringing Lady Lin home was a false pretense, I don’t see why that duel was even necessary.”

“Ohh, that. Remember what I said? I just thought I’d take the opportunity to take Linny home with me, since I was here anyway. I knew that I was finally strong enough to protect her now.”

“Get your grubby hands off me,” Lingsha sighed, removing Liu’s hand from her shoulder. For all her annoyance, there was a

peaceful look in her eyes. She was probably relieved to find out that Liu was not her enemy after all.

"Well, y'know, if you couldn't beat me, how could I trust you to take care of Linny? So I really did fight you in earnest—super earnest, Jojo. I was ready to let you kill me, and you got pretty dang close."

Liu gave a casual shrug of his shoulders. It sounded like the duel was more important to him than the mission from the emperor. That was why he had put his life on the line, even if it meant losing everything else…

He really did love Lingsha all along, in his own way. But she was imprisoned in the Ren Empire because of him…

"Hey, you, I'm not so weak you have to protect me, oh no. And I didn't ask ya to risk your life for me. All ya did was give Elshaid a lot of grief."

Liu gave a self-deprecating snort. "You're right to say that, Linny. I did all of this to protect you, but I made a lot of enemies along the way. Still, in spite of all that, I wanted to protect you. And the only way I could do that was to get one step closer to the throne. I needed power, and fighting was my only way to get it."

Lingsha said nothing.

He continued, "I really am grateful to our mentor for letting you escape when I begged for help. I also owe the people of Elshaid a debt of gratitude, for taking good care of you."

"Humph! You really are selfish, Brother, making all those decisions without asking me. I'll never forgive you for that!"

Liu hung his head apologetically. For the first time, the flippant, sarcastic man was finally baring his soul—and Lingsha wasn't ready to accept it. She still answered his heartfelt apology with hostility.

And yet, tears streamed down her cheeks.

I'm sure these two have been through a lot. They care for each other, but the chasm between them is so wide, it can't be bridged with just an apology.

As I watched the pair, I thought to myself that Liu was genuinely remorseful. However, Lingsha still perceived him as the

hateful brother who put their family in danger. It wasn't going to be easy for her to forgive him.

But that might be for the best for now. Lingsha is safe here in Elshaid—that's an important first step in her healing.

I felt quite conflicted as I watched the two argue.

"Jojo, I'm in no position to ask this, but please take good care of Linny."

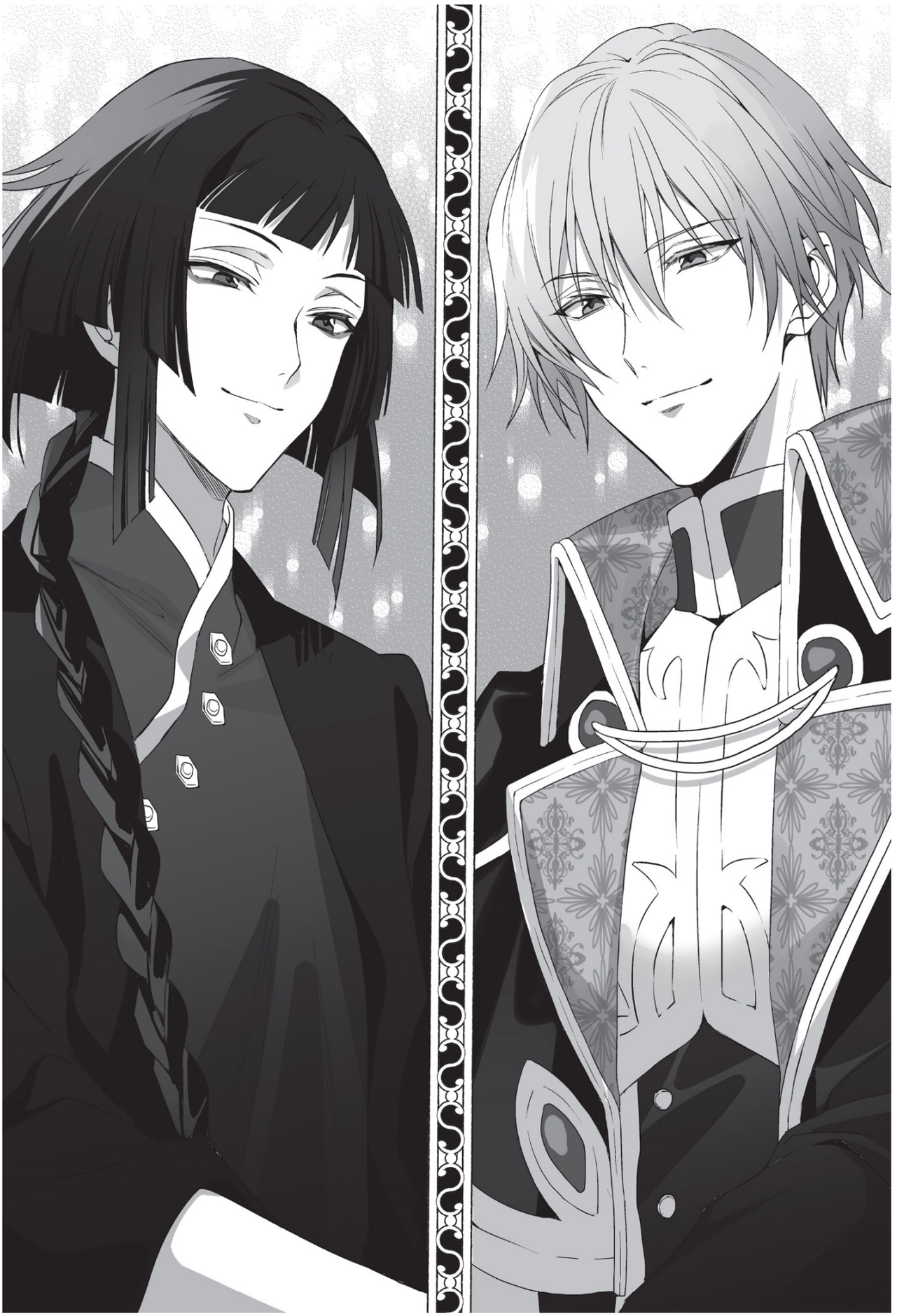
"As you wish. I shall protect Lady Lin with my life—I swear it."

"Ya didn't have to ask, stupid brother, Johann would protect me anyway."

"Haha, I see, I see. Well, that's a relief."

Johann and Lingsha both assured Liu that she would be protected, and of course, I would also see to it that she remained safe.

Hearing all of this, Eric said, "At last, I understand your motives. To be honest, I agree with Lingsha. You've been quite a thorn in our side. But then again...I don't mind having the Ren Empire in my debt."



Eric wanted to leverage what had transpired to improve relations with the Ren Empire in the future.

He's right to do that… Gaining the friendship of the emperor of a massive country like the Ren Empire is a smart move.

Hearing Eric's will made me realize once again just how powerful the Ren Empire was. He would have to think carefully about the best way to keep Elshaid safe. And in that regard, a connection with Prince Liu would be a very welcome thing indeed.

"I am going to put Tailong in your custody, Liu. But you still bear some responsibility for his crimes. I'm going to have you submit a formal apology in writing so that you can't use your minister of foreign affairs disappearing as an excuse ever again."

"Wow, Eric, you sure don't trust easily. Then again, that's a good quality for a crown prince to have. Rest assured, I'll gladly comply with your wishes."

Eric's tone with Liu was quite harsh, but the latter was unfazed and agreed right away.

"I'm holding you to that. Don't let me catch you going back on your word."

"'Course I'll keep my word. I'm a man of integrity! Y'know, I find your principles of leadership quite fascinating. I look forward to seeing what kind of kingdom you build. I hope I can be a ruler like you someday, a leader of conviction who pushes for what he believes in without falter."

Eric blushed a little and replied, "You flatter me. I'm just letting my moral compass guide this kingdom in the right direction, and it's a struggle. But thanks to that struggle, I've become blessed with a circle of good allies. One man alone can't make much of a difference…but that's exactly why I believe I need a support system. I know you have one or two people like that in your life, so cherish them." Eric spoke not as a prince but as a man.

"Thank you for that advice, Eric. It will make a fine gift to take back home with me—after I watch you marry Sainty here, of course."

"Bold of you to assume you're still invited, after all the trouble you've caused—but I will let it slide, just this once."

The two shook hands, looked into each other's eyes, and smiled. Both were destined to rule their countries, and they finally had each other's respect. To me, the only thing they seemed to have in common was their sheer bullheadedness.

And Liu just might be even more stubborn than Eric, to boot…

As I looked at the sunny smile on Liu's face, I couldn't help but sense the fiery conviction that lay behind it.

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"I've put Liu up in the accommodations I've arranged in the capital. I've already assigned ample security to it."

A while after Liu left the study, Dale came in to give Eric all the documents he had gathered pertaining to this case and to discuss further proceedings.

"All right. You know, it was a surprise that he didn't protest being placed under guard."

Dale had helped us out a lot. He was the one who had coordinated the arrest of the Renese goons who went after Jill and Nash. His outstanding leadership led to the arrest of everyone who had tried to escape, thanks to a little help from the saints.

"I'm sure Liu understands," Dale said. "And I doubt he intends to cause any further trouble for us."

"Yes, especially after all the trouble he already caused," I agreed. Though Liu's words had contradicted his actions in the past, now that his mission was accomplished, I believed he would behave himself for the rest of his stay.

"Good," Eric said. "That would help us out a lot."

"Yes, indeed. And he also told me to tell you that he's praying for a safe and uneventful wedding."

"Why wouldn't it be safe and uneventful?"

I agreed with Eric that Liu's message sounded like a veiled threat, but I decided not to speculate.

"I also look forward to the wedding," Dale said. "I heard your dress is exquisite, Miss Leia."

“Er, my dress? Well, yes, it is very well made, and I like it very much.”

“Do you? Well, I’m excited to see it.”

“Dale?”

Huh? Is it just me, or does Dale look…

His eyes seemed so sad for a flash, but when I noticed, his peaceful smile returned and I was left wondering if my imagination was acting up.

“Miss Leia, I know not everyone has said very nice things to you, but I always believed you were the perfect woman to be my brother’s queen. May you continue to be his rock.”

“Thank you. You have no idea how much that means to me.” I felt my heart lighten from his sincere praise.

He always says such kind things to me…

Having the respect of someone like Dale really did mean a lot to me. I needed to strive to live up to his expectations.

“Well, I’d better be on my way. Things are going to get hectic for the both of you, but if there’s anything you need, don’t hesitate to come to me.”

“Thanks. And thanks for all your help with this crisis… You’re a real strength to me, Dale.”

“Thank you, Brother.”

With a quiet smile, Dale left the study.

After Dale left, Eric said, “Dale was right when he said things are going to get hectic. Given everything we’ve had to deal with, we’ve fallen behind.”

“Yes, it’s a shame we had to delay the wedding preparations, despite our best efforts to move forward according to schedule.”

With all the unforeseen circumstances, we were far off schedule.

The only positive I can think of is my improved relationship with Margrave Linboldt.

The margrave had promised me he would go around and try to convince the critics to approve of my marriage to Eric. Linboldt had been our biggest obstacle, but now he was on our side.

“But you know, I’ve gotten used to having a lot of obstacles in our path,” Eric said. “That seems to be our lot in life.”

“You can say that again…”

Nevertheless, our biggest problem was now resolved. We were one month closer to the wedding. Guests from realms besides the Ren Empire had started to arrive, and Johann was already carefully coordinating security and other preparations for them.

Johann is probably in over his head too.

Eric had tasked Johann with our guests’ security without hesitation. Even though Johann had his hands full preparing for his duel, Eric could trust such an important task to no one else. Indeed, as captain of the guard, Johann would be in charge of all the security on the day of the wedding, so he was certainly the busiest person in the palace right now.

When Johann had announced his resignation and Eric said he would work Johann to the bone, he wasn’t kidding.

“But if I can dream,” Eric said, “after everything we’ve been through, I hope that our wedding is uneventful.”

“I couldn’t agree more. Mayhem has become a way of life for us as of late, but it really would be best if nothing happened at all,” I said. A wedding was a once-in-a-lifetime occasion. Everyone wanted it to be peaceful and uneventful.

“Um, Eric?”

“Hmm? What’s up?”

“I promise I’ll work hard, so let’s make this wedding an event we can be sincerely proud of, for our sake, and for the sake of everyone there.”

“Haha, well spoken. I’ll give it my all as well. After all, it’s our special day.”

Eric nodded. His eyes sparkled like a young boy’s.

Ooh! It’s been a while since I’ve seen Eric smile like this…

Lately, I had seen him display the mature look of a responsible crown prince carrying out his duties, so these flashes of boyish innocence made my heart flutter. I was going to be by his side—now and forever.

We looked into each other's eyes, and we leaned in close...

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Our wedding day was finally here.

We were blessed with a cloudless blue sky, the perfect weather for a wedding.

A throng of guests had already gathered in front of the chapel where we would be wed.

"Well, I'm in your hands, ladies."

"Right, my lady. Let's get you dressed then."

"Lift your arms please, Lady Leia."

My maids helped me put on my white dress. It was as ornate as the bridal gown for a royal wedding should be. The skirt was a wide circle of ample ruffles and looked like a giant blossom. To make the ensemble even more floral, I had a spray of blue roses on my bodice that matched Eric's eyes. My veil was beautifully embroidered with blue roses as well.

I feel silly saying so, but when I looked in the mirror, I was so beautiful that I didn't recognize myself.

Is this really me? I feel like I'm dreaming.

But this was unmistakably reality. I had already tried on the dress before, but today I had my hair done and was wearing makeup so I looked even more radiant. This dress was undeniable proof that Eric had chosen me.

"Oh Leia...you're so pretty, oh yes, you are." Lingsha, who was my bridal bodyguard, smiled beside me. Since she would also be in the wedding party, she too was wearing a floral ensemble. The pale blue dress suited her very well.

"Aww, thanks," I tittered.

“By the way, Johann says good luck. And he promises the guards will keep you and Eric safe.”

Johann was in charge of security today.

“Did he now? Well, I’d better thank him afterward.”

“Leia, you’re as brilliant as the sun. Your Lingsha has never seen a bride more beautiful.”

Lingsha beamed just as radiantly at me as if it were her own special day. She was happier than anyone about our marriage, so it really meant a lot to have her here with me to celebrate.

“Oh, Lin, thank you so much.”

“One more thing—Eric asked me to do something for him. Wait here.” She smiled and left the room.

What did Eric ask her to do? I was genuinely at a loss for what it could be. After some time, Lingsha returned to my dressing room with another woman.

“Long time no see, my dear sister.”

“Jill!”

I was genuinely startled by the sudden reunion. I thought Jill was confined to the convent…

“What are you doing here? I hope you didn’t—”

“Prince Eric pulled some strings. Apparently, he kept it secret because he knew you would hesitate to invite me for fear of causing a disturbance.”

There Jill stood in her monastic habit. We had a complicated history, but I had come to value her as an important member of my family.

Still, I thought the gravity of her crimes was too great, so I had decided not to send her a wedding invitation. Seeing her here now made my eyes flood with happy tears.

Truly…you have changed so much.

All traces of her tragic heroine persona had been buried. A distinguished and pious woman stood before me now. The way she continued to grow never ceased to amaze me.

“Hee hee! Aw, don’t cry, sweet sister. Today is your special day! Tears are not invited.”

“Thanks, Jill.” I gently wiped my eyes and smiled at her.

Oh, Eric, thank you so much.

“Leia, I just wanted to tell you I’ve prayed every day at the convent for your happiness.”

“Thank you… I always pray for your happiness too,” I said. Then I went over and gave her a hug. It was the first time I had ever felt such love for my little sister.

“Leia, you’re so warm…so very warm. And I’m so happy. My life is now whole.”

“I’m happy too, Jill. I’m so happy I get to see you grow up into such a wonderful person. And I really am so glad you get to spend this special day with me.”

We looked into each other’s eyes. Jill valiantly tried to hold back the tears that wanted to spill out. After her visit, a maid escorted Jill out to the chapel pews to wait for the wedding.

“Lady Leia, it’s time.”

“Right. I’m coming.”

And now it was time for me to go see the man I loved.

Our wedding was about to begin.

“Here I am, Eric.”

“Leia? Wow…I’m stunned. You look amazing in that wedding dress. So beautiful. I’m the luckiest man alive, having such a beautiful bride by my side on this special day.”

“Th-thank you. You have no idea how happy you just made me.”

Seeing his sincere shyness on full display, I felt a little self-conscious as I thanked him. My cheeks burned and my heart raced double time.

Sometimes Eric gets so heartfelt, so vulnerable with me that I can hardly keep up.



His surprise bursts of sincerity always caught me off guard, just like he did that day he dragged me away from my family. And I was sure he would continue to surprise me like this for the rest of my life.

“Hm? Something wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I’m good.”

“Hmm, okay. I’m excited our wedding is finally here.”

“Me too. It’s thanks to all our hard work.”

He offered me his hand, and I took it as we walked out together.

***

We walked down the aisle of the majestic chapel, one step at a time. I would be lying if I said I wasn’t nervous, but strangely enough, I felt no fear inside me. Perhaps I had Eric’s warmth beside me to thank.

As a sea of faces watched us, we made our way to the altar. Eric’s face was stiff as he stood beside me, but he did not look at all nervous.

I hope I’m not making a strange face right now…

I stole a glance at Eric. When our eyes met, he smiled at me, and I relaxed a little.

It was finally almost time… The priest stood before us, and we began our vows.

“And now, the bride and groom shall give their vows… Dost thou, Eric Elshaid, take Leia Westoria as thy wife, to love as long as you both shall live?”

“Absolutely. I do.”

“Leia, do you take Eric Elshaid as thine husband, to love as long as you both shall live?”

“Yes, I do…” I answered with pride.

The priest continued, “Then let us exchange the rings.”

I turned to Eric and held out my left hand. He pulled a tiny box from his pocket, produced a ring from it, and slid it onto my ring finger. Then I took Eric's hand and placed a tiny box atop his large hand. Inside was a ring of simple design with the crest of the Elshaid royal family upon it. I carefully pulled it out of the box and slid it onto his left ring finger.

"You may now seal your vows with a kiss, with these guests and with God as thy witness."

We looked into each other's eyes. I couldn't hide the shyness I felt, but I still couldn't look away.

Eric's face is so close to mine…

I could see myself reflected in his eyes as a gravitational force pulled our lips together. This new sensation was soft and so warm. I could feel my heart soaring in the air.

In that moment, I wished time would stop forever.

I never dreamed such happiness was possible.

But the moment that felt eternal passed in no time at all.

Reluctantly, Eric pulled away. He looked incredibly bashful, and I'm sure I was no different. My love for Eric was overflowing, and I couldn't contain it anymore.

"Congratulations! I now pronounce you husband and wife!"

The chapel erupted in applause. When I heard it, it finally felt real to me. My dream had come true.

We really are… Eric and I really are married. And so many people are here to celebrate…

I couldn't count the struggles we faced to reach this moment, but I was so jubilant now that none of that even mattered anymore. I could proudly declare that I was happy.

That night, we had a wedding reception at the palace. Guests from all over the kingdom—and from lands beyond—packed the palace.

"Congratulations, Crown Princess Leia!"

"Prince Eric, Princess Leia, I wish you eternal happiness!"

Voices of congratulations echoed wherever we went. And each time, I held back tears of joy as I thanked them. Until I met Eric, I never dreamed such a blessed day would ever come to me.

“Ladies and gentlemen, thank you so much for all your devoted support.”

“Yes, thank you!”

We smiled and thanked all of them one by one.

“Prince Eric, the crown princess has such a lovely dress.”

“I know, isn’t she beautiful? I couldn’t be prouder of my bride.”

“Yes, she looks wonderful.”

“Thank you.”

I threaded my arm into Eric’s left arm as we slowly made our way to our seats.

And then, he apparated before our eyes. “Well, well, well, long time no see, Sainty, Crown Prince Eric.”

“Prince Liu…”

Liu presented me with a single red rose by way of greeting. As we stood there, stunned, he smiled playfully at me.

“Well, you kept your word—you behaved yourself all this time. I really appreciate that.”

“As a married man, your first words to me are sarcasm. Never change, Eric, never change. Well, I’m one to talk.”

Liu and Eric smiled at each other. And if I wasn’t mistaken, I sensed the kindling of friendship between them.

“I’m just a little envious of you, Eric. You got to marry a strong, feisty woman like Sainty here.”

“Um…was that a compliment?” I asked.

“Of course, it was. I love strong women, that I can’t deny.” He looked me in the eye and nodded. He had duped me more times than I could count, but I got the strange feeling that I could believe his words this time.

“And that’s why…I’m gonna make a wonderful woman like you my primary wife!”

“Th-thanks?”

I take it back. I really have no idea how to deal with this man.

Perhaps due to cultural differences, I just couldn't take that compliment—assuming it even was a compliment. I just wasn't comfortable being called a "primary" wife.

"Liu, I'd appreciate it if you stopped bothering my wife."

"Huh? Did I say something weird?"

"Next time you come to Elshaid, I hope you read up on our culture first." Eric radiated frustration. If we ever did see him again, I hoped it would be under more peaceful circumstances.

"Cool, cool, cool. Well, thanks for the awesome ceremony, you two. See ya later."

Liu waved goodbye and left the reception hall. It seemed that he'd only come to the reception to pay his respects.

"Leia, Eric, congrats on your wedding, oh yes!"

"Prince Eric, Lady Leia—no, I suppose I should call you Princess now?"

Johann and Lingsha immediately took Liu's place. They were our bodyguards at the reception as well as the wedding ceremony.

"I'm fine with either," I giggled.

"Then, Princess Leia, I wish to offer you my most heartfelt congratulations on your special day." Johann bowed deeply. It was an overly formal display, but I liked it. This was very true to form for Johann.

"You did a fantastic job today, Johann," Eric said.

"Yes, thank you so much," I said. "Thanks to your and Miss Lin's protection, everything was safe and uneventful."

Johann's eyes brimmed with tears as he bowed even lower. "I am unworthy of such praise. I shall strive to serve you well as your bodyguard for the rest of my days!"

"I appreciate that," Eric replied. "Hmm... You know, now that the wedding is over, you two should take some time off together. Take a moment to talk about your future."

“Right, yes, we should—Your Highness! What are you talking about?! W-we have nothing to do with this conversation.”

“Aww, Johann, are ya blushing? You silly thing.”

“O-oh, Miss Lin, I’m n-not blushing!”

Lingsha frowned at Johann’s knee-jerk denial. His face turned red and he avoided her gaze.

Hee hee… They’re so cute.

Seeing this uncharacteristic side of the usually stoic and serious Johann was starting to make even me blush.

“But y’know, seeing Leia in that dress made me wanna wear an Elshaidian wedding dress, oh yes.”

Lingsha seemingly had a thing for wedding dresses now.

I bet Renese wedding dresses are totally different.

“You hear that, Johann? I guess when you two get married, you’ll—”

“I repeat, Princess, this conversation is going off the rails! You two are the stars of the day, so please, pay me no heed.”

“No, Johann, it’s very important. You and Lin are my two best friends.”

I meant that. They were both very precious to me. My wedding day was the happiest day of my life, but if I could make a selfish wish, I wanted it to be the happiest day of their lives too.

“Is that so? Well, if you insist, then I, Johann Olbrun, shall prepare the finest wedding dress for you, Lady Lin.”

“Johann…was that a proposal?”

“Er?! Ah?! Th-that wasn’t what I meant!”

“Okay, then what did you mean?”

“N-not what you think! I was just…you see, I was—”

“Johann…know when you’ve been beat, man,” Eric grinned.

“Y-Your Highness?!”

As I listened to their repartee, I became full of inexplicable joy.

Johann sighed in defeat, took a determined breath, and said, “Lady Lin, I adore you with all my heart. And soon, I will have

something very important to ask you. Please, let's leave it at that for today."

"Haha! Well said, Johann. You've gotten so valiant, oh yes."

"Hmm…I somehow feel I played right into the prince and princess's hands, but I'll overlook it…" Johann said, his eyes conflicted. Then he straightened his posture and addressed me. "Prince Eric, Princess Leia, if I may be so bold, your Johann and Lingsha…shall be bodyguards of the crown prince and crown princess with pride. Though I am unworthy of such an honor, I shall pour myself into this work, body and soul. Here's to hopefully many long years of service."

Johann's gaze was sober as he made his promise. His commitment as captain of the guard rang proud with ceremony. From this day forward, he and Lingsha would be bodyguards to the crown prince and crown princess.

"Of course. I'd have nobody else be our bodyguards," Eric said.

"Yes, I am every bit as honored as you," I echoed.

"Thank you. I am overjoyed. I shall protect the both of you with my life."

"Same goes for Lingsha, oh yes. Eric, Leia, nobody's hurting you on my watch."

Our two most trusted friends declared their commitment to us with smiles. With both of them by our side, I knew that no matter what difficulties came our way, we would be safe.

"Leia, His Majesty is here."

"All right."

After we'd made our rounds at the reception, His Majesty the King made his entrance. The crowd fell silent as he entered regally, all eyes falling on him…

Then the king walked up onto the stage and looked at us. He was about to give us a few words of congratulation.

"Ladies and gentlemen, thank you all for coming today. Eric, Leia, congratulations to you both. It was a beautiful ceremony.

Today marks the first day of your new life together. May you both have a long and happy marriage."

"Thank you."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

The king nodded and continued, "Eric and Leia were once a crown prince and his bodyguard. Leia has always been a strong support for Eric, as a saint and as his bodyguard. But now that has changed. Now they are officially husband and wife. It is my hope that they tread life's paths side by side from now on and support each other."

The king was always there, watching over us. I savored each and every one of his words.

"Now, Eric, you are the crown prince. If you have dreams for the future of Elshaid, then I hope that you carry them out. This is my heartfelt wish as the king."

"Thank you, Father."

"And a word for you, Leia. I know you very well. You've been doing the Lord's work as a saint, but now you must also serve this country as crown princess. Please, take good care of Eric."

"I will, Your Majesty."

"Good. Thank you."

Satisfied, the king took his seat and smiled. Now it was finally time for Eric and me to address the crowd. We ascended to the stage.

"First off, I'd like to thank all of you," Eric began. "We wouldn't all be here on this special day if not for you. Thank you. Thank you for helping me begin a new life with the woman I love. I swear to all of you as crown prince that Leia and I will make this kingdom an even better place. I humbly request for your continued faith in me."

Eric bowed with reverence for everyone in the crowd. The hall burst into applause. It seemed the crowd was quite inspired.

It sounds like the entire kingdom is celebrating us.

The reception hall shook with all the cheers. As I listened, I felt something well up inside of me.

"And now some words from Crown Princess Leia Elshaid."

This would be my first speech as crown princess. I would be lying if I said I wasn't nervous, but with Eric beside me, there was nothing to fear.

"Thank you all, truly, for coming out today to celebrate our special day. I have devoted my life thus far to protecting the honor and glory of Elshaid as a saint. But now my life's mission will be to support Crown Prince Eric, not as a saint but as his crown princess. I still have much to learn, so I hope that you will all be patient with me."

When I finished, another loud burst of applause resounded. It reminded me of the moment when Eric announced our engagement—with one major difference.

"All hail Crown Princess Leia! All hail Saint Leia!"

Linboldt's loud cries rang out over the applause. The nobles who had opposed our marriage when we announced it on Foundation Day now loudly celebrated it.

They accept me—that realization makes me so happy.

I waved to the cheering crowd.

"Leia, there's something I must tell you again."

"Yes? What is it."

"Thank you for marrying me. I can't wait to spend the rest of my life with you."

"Me too…"

I was so happy I wanted to cry. But I couldn't let myself cry.

After all, this was only the beginning.

The party went on well into the night…

Never before had I ever laughed or smiled so hard as I did that day. Never before had I enjoyed myself so much.

I'll never forget this day as long as I live. I just know it.

In time, the jubilant party finally came to a close.

And we sent our guests home with smiles on our faces.

Epilogue

“YOU SHONE BRIGHTEST of anyone today, Leia.”

“Thank you. But you were beautiful too, Eric.”

“Haha, thanks.”

We were in a palace room, snuggled up against each other. Moonbeams streamed through the window as Eric and I occupied our own little pocket of time just for us…

Sharing each other’s warmth, we reminisced over the past.

“Eric, do you remember the day we met?”

“I could never forget it, even if I wanted to. It was the day I took the most shamefully immoral action of my life.”

As I’d feared, the day we met still remained a painful memory for him. But he was trying to move past it.

That’s what made me fall for Eric in the first place. He didn’t hide from his sins, yet he hasn’t let his sins chain him down either. He always believes in himself, and that’s what made me admire him…

I could never see my first encounter with Eric as a bad memory. To say I wouldn’t be where I am today without him would’ve been no exaggeration.

Eric saved me. It was a conviction that grew stronger by the day.

“Well, to me…the day we met is a beautiful memory. I’m better off having met you, Eric, and I know it with all my heart.”

“Leia, your mercy is my salvation. Thank you…”

Eric rose, opened the window, and gazed up at the night sky. I joined him, beholding the beautiful stars filling the sky, twinkling like gemstones in a giant treasure chest.

“I can stand here now at an open window, leisurely gazing at the stars without fear of assassins because of you, Leia.”

“Hee hee! Well, I’m sure you and I will have plenty of beautiful things to look at together from now on.”

“We sure will.”

I gently hugged Eric's arm, and he softly drew me to his chest in turn. "Leia…I love you with all my heart."

"And I love you too, Eric."

Dear God—would you forgive me for feeling like a heroine all day just this once?

Not a tragic heroine, but a blessed heroine.

I want to share my life with this man…forever and always.

I pray that this happiness might last forever.

This warmth—this was what I had wanted the most. What I had been longing for all this time.

This is my story, no one else's.

I made the choice to walk life's path into the future with Eric, no one made that choice for me.

And no matter what hardships await us, we can fight them to the end without giving up.

As the night breeze caressed us, we dreamed.

Dreamed of our happy future together.

Afterword

THANK YOU for buying Volume 3. I'm glad that I somehow managed to finish writing it and that you're reading it right now. In Volume 3, I wanted to write about the wedding, of course, but it was actually my desire to delve into the lore of the Ren Empire that inspired the plot this time around.

I know I said so in Volume 1, but I especially love Lingsha. And as luck would have it, many of the readers love her too, so I decided to go ahead and write more about her.

Another thing I've been wanting to do was write a character like one you'd find in a Chinese fantasy. I felt that Chinese stuff was a bit too hard for me to write, but my selfish desire to see Futaba-sensei's illustrations of Chinese characters won me over (lol).

From a writing standpoint, this was my hardest novel to write since my debut novel. I had a really hard time finishing the manuscript (though that was all my fault). All my projects thus far, I finished handily with plenty of time to spare, but this time, I was like "Is this ever gonna end?" "How'm I gonna write this?" I was prone to writhing around pitifully like this, and I surely caused a lot of grief for my poor editor—sorry!

But in exchange, I learned how to better approach my novels moving forward. I've grown a little as an author. (I hope...)

It is only by the support of so many that I manage to do this. Ideally, I'd take the time to thank everyone personally at length, but I just wanted to take some space here to extend my gratitude.

Lastly, Volume 1 of the comics version went on sale in October. Masuke Mawata-sensei's art is freakin' cute, so I really hope you'll check it out. Each and every character is so unique—it's the best!

Well, let me once again thank you all—my readers—for reading this series. I hope we meet again!

—FUYUTSUKI KOKI



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