
Izumi Sawano
Illust. Uri Sugata
I want to Escape from Princess Lessons
3


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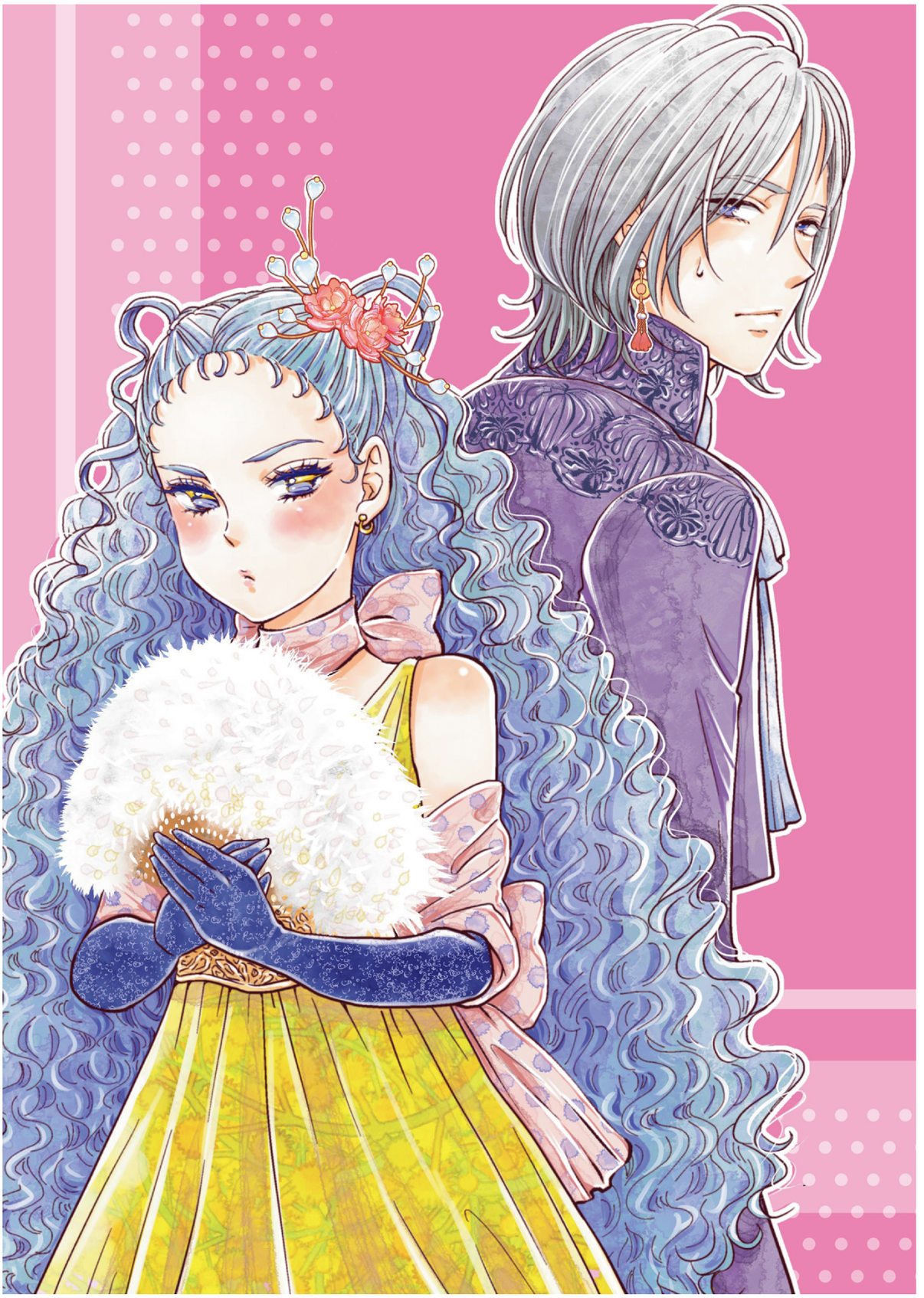


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I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons 3

“They’re multiplying!” I blurted out as I looked at the bookshelf, now lined with books I was sure hadn’t been there before. “There are…*more* of Lord Clarke’s diaries!”

Not just one, not just two, but *three* whole new ones.

As I stood there gaping, Maria—arranging sweets on a tray nearby—nodded and said, “Indeed. His Highness is such a hard worker.”

“You knew about this?!”

“I don’t know exactly when each new one appeared, but I did notice they’ve been gradually increasing in number.”

So he hadn’t just dumped them onto the shelf all at once? He’d been adding them one at a time? And I hadn’t noticed until now?!

“You’ve been quite engrossed in that one lately, Your Highness,” Maria said, glancing at the book in left hand: a romance novel I’d taken from the bookshelf.

“I-It’s not what you think, okay?! This is just…for…for reference!”

“Ah, of course. So you can reference that for romancing the prince.”

“No!” There Maria went again, thinking silly thoughts!

“Oh, don’t worry. I understand.”

“Clearly you do not! In fact, it’s patently obvious you don’t understand in the slightest!”

“So, what are your romance prospects, you think?”

“See! You don’t get it!” Maria was a little too fond of love stories for my tastes.

“Oh, what’s the harm in telling me? I do love some royal gossip… I mean, royal love stories! It’s not the kind of thing you hear about every day.”

“You just said ‘gossip.’ You just *very clearly* said it!”

Maria giggled like the adorably cunning fox she was. “What other entertainment can I get working here?”

“You can go and entertain *yourself*!” Instead of being satisfied living vicariously through other people’s stories, she should’ve been experiencing her own romance. Hmph.

“Well, about that…” Maria’s expression darkened instantly. “I’ve received a few marriage proposals in the past. But I wanted to keep working for a while, so I decided to postpone my responses.”

“And then?”

“They were all withdrawn.”

Ohhh. That could only have meant one thing…

“Prince Louis did this! He’s preventing me from getting engaged! He’s awful! And a flower is only in bloom for so long…!” Maria lamented, sorrowfully pouring a cup of tea.

I returned to my seat, romance novel in hand. “Well, even if you don’t get married, there’s always Prince Louis as insurance.”

“What do you mean, ‘insurance’?! Are you saying it’s guaranteed I’ll end up unmarried?!”

Instead of confirming or denying her statement, I simply smiled. I really didn’t think Prince Louis would allow Maria to marry anyone else, at least until he himself was old enough to tie the knot.

“You should resign yourself to your fate,” I told her.

“It’s too early for me to resign myself to anything! I still dream of a handsome nobleman!” Given the financial hardships in her past, it made sense that Maria wanted to avoid those struggles in the future.

But of course, I hadn’t meant that she should give up on marriage entirely—just that she should accept that she probably wasn’t going to end up marrying anyone other than Prince Louis.

“You know, Maria, a nobleman could still go bankrupt after, say, a business failure,” I pointed out. “On the other hand, a prince will always be a prince. It’s a good deal.”

“I’m studying all sorts of things with Lady Brianna to ensure I can avoid any and all business failures! It’ll be okay! I’ll guide my future husband!”

S-Such a strong will! Also, since when had she and Brie been studying together? And behind my back! Were they sharing tea and giggles without me?! Unfair! I wanted to join in too!

“Bring me along next time,” I said.

“I’ll do what I can,” Maria replied, which very much sounded like a way of saying that she would not be bringing me along.

How awful of her! How could she?! Was it because I hadn’t been talking about Lord Clarke much as of late? Was she *that* curious?! Oh, fine, then! I’d just have to barge in on her and Brie’s

little private tea parties!

No sooner had I resolved to take matters into my own hands, a knock came from the door. “Yes?” I said.

“Leticia, it’s me,” came Lord Clarke’s voice.

“Come in,” I said, and Lord Clarke stepped into the room. “Is something the matter?”

“There’s been a slight change of plans regarding the upcoming party,” he explained, handing me a piece of paper detailing said changes.

“You didn’t need to deliver this personally,” I pointed out. An attendant could’ve taken care of it; there was no need for him to come all the way here.

“No, it’s just…” Lord Clarke hesitated for a moment, then continued. “I wanted an excuse to see you, Lettie,” he admitted bashfully. I couldn’t help it—my heart skipped a beat. Maria was an adorably cunning fox, and so was my husband, apparently!

“O-Oh. I see,” I mumbled, averting my eyes in an attempt to hide my agitation. My gaze landed on Maria, who was giving me an enthusiastic nod. Definitely a nod of the “go get him, tiger” variety—I promptly ignored her. I looked back at Lord Clarke, grateful that being distracted by Maria had helped me calm down. “Would you care for some tea, Lord Clarke?”

“No, thank you. I sneaked away from work, you see.”

Aw, man.

Lord Clarke quickly handed me something.

“What’s this?” I asked.

“I figured you’d be interested,” he said, holding out what seemed to be a book.

No way, I thought, staring at him as he smiled bashfully once more.

“It’s the continuation of my diary.”

“I am not *at all* interested!” I protested. I hadn’t even read the previous ones!

“Well, just take it, okay?” He handed me the diary, then quickly left. “See you later.”

Maria and I both looked silently at the diary in my hands for a moment.

“You’re not taking a peek?” she asked.

“Nope.”

Maria’s shoulders slumped in disappointment. But I wasn’t going to look! I wasn’t about to give her any gossip material!

Instead, I gingerly placed the diary next to the others.

And then I stared at it.

And then I picked it back up.

"So you *are* going to read it," Maria pointed out.

"N-No!" I said quickly. "It's just, you know, the honeymoon, it was very hectic, and I mean, I thought, 'Oh, I would like to recall it. From another person's perspective.' Or something."

"Oh, that trip! When I couldn't go to the hot springs! You *have* to take me along next time!"

"All right, all right!"

After dodging Maria's persistent demands, I looked at the diary once more. The cover read, "Prince Clarke's Diary: Honeymoon Edition."

***

I was in the courtyard when a familiar voice called my name.

"Lettie?"

How odd. Hadn't he said he was going to be busy with his duties all day? He'd come in early through the secret door this morning and told me as much while I was still half asleep. It was the whole reason I'd been determined to achieve my goal today!

No, he'd been crystal clear this morning. He *had* to be working right now. Yes. The voice calling out to me could be nothing but a hallucination. I was just tired, that had to be it. I was going back to my room. As quickly as humanly possible.

"Lettie," none other than Lord Clarke said, scruffing me as I tried to exit stage left pronto.

"Gahhh! You *are* real!" I yelped.

Alas, escaping reality was a futile endeavor. He had me in his grip. No matter how much I flailed, Lord Clarke held fast to the back of my neck with one hand. The difference in our strength was too vast; there was no way for me to break free, try as I might. I did wish he'd at least let me struggle a little, though. Considering the embarrassment of being caught in the middle of my very purposeful escape attempt, I thought I deserved to be afforded a moment to resist.

"Lettie... Uh... I... I'm sorry I came so suddenly..." he said hesitantly, clearly feeling awkward. Which made two of us! Despite his contrition, however, he didn't let go. He attempted an earnest smile, lowering his eyebrows slightly. "I think you're fine

as you are, you know?"

"That's exactly the kind of patronizing line you'd say to your inferior!" I protested. His words had hit me right in the gullet. Kindness! My one weakness!

"I didn't mean it that way."

"You did, you absolutely did! Absolutely, totally did." I stopped trying to escape and pried his hand from my neck, then grabbed his sides firmly. "You! Don't have! A single ounce! Of fat! On you! Just like that! How dare you!"

"L-Lettie? Pfft... Heh! Heh heh heh!"

"Eat this! Tickle attack!"

"Heh! Heh heh heh! Lettie! Stop—" he tried to protest but dissolved into another fit of giggles.

I continued to tickle him with both hands. This man, with basically no body fat. Not an exaggeration, by the way. Anyway, he was trembling and twisting.

"Stop, Lettie, please, heh heh heh, you're, heh, killing me..." he protested weakly.

"Tickling isn't lethal! And I'm the one dying! Of embarrassment!" I retorted.

"Embarrassment isn't lethal either... Heh heh heh, ahhh, I'm sorry, I'm sorry! I apologize! Please have mercy on me! Heh heh heh!"

Reluctantly, I let go.

Out of breath, Lord Clarke collapsed backward onto the courtyard. "Seriously," he said breathlessly, "I'm a prince...so I'm not used to this at all... No one ever tickles me, so please, don't..."

Oh, how pathetic. But also a very pretty kind of pathetic. He had the advantage of good looks, and in contrast, I was...well... I placed a hand on my own side, and indeed, I found it quite grabbable.

"Aaargh! I hate this stupid faaat!" I shouted.

"L-Lettie? You're not fat," Lord Clarke said.

"You don't get to say that, Your Thinness! It just sounds backhanded!"

"It's not backhanded! You're perfect as you are!"

"You said that, and I took it to heart a little bit, and now I've gotten faaat!" Frustrated, I sat down and repeatedly smacked the ground. Which was basically dirt and grass, so it didn't hurt. My heart, however, was another story. "I gained weight, but I acted like I didn't care! I was dieting in secret so nobody would notice!

Why did you come to see meee?!”

“Well, I needed to talk to you about something…”

“You came to laugh at me struggling with my sit-ups, didn’t you?!”

“Lettie! Lettie, calm down!”

“How could I possibly calm down?!” I demanded, still pounding the ground. Lord Clarke’s attempts at calming me down only made things worse, and now the soldiers and handmaidens were watching us from a distance.



There was only one person present who could settle this pointless struggle.

“Enough of that irritating nonsense!”

“Eek!” I yelped as I was forcefully pulled to my feet. Lily, who had lifted me up effortlessly, was clearly displeased. Just how strong was she to lift an entire woman off the ground like that?

“Quit your endless whining! If you wish to lose weight, then just do it! Yes?!”

“Oh. Yes…” Honestly, no, not “yes,” but defying Lily sounded like a bad idea at the moment, so I grudgingly nodded.

“I apologize, Your Highness,” said Lily, who by the way was only present because she was acting as my exercise instructor. “Lady Leticia is quite sensitive at the moment. But you had some business with her, did you not?”

“Oh! Right! Lettie!” Lord Clarke, exclaimed, having regained his composure. He took my hand and beamed. “Let’s go on our honeymoon!”

“Huh?”

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Apparently Lord Clarke hadn’t been lying about needing to work, since he left shortly after.

“Oh no. Ohhh no no no no. Lily. Lily!” I rambled, grabbing Lily’s shoulders like that’d help me steady my beating heart and keep it from leaping out of my chest. “I’m a newlywed!”

“I am aware, yes,” Lily replied calmly, her expression unchanged—even though my agitation was making it difficult for me to control my grip. She was amazing! How vexing that I couldn’t control my strength!

“Newlyweds go on honeymoons, Lily!”

“I am aware, yes,” she repeated, using her superior strength to remove my hands from her shoulders. And was it just me, or did I feel a slight pinch as she did so? Had I imagined that? Had I actually hurt her, despite her stoicism? And could she please not pinch me? Maybe if I apologized…

“Ow, ow, ow, ow! I’m sorry, I’m sorry! Forgive me!”

“Oh silly me, I failed to control my strength! My sincerest apologies,” Lily said in exaggerated fashion. “I was simply acting just like a certain princess I know.”

Hey! That was sarcasm! But I deserved it, so fine!

“Never mind that! The honeymoon, Lily! The honeymoon!”

“Please calm yourself.”

“*Th-Th-Th-The* honeymoon! You know! The trip! With the thing! *The thing*, Lily!”

“Please calm yourself.”

“*The scandalous thing*, Lily!”

“I said, calm yourself!”

“Oh. Pardon me.” Lily’s shout had brought me back to my senses, a little. She had always been scary when she was angry, and I had learned through years of experience that if she raised her voice, it was best for me not to argue.

“Lady Leticia, please remember that a honeymoon does not equate scandalous behavior.”

“But the stories say—”

“Forget the stories for now.”

“Okay…”

Following Lily’s sage advice, I decided to forget everything I knew about honeymoons, since apparently my knowledge was skewed. But I was so detached from everyday life, romance novels were my only references! What else was I supposed to think?

“A honeymoon is just a trip for newlywed couples,” Lily explained.

“But they stay under the same roof,” I pointed out.

“You are currently living under the same roof, are you not?”

She had a point. We stayed in separate rooms, but we did live together under the same roof in the royal palace. Along with the king, the queen, and Mathias too! That made sense. My mind was a little more at ease now. We were already living under the same roof without any issues, so clearly it would be fine!

Wait.

“When you say the trip is for newlywed couples, do you mean just two people?” I asked.

“Generally speaking, couples consist of only two people,” Lily said, as though I’d just asked the world’s silliest question.

“So it’s just us two? Lord Clarke and I?”

“Indeed.”

We were going on a trip, just the two of us?

“Well, technically, guards and attendants will accompany you,” Lily added.

“But *strictly speaking*, it’s just us two.”

“Well, yes.”

I froze. The two of us? Alone? Possibly...in the same room? The entire trip? Just us, all the time?

“I can’t do iiit!” I shouted, and Lily covered her ears.

***

“Okay, no, look, listen, this can’t be right,” Brie said suddenly, like a thought had just occurred to her. She had been silently rocking along in the impressively large royal carriage, which honestly wasn’t very like her. “Why am *I* coming on your honeymoon? This makes no sense!”

“It makes perfect sense,” I retorted.

“I’ve never heard of newlyweds bringing friends along on their honeymoon!”

“Perhaps it’ll become a new trend.”

“It will not!” Brie protested, standing up in her aggravation. The unsteady carriage quickly forced her to sit back down, however. “And besides, it’s not just me! What’s with all these people?! Attendants and guards should’ve been enough! I understand Maria and Lily might be needed during the trip, but still! Still! What do you need your *brother* for? What kind of bride brings her brother on her honeymoon? Won’t that ruin the romantic mood?! Bringing a friend is bad enough! And why is a neighboring nation’s prince here too?! This *is* a honeymoon, right?!”

“It’s a Leticia-style honeymoon.”

“Style, my a—”

It was early morning. The birds were singing beautifully. And Brie was so full of energy at this hour! How vivacious of her.

“Besides, I need Prince Louis,” I interrupted her. “We’ll be staying at his family’s royal palace, after all.”

“That makes it even more inappropriate for a low-ranking noble like me to come along!” Brie said, holding her head in her hands. She was overthinking it, if you asked me.

“No one cares that my companion is a low-ranking noble,” I insisted.

“I don’t even have the manners for this! I can’t dine or greet people gracefully like you do!”

“Oh, it’s fine! It’ll all work out!”

“What you actually mean is ‘that’s a you problem,’ don’t you?!”

Whoops. She saw right through me.

Brie glared at me. “You come to my house out of nowhere, wake me up, make me get changed, randomly pack my things, then shove me into a carriage! Couldn’t you have given me advance warning?!”

“You’d have run away if I had.”

“Of course I would’ve!”

Ah, so I had chosen the correct course of action this time. I deserved a pat in the back for my discerning judgment.

“And, and! And what I really want to object to is,” she continued, standing up once more, “this seating arrangement!” The carriage’s movements once again proved to be too much, and Brie quickly sat back down. Would she get mad at me if I told her to just stop trying to stand?

“What’s wrong with it?”

“You can’t see what’s wrong with it?!” she snapped. I couldn’t help but notice Brie’s intense scowl. And also the intense swaying of her ample chest to the rhythm of the carriage’s movements. Not that I was envious or anything. Never. Anyway, Brie pointed to the two women sitting in front of us. “You’re sitting next to me, and Lily and Maria are sitting opposite us! That’s what’s wrong!”

“It’s easier to split groups by gender,” I pointed out.

“Ease is not a factor in deciding this!” Brie protested.

“I like it!” Maria chimed in. “It’s like we’re having a girls’ day out.”

“Don’t make this worse than it already is, Maria!” Brie chided.

“I tried to stop her,” Lily pointed out.

“Oh, Lily… You’re the only sensible one here…”

Wait, wait. That wasn’t fair. Sure, Brie didn’t know Lily’s difficult character quite like I did, but still! Lily was *not* sensible! Sensible people did not pinch their mistresses’ hands.

“You should be sitting with your new husband!” Brie said.

“We’ll be riding together tomorrow,” I said.

“I mean you should be riding together every day, you buffoon!”

Wow! Rude! The trip had only just begun, yet Brie was already having a go at me. Several goes, actually. Was she going to keep this up the whole trip? She was wasting so much energy on all that yelling!

Brie continued to complain, clearly not done ranting at me

yet, and I just turned to look out the window. It was best to simply tune this out.

***

"Oh, I'm exhausted..."

Brie could not, in fact, keep it up the whole trip. Since the trip to Prince Louis's home country, the Kingdom of Delbaran, took longer than a day, we had to stop at an inn along the way. By the time we reached the inn, Brie was swaying on her feet.

"That's because you've been yelling this whole time," I told her. "Maybe don't do that."

"And whose fault was that?!" Brie retorted. I pretended not to hear.

This, by the by, was not the same shabby inn from the time when Prince Louis kidnapped me. On that occasion we'd been trying to take the shortest route, and we'd only had to stay at the less-than-luxurious inn due to the prince's whims. Now *this* inn, meanwhile, was quite decent. This was a planned trip, after all, and we'd booked it in advance.

I looked up at the inn and gave a nod of satisfaction. "Mm-hmm. An inn fit for a honeymoon, no doubt."

"You've been whining nonstop about this and that, but you were really looking forward to this, weren't you?" Brie asked, poking my arm.

How annoying! I wasn't looking forward to the *honeymoon*, I was looking forward to the *trip*. There was a very important distinction here.

"How are you feeling, Lettie?" Lord Clarke asked as he made his way over from his own carriage. He gave me a concerned look and put an arm around my shoulders.

"I'm doing fine," I replied. Sure, the carriage ride had been longer than usual, but I hadn't gotten motion sickness, so I was feeling great.

"You guys aren't going to make me stand here and watch you be lovey-dovey the whole trip, right?" Brie narrowed her eyes at Lord Clarke and me. "I hate this. Just send me home."

Lord Clarke gave her a reassuring smile. "You'll be compensated for the trip, and we'll be covering all of your expenses."

"Oh!" she exclaimed excitedly. "Sounds like I'm getting myself

a new dress as soon as we arrive at…Del-something."

"*Delbaran*, you philistine," Nadir quietly corrected her. And with an insult thrown in too!

"Who's a philistine?!" Brie protested.

"If you want to marry into money, the least you could do is learn about neighboring countries." Vicious as ever, my brother.

"I did not ask you for advice!"

Brie had stopped acting all fake cutesy around Nadir recently. She'd probably realized he wasn't going to fall for the act. But she was still hovering around him, in a sense, so perhaps she hadn't quite given up on winning him over yet.

Also, speaking of Del-something [sic], the prince of said country was fast asleep in Lyle's arms. Kids could sleep anywhere, anytime—it was truly impressive.

We went inside and were soon shown to our rooms—and they were truly what one would expect of an inn a honeymooning royal couple would stop at. Our room was about as large as my chambers back in the royal capital; a spotless chandelier hung from the ceiling, which by itself was proof of the quality of this inn. At the center were a large table and sofa, and opposite the door, a balcony. It also had an attached restroom and bath, and the beds were far superior to those at the inn I'd stayed at before.

"I have no complaints!" I exclaimed, nodding in satisfaction.

"Well, *I* have complaints!" Brie yelled loudly. "Why are you and I sharing a room on your honeymoon?!"

"I figured it was best to separate by gender."

"On a honeymoon?!" Brie's exhaustion seemed to have gone elsewhere. "You should stay with your new husband!"

"We have adjoining rooms at the palace in Delbaran."

"That's besides the point, and— Wait, you're not staying in the same room there either?!" Truly, Brie was in top shape. "This is no honeymoon! This is just a trip! What do you think a honeymoon is *for*?!"

"A trip to bring newlyweds closer together."

"And you're planning to grow close at this distance?!"

Seeing that our argument was going nowhere, she burst out of the room and knocked on the door of the neighboring room.

"Brie, you're disturbing the other guests," I told her.

"This inn's been fully booked for us anyway!" she retorted. Had it? I didn't know. So not only had we gotten an excellent

room, we'd also booked the entire inn! How luxurious…

"You're still bothering people. Stop it."

With a furrowed brow, my brother answered the door, and Lord Clarke peeked out from behind him, asking, "What happened, Lettie?"

"No, this wasn't my doing," I replied awkwardly. I had no issues here! Brie did!

"Your Highness!" Brie exclaimed, leaning forward. "It's your honeymoon! The royal couple should share a room!" She clenched her fists. "I will share the room with Lord Nadir!"

"Wait, wait, wait!" I jumped in to stop her. "*That* was your angle?!"

"Don't make it sound like I'm doing something wrong! I simply think newlyweds should share a room, and if it just so happens, perchance, that one thing leads to another, it's a bonus, that's all!"

"You're a little too honest!" It was classic Brie, truthfully.

My brother looked her up and down, then snorted. "You're really pushing it."

"What's that supposed to mean?!" Brie shouted, looking like she was about to lunge at him.

"Stay calm, Brie! Deep breaths! In, out…"

"That's not the kind of pushing he was talking about!" she snapped. I was just trying to help her relax! Picky, picky. She turned to Lord Clarke and asked, "And Your Highness would want to be in the same room as Leticia, right?!"

Lord Clarke shyly scratched his shapely cheek. "Well, I'm not quite sure about sharing a room immediately…"


room
together

Brie let out her loudest shout yet. “Another wuss!”

***

“This is so good…” Brie mumbled over and over as she chewed. The food had calmed her down immediately.

Of course, unlike last time, this was a full course meal, and a very luxurious one. That wasn’t to say I disliked commoner food, mind you; on the contrary, I quite enjoyed it. I’d have loved to eat it again if I could.

“You’re not holding your knife and fork correctly,” my brother muttered to Brie. “Do not make noise. Do not move your arms any more than you need to.”

“Ah, the meal’s amazing, but my seat neighbor is such a pain…” To be fair, she herself had admitted to a lack of manners, so her faulty table etiquette was understandable. Still, my brother couldn’t help but correct her. “Why can’t I at least eat the way I want…?”

Brie did at least have enough common sense not to yell at the table, so she didn’t shout back at my brother despite her irritation. She just quietly bottled up her dissatisfaction instead.

“You’re a noble. This is the bare minimum,” Nadir chided. “And I *just* told you not to make noise.”

“Spoken like an annoying mother-in-law.”

“Say that again, I dare you.”

“A *wicked* mother-in-law.”

“You’ll regret this later.”

“I have a poor memory, so I won’t remember enough to regret it.”

Brie and my brother sure seemed to be having fun! Although they *were* having an intense foot fight under the table.

“Why can’t I eat with Maria?” Prince Louis asked with a sigh, slumping his shoulders.

Maria, who was standing behind me, smiled and said, “I’m at work at the moment, that’s why. I’ll have my own meal later.”

“I want to eat with you!”

“You may not.” Maria’s flat refusal made Prince Louis slump his shoulders even more.

“I’m here too, you know,” Lyle chimed in.

“You’re my attendant, so of course you eat after I do. Last time you only ate with me out of necessity.”

“The favoritism,” Lyle mumbled tearfully. Which was a very Lyle thing to do.

“Hey Brie,” I said, “they’re supposed to have a really large group bath here. Let’s take a soak later.”

“Why are you sticking to me like glue?” Brie asked, taking a break from her battle with my brother to look at me with pity. Why was she giving me that look? “Why don’t you take a bath with His Highness instead? Taking a bath together is one of the highlights of a honeymoon.”

“Not all couples take baths together.”

“Prince Clarke, you’d like to bathe with Leticia, would you not?”

Lord Clarke—who, unlike Brie, had been eating with pristine table manners—thought for a moment before a faint blush graced his cheeks. “It’s still too soon for that.”

Brie instinctively lifted her fork. Nadir quickly confiscated it.

“Oh, this isn’t good,” Brie murmured. “He was such a wuss that I felt the urge to kill him for a moment.”

She shook her head repeatedly, trying to suppress her feelings, but Nadir held her head in place. “Do not move your head while eating,” he told her.

“Don’t you ever want to be with your husband?” Brie asked me, ignoring my brother. Lord Clarke looked at me intensely, awaiting my answer. Which he shouldn’t have!

“It’s not that I don’t want to be with him,” I said vaguely.

Seeming dissatisfied with my answer, Brie went back to wrestling her food. Lord Clarke, on the other hand, was deeply moved, if his blush was any indication. Why did he have to react like a tender maiden?

“That’s not how you should cut your meat,” Nadir told Brie. “Your slices are too big and unrefined.”

“That’s it,” Brie said. “The rich man I marry won’t have a strict mother *or* an annoying sister.”

“Women are not the only ones who can be cruel,” Nadir observed.

“Fine. The rich man I marry won’t have any irritating *relatives*,” Brie declared, taking a big bite of her steak.

***

Despite some complaints along the way, we safely arrived at our destination.

“Wow! What a magnificent palace!” Brie said, looking up at the castle in awe. Indeed, the royal palace of Delbaran was large, possibly even bigger than the one where I lived.

“It’s expanded over time,” Prince Louis boasted proudly. “That’s why its shape is so unique.” The shape of the palace was indeed a bit irregular, but somehow, that only made it more beautiful. “I’ll be your guide from here on. Maria, walk with me.”

“No, thank you,” Maria replied, dodging Prince Louis’s attempt at taking her arm.

The young prince led the way with a dejected look; Maria and Lily were here as handmaidens, so they walked at the very back. As we progressed through the various sections of the palace, we noticed each section had unique stonework, with walls made of different materials, which was quite fascinating. We were so engrossed in our surroundings that we made it to the throne room in no time.

Prince Louis didn’t even knock before opening the door. Prince or no, knocking was common courtesy! But, ignoring my slight bout of panic, the young prince ran inside, exclaiming, “Father!” before leaping straight onto the man sitting on the throne—presumably the king.

The man hastily caught the young prince, and a crack echoed through the throne room.

“Father?” Prince Louis pulled away slightly, looking at his father’s face.

“Ah, Louis,” said the king—the very picture of a kind old man—as he patted Prince Louis’s head. “Welcome back, my son. Cute as ever, aren’t you? Oh, but you seem to have grown since I last saw you.”

“Really?!” the young prince exclaimed joyfully, bouncing on his father’s lap and eliciting wheezes and whimpers from the old king with each movement.

I felt bad for intruding on their familial moment, but the rest of us simply couldn’t stand here watching their reunion forever. And the king seemed to be at his limit. Lord Clarke and I exchanged nods, then stepped forth.

“Your Majesty the King of Delbaran,” Lord Clarke began. “Thank you for allowing us to stay at your palace. I am Clarke, Crown Prince of Astarl, and this is my wife, Leticia.”

“It’s an honor to meet you, Your Majesty,” I said with a curtsy. “I am Leticia.”

The king, still holding on to Prince Louis, gestured at us with his free hand. “No need for all that. You’ve all taken great care of Louis. A honeymoon is a precious, unique moment; please relax and enjoy your stay.” He slowly set Prince Louis down with the occasional groan and grunt. “I wanted to give you a tour of the palace myself, but I’m afraid I am unable to at the moment.” He stroked his long white beard. “I appear to have just thrown out my back, so I’ll need bed rest for a spell.” He sounded like he needed it.

We nodded, and the king smiled in relief.

“Father, how did you throw out your back?” Prince Louis asked, as if he hadn’t just made it happen himself.

I bit back my urge to accuse the young prince of being the back-throwing culprit in front of his father. We asked him to show us around, and although he seemed reluctant to leave his father’s side, he agreed and we took our leave from the king.

“Surprising, isn’t it?” Lyle said as we walked. “The king is quite advanced in years, and he dotes on Prince Louis, who was born late… *This* is the result.” He pointed conspicuously at Prince Louis.

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” asked *this*—that is, Prince Louis, who was turning red with anger.

Suddenly his previous willful behavior made sense. “I figured he was spoiled, but as it turns out, he was *spoiled*,” I mused.

“You might as well be stabbing me,” Prince Louis muttered, shooting me a dissatisfied glare, which I promptly ignored.

“Did I make any mistakes?” Brie asked anxiously, a far cry from her earlier energetic demeanor. “Was it okay? I didn’t do anything odd, right?” She must have been insecure about her manners and education.

“You just stood quietly behind us, didn’t you? There couldn’t have been a problem,” I replied.

“I’m so nervous…” She’d been raised as the heiress of a barony, and so her education had differed from those that higher-ranking nobles’ daughters received. Not only that, but her family wasn’t wealthy, so she had focused more on business management than noble etiquette. “I’m practically a commoner. I’m sure I’ll make a horrible blunder. Um, can I stay at an inn, maybe?” she asked, restless and fidgety.

“That’s not allowed for safety reasons,” Nadir cut in. We’d come with a small group and couldn’t afford to spare a guard.

Borrowing knights from the Kingdom of Delbaran just for the convenience of a friend of the honeymooning couple would've been bad form.

Brie was dejected at the realization that she had no choice but to stay at the palace. It was a royal palace, yes, but also just a place to stay, so it wasn't that different from a regular inn. Oh, but I did remember my brother scolding Brie for her table manners, so she must've been concerned about eating her meals with the rest of us.

"Hey, cheer up," I said, trying to encourage her. "Your chambers will be right next to mine!"

"How's that supposed to cheer me up?" She didn't seem very encouraged. Why not?! She should've been ecstatic about being next door to her best friend!

"Maria," Prince Louis said to the handmaiden, "I have my own chambers, so I can't stay with you, but should you ever feel lonely, you can stop by anytime!" It made sense that he would be in his own chambers. This was his home, after all; he wouldn't have stayed in a guest room.

"The world could be ending and I would still not stop by," Maria said.

"I'll be right next door to you too," my brother told the dejected Brie, whose eyes lit up for a moment.

"If you allow me to sneak in, perhaps I'll feel better," she suggested. She was more resilient than she appeared, huh?

"I'll make sure security is airtight," Nadir retorted.

"Oh, Leticia!" Prince Clarke said, smiling handsomely at me as I was about to enter my chambers. "Let's go on a picnic tomorrow. Just the two of us."

***

A picnic. Just us. A picnic, with just us two. A picnic, with just Lord Clarke and me.

The words kept swirling endlessly in my head, to the point I didn't even know what they meant anymore. What was a picnic, again? Oh, right! A picnic was, well, a picnic. Goodness, I had to pull myself together.

I slapped my cheeks to psych myself up, and Lord Clarke shuddered. "Wh-What's wrong, Lettie?"

"Oh! Nothing," I replied.

We were already alone, incidentally. Indeed, it was just the two of us. Not only that, we were both riding the same horse, with me clinging to Lord Clarke's back. Our escorts were following a ways behind.

How long had it been since we were alone? I couldn't stop being overly conscious of how closely our bodies were pressed together. Was I sweaty? Stinky? Did I stink of sweat? I was so conscious of it all that I noticed every tiny detail. Like how good Lord Clarke smelled, for instance, despite being a man, and—Wait, no!

I shook my head vigorously to drive away the wicked thoughts, and Lord Clarke again spoke up. "Lettie? Are you tired already?"

"No, not at all! I am! Very! Not! Tired!" Which was precisely why my brain was going into overdrive and tormenting me. Pressing down on my chest with one hand, I mentally chanted, *Calm down, calm down.* As I did, I realized how firm Lord Clarke's abdomen felt against my other hand. Was he more toned than I thought?

"Lettie? Lettie!"

"Ack!"

It appeared we had arrived at our destination while I was adrift on the raging sea of my thoughts. I dismounted the horse with Lord Clarke's help, and one of our escorts handed me a basket.

"Wow!" I gasped as I looked around. We were in a field, covered in unfamiliar blue flowers. I'd never seen anything like them.

"These flowers only grow in Delbaran's climate," Lord Clarke explained. "I wanted to show them to you while we're here."

No wonder I'd never seen them before! I leaned down to get a better look at the rare flowers. "Wow, they smell so sweet!"

"Don't they? Apparently, they're often used as an ingredient in perfume," he noted as I enjoyed the newfound fragrance. How knowledgeable of him! Well, he *was* a diplomat, so it was only natural.

Maybe I should study a bit more too…

"Shall we eat?" he asked.

I nodded and opened the sandwich-filled basket. "Hmm?" There was a folded piece of paper tucked away in the corner. I opened it.

Leticia's a pushover, so you should be assertive.
Kind Regards,
Brianna

I crumpled it up. There was another piece of paper, so I read that as well.

Heirs are best produced quickly.
Cordially,
Nadir

I crumpled that one up too.

"Lettie, what are those?" Lord Clarke asked.

"Nothing." I stuffed the notes into my pocket. Busybodies, those two! "Now then, let us eat," I said, handing Lord Clarke a sandwich before he could say anything else.

"You know," he said after a while, "it's nice to relax like this sometimes." His eyes were starting to droop—perhaps it was due to the warm weather.

I was feeling sleepy myself. "Shall we take a nap?" I suggested.

Lord Clarke declined and, rubbing his eyes, plucked a few flowers nearby to make a flower crown, just like he'd done once upon a time. He placed the crown on my head.

"They suit you," he said.

I looked down bashfully, the sweet scent tickling my nostrils.

Lord Clarke watched me for a while, then reluctantly pushed to his feet. "Shall we go, then?"

"Huh? Already?" I wanted to lounge around the flower field a bit longer.

Sensing my reluctance, Lord Clarke tugged on the horse's reins. "This is a beautiful place, but we can't stay for long."

"Why not?"

"The milous might come out."

"The what?" What in the world was a milou?

Lord Clarke lifted me onto the horse. "Milous are a type of large carnivore that lives around here."

Oh, a carnivore. A large one! Wait. A carnivore. Of the large variety. A big meat-eating thing? A large carnivore?!

"You don't want to be eaten, do you?"

I shook my head vehemently. I must have been pale as a sheet.

Lord Clarke picked a few flowers and handed them to me. "They smell like you, Lettie."

Untrue. I did *not* smell that sweet. With flushed cheeks, I

turned to protest, but he just laughed at me joyfully.

Just like on the way here, I rode back with Lord Clarke, feeling the warmth radiating from his body. The flower crown and bouquet were new, though, and they filled me with a sense of joy.

“Oh my goodness, that’s sweet! Cloyingly so! Are you two so disgustingly sugary that you started smelling like it?!” Aaand Brie just magnificently ruined the pleasant atmosphere from the picnic. As she would.

Maria dried the flowers for me later.

***

At dinner, we were joined by an unfamiliar face. We’d spent a lot of time on the road today, and I’d wanted to take a bath to freshen up, so I was the last to arrive at the table.

“Hello,” the stranger said, smiling warmly at me as I took my seat. “I’m Nathan, Louis’s brother and Crown Prince of Delbaran. My father couldn’t attend, so I’m here in his stead. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

“It’s an honor, Your Highness,” I replied. “I am Leticia, Lord Clarke’s wife.”

So His Majesty’s back was still in bad shape. It made sense; a slipped disc took a while to heal. Since the royal family couldn’t simply leave guests unattended, the crown prince himself had come to entertain us.

“Truly, there was no need to go to such lengths,” Lord Clarke said apologetically. “We’re not here on official business. Please, don’t worry about us. Prince Louis is already here, so there was no need for the crown prince himself to go out of his way.”

The crown prince laughed heartily. “Oh, don’t worry. You’re not wrong, but my brother’s been in your care for quite some time. I simply wanted to meet you all, so please don’t worry. I won’t be joining you for dinner from tomorrow onwards, so you’ll be able to relax and enjoy your meals.” Well, he seemed reasonable! “It would appear someone here is too nervous to eat around me, after all.”

Prince Nathan glanced briefly at Brie, but she seemed too preoccupied with turning pale as she looked back and forth between her knife and fork.

I discreetly nudged her foot under the table so Nathan

wouldn’t notice.

“Eek! I-I’m quite all right! Q-Q-Q-Quite. I won’t make any blunders. I won’t make any blunders…” Brie did not look all right in the slightest. In fact, she was trembling. As I watched, her face turned even paler.

Prince Louis spoke up to reassure her. “Brie, was it? Don’t worry. My brother doesn’t concern himself with trivial matters. You won’t get in trouble for dropping or breaking a utensil or anything.”

“I-I won’t break anything!” She conspicuously did not deny the possibility of dropping something, but still, his words seemed to have reassured her somewhat, and she stopped trembling.

“Yes, please don’t worry. I won’t mind,” Prince Nathan assured her. “There’s no need to shiver quite so much. In fact, every time you do, your bosom— Ahem! You might end up injuring yourself, for example.”

He had totally been about to say something inappropriate: his eyes were practically glued to Brie’s ample chest.

“Thank…you,” Brie mumbled dubiously. The crown prince’s gaze remained right where it was.

“My brother cannot stop himself from ogling women’s chests,” Louis explained. That much was obvious, with how Prince Nathan’s gaze was laser focused on Brie’s assets. He then turned to me with a smirk. “So *you* have nothing to worry about.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?!” I blurted out without thinking. I took a quick look at Prince Nathan, but he was, in fact, not sparing me a single glance.

“Indeed, be at ease,” Nathan said. “My interest is focused on one thing only at the moment.” He meant it too. His focus hadn’t wavered for even a second.

Yet somehow, I wasn’t very reassured. It felt a little backhanded. Sorry for having a small bust! Actually, it wasn’t even small. It was average! Brie’s was just huge.

“What fantastic boobage,” Prince Nathan murmured. “Marvelous…”

“No one’s ever stared at me so openly before…” Brie tried to hide her chest with her arms to escape his gaze, but that only made it puff up even more.

“Oh! Even better!”

“Harasser! Pervert!”

“Yes! Yell at me more!”

“Um, is your brother always like this?!” she asked Prince Louis.

“Well, he wasn’t always,” Louis replied. He told her to just ignore him and started eating.

I figured worrying about it would be a waste of my time, so I just started eating as well.

“L-Lettie…” Lord Clarke mumbled, looking at me with his cheeks flushed. “I-I think yours is just right…”

His bashful comment didn’t make me feel better at all, so I just focused on my meal instead. He didn’t have to rub salt in my wound!

That night, a scream came from Brie’s room.

***

“You heard it, didn’t you?!” Brie shouted during breakfast, without so much as a greeting beforehand.

I blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“Me screaming last night!”

Oh! That. I clapped my hands. “Oh, I’m sorry! I thought I was dreaming!”

“Liar! You just didn’t care!”

“I didn’t *not* care! I was just obeying my body’s demands for sleep!”

“Which means you did hear it!”

Oh. Whoops.

With that slip of my tongue, Brie knew I was lying. She approached me, not bothering to conceal her anger.

“Hey! Put down the fork!” I chastised her. “It’s bad manners to point it at people!”

“That is the least of my concerns right now.” She was clearly furious.

I forced a smile, backing away from her fork. “Um, so, what happened?”

That question only further stoked her fire. “‘What happened’?! What *didn’t* happen!” She slammed the fork onto the table. “If Lily hadn’t come to help, it would’ve been an utter disaster!”

Well, she seemed fine, at least. I looked over at Lily standing behind me. “Hey, Lily… You didn’t come help me when *I* was crying and pleading…”

“My assistance is contingent on who and why,” Lily said coolly. How mean! I really had wanted help back then! Lily had to have

noticed my dissatisfaction, but her expression remained composed. “I couldn’t ignore a man sneaking into a woman’s room in the middle of the night.”

“Oh, Lily,” Brie murmured tearfully, gazing into Lily’s eyes and sighing. “I nearly fell in love with you there and then…”

Wait, she *did* say “nearly,” right? Not that I had that sort of prejudice, but Lily was *my* dear handmaiden! I wasn’t going to let Brie have her! Which was not the kind of thing I should’ve been thinking, but it was Brie’s fault for acting so enamored.

I cleared my throat. “But if he’d done something and taken responsibility, wouldn’t that have solved your problem?” After all, the sneaky man in question was the crown prince of this kingdom. It was like digging for gold and finding an entire mine!

Brie sighed. “I would prefer a wealthy local. This place is quite far from my home, and… Well, even if he had done something, I doubt *that* man would’ve married me.” There would be more disadvantages than advantages, she went on to explain as she took a drink of water. “Sleep with me tonight?”

“Huh? No, thanks.”

“You would sit idly by with your friend’s chastity in jeopardy?!” she protested, this time grabbing a knife and raising it at me.

Lily made no move to stop her, and Maria simply smiled. Lord Clarke and my brother, incidentally, despite the statement the day before that we weren’t here on business, weren’t having breakfast with us because they needed to “take care of something.”

I had no choice but to restrain Brie’s hand myself, but she was so much stronger than me. Did chest size correlate with arm strength? “Fine, fine!” I conceded reluctantly. “I’ll do it!”

Brie lowered her arm. “You promise?”

“Yes, yes!” I assured her.

Satisfied, Brie finally started eating. With neither my brother nor any other dignitaries present today, she didn’t seem nervous at all.

Something was still bothering me, though. “Prince Louis, is your brother all right in the head?”

“He’s very good at his job,” the prince replied. “It’s just when it comes to women that he’s…true to his desires.”

Sounded like an awful man. “It must be difficult to have a womanizer for a crown prince.”

“Actually, no. He’s so focused on looking for the ‘ideal

boobage' that no such problems have arisen. On the contrary, he's being pressured to take a wife."

Wow, Prince Louis just said "boobage." Wait, not just "boobage…"

"'Ideal boobage'?"

"Indeed. It sounds like he really liked Lady Brianna's boobage. In fact, he was shouting to the winds about how great it is."

Brie looked dead inside. "So this is what it feels like to be seen as a piece of meat…"

"I-Indeed…" I agreed. Though it was more that she was being seen as a pair of boobs. For the first time, I felt sympathy, not envy, for her chest size.

"My brother is overjoyed to have found the ideal boobage," Prince Louis noted. "He'll probably be persistent." I wished he'd stop making everyone even more anxious.

In an attempt to lighten the somber mood, I decided to change the subject. "Prince Louis, you're the third prince, right? What about your other brother?"

"Ah, Dale…" Prince Louis stopped eating and gazed into the distance. "He renounced his right to the throne, refused to serve as a noble, became a commoner and an adventurer, married a woman from his adventuring party, and now they're expecting their fourth child."

H-How free-spirited of him!

I continued my meal, musing about the strong personalities these brothers had.

***

"Briiie," I whined as I followed behind her, exhausted. "Are we done yet?"

I was hoping the answer would be yes, but she just shot me a glance and kept walking. "What are you talking about?!" she asked. "We've barely seen anything at all!"

She looked at everything, making no effort to hide her excitement. Her playful demeanor was fitting for her age and quite cute, except when she'd mumble things like, "I've never seen something like this before. It may sell well for being unique," and also, "Imported items do tend to fetch good prices from wealthy customers." That was *not* cute.

"This place is amazing!" she exclaimed, her eyes sparkling. "It's practically a gold mine!" Sparkly eyes, awful words.

“Can we just call it a day already…?” I pleaded.

“How are you so tired? All you’re doing is window shopping.” Brie tilted her head in genuine confusion. I could tell from her face she truly did not understand.

It was as she said: I was only window shopping. Brie was bargaining on her own, and arranging for her items to be delivered later, so we weren’t carrying any bags. Still, going from shop to shop was exhausting!

“Are you worried about the costs?” she asked. “Don’t worry. The only things I charged to His Highness’s account were the very first dress and shoes I bought. I couldn’t buy all of this on our country’s dime, after all. Everything else is for my business and paid out of pocket, so don’t worry.”

So she wasn’t just a money-grubber! Huh. Brie proudly asserted she knew her limits, but that was besides the point! And I was a little moved, but that was also besides the point!

“I’m tired. I wanna go back,” I mumbled.

“I swear, you have no stamina,” she said. Why wasn’t *she* tired? Maybe she didn’t get tired when it came to business matters? “Although I suppose we have seen most of what there is to see. All right, let’s head back.”

My eyes welled with tears as the words “head back” finally spilled from Brie’s lips. This had to be the twentieth back-and-forth we’d had about going back. I was so elated at the prospect of escaping this shopping hell that I could’ve danced.

“Great! Let’s go!” I exclaimed. “Let’s go right now! Now!”

“Where did all your exhaustion go?” she asked, exasperated. “Honestly, you couldn’t be more transparent if you tried.”

I paid no mind to her exasperation and had Lily arrange for a carriage to take us back to the palace. The storefront was too narrow for one to pass, and it’d have to be parked farther away, so Maria was standing a ways from us, waiting for it.

“I’m so glad I was made to come along on this honeymoon,” Brie said. “I got an expensive dress for free out of it!”

“What do you mean, you were ‘made to come along’?” I asked.

“Was I not? To be precise, I was *dragged* along on this trip.”

“Urk…” She had me there.

While we were waiting for Lily in front of the shop, Brie suddenly said, “Oh? Isn’t that His Highness Prince Clarke?”

“Lord Clarke is working. He wouldn’t be…” I trailed off. “It *is* him!”

There was no mistaking it. That was definitely Lord Clarke, emerging from what appeared to be a restaurant and quickly getting into a carriage. With a woman beside him.

"What the…" I murmured.

"Oh, no, this sounds like more than I bargained for. I'll be going—" Brie started to say, stepping toward a newly arrived Lily, but I grabbed her arm before she could leave.

"You're coming with me, aren't you, Brie?"

"No. This sounds too complicated for me."

"You could be in for a front row seat to a dramatic showdown. Come with me."

"More like I'd be thrown onto the stage. No thank you."

"Lily! After that carriage!" I instructed as I pushed the unwilling Brie into our own carriage, which promptly started to follow the one Lord Clarke had boarded.

Brie sighed. "Dragged along again…"

"Are you my friend or not?!" I demanded.

"This is the worst…" Whatever. Her complaints didn't matter.

Just you wait, Lord Clarke! I thought to myself, burning with determination.

***

"They ate together, checked out a general goods store, stopped by a clothing shop… It's a standard date course," Brie mused. She'd just complained about being "dragged" into this, and now she was acting like some sort of ace detective!

We were still following Lord Clarke, and she looked like she was really enjoying herself speculating about his actions. She was so proactive, I half wondered if she was just going to start charging ahead to check what he was up to. What happened to "too complicated for me"?

As we stealthily resumed following Lord Clarke's carriage, Brie continued her analysis. "But they've been keeping their distance, which isn't very datelike. No arms around shoulders, no holding hands. They're talking, but there's no intimacy," she pointed out. "I mean, people on a date should be smiling, right? They looked perfectly stoic! Did you notice?"

"Yes, I did, but…" I trailed off. Now that Brie mentioned it, while it was true that Lord Clarke had been stopping by several places with that woman, they'd kept a strange distance and

didn’t seem to be having a romantic time. Watching them, I also felt something was off. This didn’t feel like a date. “You’re right. It’s weird…”

“Well, if they’re of the opposite sex and not in a romantic affair…” Brie pondered, looking at me like she’d just had an idea. “Could they be long-lost siblings?!”

What.

“Now you’re just reaching. I’ve never heard anything to that effect.” A secret child in the royal family would’ve been a huge scandal, after all.

“Tsk, tsk, tsk,” Brie chided with a spark in her eyes. “Truth is stranger than fiction, you know!” She had a mystery novel nearby that she’d brought to read on the way back from our trip. A mystery enthusiast, clearly.

“Pardon me,” Maria interjected apologetically. She had been trying to stay out of our conversation. “We’ve arrived.”

I hastily got out of the carriage to find myself at a familiar location.

“Bringing his mistress under the roof he shares with his wife!” Brianna exclaimed excitedly. “Bold move!” Hadn’t she just speculated this woman was his sister? Goodness.

The sister theory had been thrown out the window in favor of the previous hypothesis that this woman was his lover. Which, admittedly, could be more plausible. Bringing a lover to where one lived wasn’t unusual—provided the wife wasn’t present. And indeed, our carriage had arrived back at the royal palace of Delbaran, where we were staying for our honeymoon.

“Would he truly risk bringing her here with all the prying eyes, though?” I wondered. “Isn’t that too dangerous?”

“Well, he *is* right here with her, isn’t he?” Brie retorted.

He was, yes, but still! All it would take was one of the palace guards informing me, and he’d have been immediately exposed. Would he really choose the palace to dally with a mistress? I would’ve booked a different lodging, personally.

“We cannot let this stand! Let’s go!” Brianna exclaimed, grabbing my hand. She took off running, and I tried to match her pace, careful not to trip.

“Wh-Where are we going?” I asked.

“Duh! We’re going to catch them in the act!” she replied excitedly, running straight for Lord Clarke’s chambers.

“What?! Right now?! All of a sudden?!”

“His mistress is right there! When else?!”

“W-Wait! I’m not ready!” I tried to dig in my heels, but Brie was stronger and dragged me along without hesitation.

“You’re his legitimate wife! It’s best for your future if you nip this in the bud!”

“B-But—”

“Quit your whining and go put on a fun show— I mean, go give him a piece of your mind!”

“Did you just tell me to ‘put on a fun show’?!” I snapped, still trying to resist.

“Enough already! Women must be bold!” Ignoring my attempts at resistance, Brie dragged me to Lord Clarke’s chambers—and there were clearly people within—then shoved me inside.

I tried to leave the room immediately, but the door shut firmly behind me and wouldn’t open. How dare she! She was going to pay for this!

“Lettie?” Lord Clarke’s unmistakable voice came from behind me as I clung to the door.

Smoothly, I straightened up and smiled politely. Like Brie had told me, women needed to be bold! “Hello, Lord Clarke,” I said. “Who might this be?”

Unbothered by my smile, Lord Clarke gestured at the lady beside him. “Oh. Allow me to introduce you. This is a noble of Delbaran.”

The lady stepped forward and extended her hand. I shook it, hiding my bitterness behind a practiced smile directed at my husband’s alleged lover. She was tall for a woman, with beautiful features and a graceful smile. When she looked at me, I got the feeling she looked similar to someone I knew.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Oh. That voice. I…was wrong. “I am Neil, a duke and the king’s younger brother.”

Honestly, I wanted to praise myself for managing to keep my pleasant smile instead of gasping in shock.

***

“Apologies for startling you,” Duke Neil said with perfect manners and a refined tone.

“No apologies necessary,” I replied. I knew he looked familiar. He was the spitting image of Prince Louis.

“You must be surprised by my lack of resemblance to His Majesty the King,” the duke said gently, with a warm smile. That wasn’t the thing I was surprised about, however. Not at all.

Not that I could articulate this with any manner of clarity, so I simply smiled vaguely instead. “Um… Duke…Neil, was it?” *Ack! Stupid me.* “Ah, that would be your given name, correct? Might I ask the name of your noble house?” I wasn’t quite so ignorant as to call a high-ranking noble of an allied nation by his first name immediately upon meeting him, after all.

“Oh!” Neil exclaimed in realization. “Well, since I was originally a prince, my noble house was established later as a matter of formality. I’m not used to that title, so please, just call me Neil, if you would.”

“Of course.” Well, if that was his preference, then there was no problem.

Speaking of calling people by their given names, the reason I did that with Prince Louis was because I didn’t want to show him any respect. Nobody would think to be polite to a kidnapper, after all. He should count himself lucky that I even attached “Prince” to his name!

As Duke Neil himself had mentioned, he didn’t resemble His Majesty the King at all, but rather looked just like Prince Louis. Perhaps the little prince would grow up into a beautiful man like his uncle. Their auras were completely different, though. Prince Louis had a strong-willed air about him, whereas Duke Neil had a strangely comforting, gentle demeanor. He felt almost sacred, like a statue of an angel in a church. Prince Louis could never pull that off.

“Um, Duke Neil, might I ask why you’re in Lord Clarke’s chambers?” I figured I should at least ask about the matter that had been nagging at me.

It was Lord Clarke who replied, smiling. “Duke Neil and I meet on occasion during official duties. We ended up chatting and became friends. I figured it would be nice to have tea in my chambers, so I invited him here.”

“We were taking a stroll around town earlier,” Duke Neil added with a smile of his own. They seemed like good friends. I felt ashamed for following them and being so openly jealous.

I took a sip from the cup of tea that was offered to me and exhaled, glancing over at the duke. Was this an appropriate question to ask so soon? I wasn’t sure, but I was too restless and

couldn’t help myself, looking over at the two men as they calmly drank their own tea.

“Um…” I swallowed, carefully adjusting my tone to avoid offending him and keeping my expression as one of genuine curiosity. “Duke Neil, may I ask why you’re dressed as a woman…?”

It was baffling! He was wearing a beautiful gown, women’s jewelry, makeup, and even heels. The man looked like a gorgeous lady from every angle.

With a delicate, decidedly feminine gesture, Duke Neil set down his cup. “You see,” he began, turning to me with a broad, mesmerizing smile that could make anyone fall at a glance, “I’m gorgeous, aren’t I?”

I beg your pardon? My momentary captivation shattered as his words yanked me back down to reality. Something didn’t feel right about what he’d just said.

“And when I’m in a gorgeous dress, I’m even more gorgeous,” he continued.

I took a step back from the seemingly enamored-with-himself duke. Forget what I’d just said. This man was no angel! He was just a narcissist!

Lord Clarke was watching Duke Neil with amusement. “Isn’t he an interesting character?”

Maybe he could’ve been described as “interesting,” yes, but I wasn’t sure I wanted anything to do with him.

“I’m simply enjoying my own beauty,” the duke explained. “Ah, but don’t worry. I don’t dress like this out of an interest in men.”

Was that supposed to make me feel better? How, exactly? My brain couldn’t process any of this, so I simply nodded along.

Duke Neil nodded back, satisfied. “Ah, that’s right!” he said, clapping his hands as though he’d just remembered something. “His Highness Prince Clarke and I weren’t simply on a leisure stroll today. Lady Leticia, do you perhaps enjoy hot springs?”

“Hot springs, you say?” I echoed, puzzled by the sudden change in topic. “I do, yes.”

“You see, there’s a hot spring resort in my territory. I came here to invite you there. It’s a perfect spot for a honeymoon, wouldn’t you agree?”

Hot springs were indeed a classic honeymoon destination. I glanced at Lord Clarke.

“That sounds fun.” He seemed enthusiastic as well.

“It does sound fun,” I agreed.

It was decided we’d be going the next day, so I went to bed early. And that night, a scream echoed from Brie’s room.

Ack! I completely forgot!

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“You’re a cruel, cruel woman, breaking your promise to me,” Brie ranted on and on, clearly resentful.

“I said I’m sorry,” I protested weakly. I had indeed forgotten my promise to sleep with her.

But it was understandable! It wasn’t every day that you found out that the person you thought was your husband’s mistress was actually a pretty man in a dress, who wasn’t even into other men and just dressed as a woman to look prettier. Of course my earlier promise had slipped my mind!

“Speaking of being cruel, I seem to remember you leaving me in Lord Clarke’s chambers and retreating to your own,” I said accusingly.

“Of course I did! I waited in the hallway for some time, but you didn’t come back out. What was I supposed to do, wait there forever?”

She…had a point.

“And I went to your chambers later to hear what had happened,” she added.

“Because you were curious!”

“You got me there,” Brie stuck her tongue out playfully. “To be fair, I was so excited to hear the conclusion of that sordid tale that I forgot our promise as well.”

“So you also forgot!”

“You’re still awful, though!” She complained and complained, but she sure was stuffing her face full of the sweets Maria had prepared beforehand. A settlement of sorts from me, incidentally.

“So, what happened to you last night?” I asked my pastry-munching friend.

She frowned in annoyance. “Nothing, as you can see from the fact I’m fine!” She snorted, then sipped some of the tea Maria had brewed in advance for our carriage ride, managing not to spill any. “Lily helped me, and she slept with me after!”

Gasp!

“Lily… You never once slept with me…”

“It is contingent on who and why,” Lily reminded me heartlessly. How could she prioritize my friend over me? I’d been with her since childhood! I’d have given anything to take naps with her when I was little!

“Anyway,” I said, turning back to Brie, “you’re fine, so clearly there was no issue.”

“Yes, there was. There was!” Brie didn’t have to say that twice! And she stuffed another pastry into her mouth.

“I did bring you to the hot springs as an apology,” I pointed out.

“Me and everyone else,” she retorted. “This doesn’t count.” She was correct. I had, in fact, been so worried about this trip to the hot springs that I ended up bringing everyone along. “And there’s one more thing!” she continued, putting down her pastry. “Why aren’t you riding with your husband in his carriage?!”

I covered my ears at her shout. Her voice carried a little too well, so I really wished she wouldn’t yell inside the carriage. “Well, I wanted to ask about what happened to you yesterday,” I explained. “And I wanted to ask Prince Louis about Duke Neil. *And* it’s convenient to bring a handmaiden along as an attendant.”

Prince Louis pouted. “I wanted to hang out with Maria.”

“And that’s why I brought Lily,” I told him.

He glared at me. “You’re a horrible person.”

“Better than you, though,” I said, glaring right back.

Brie just sighed.

I’d wanted to know what had happened to her last night, all right? And I couldn’t just talk about Duke Neil while he was right there! That would’ve been impolite. So I’d asked Prince Louis to ride in this carriage. And I couldn’t simply have Duke Neil ride with strangers, so he and Lord Clarke were together. There had still been room, so Lyle and my brother were also in their carriage. And, to annoy Prince Louis, I’d had Lily accompany us and left Maria back at the palace.

A perfect arrangement!

“So,” I said to Prince Louis, “your uncle’s cross-dressing thing. Is that just a hobby?” This pressing question was one of the reasons for this perfect arrangement, after all. I had to ask!

“It is, yes,” he replied. “He says he doesn’t want to be a woman. He just thinks women’s clothes are prettier than men’s.”

In his pursuit of beauty, Duke Neil seemed to have stopped caring about gender differences.

I stared intently at the boy who was the spitting image of his uncle. “So what are *your* thoughts on cross-dressing?”

“Never!” he snapped. “Absolutely not!”

“I’m serious, though! You look just like the duke. I think it’d suit you.”

“And this is exactly why I didn’t want you to meet him!” Ah, so he’d anticipated this. I still thought he’d look good in a dress, though.

“The duke is unmarried, correct?”

“That’s right,” Prince Louis said, his face scrunching up. “He only loves himself.”

A narcissist through and through.

Prince Louis continued to make a face. It was probably hard on him that his uncle, who looked exactly like him, was constantly calling himself gorgeous. Although if you asked me, Prince Louis himself was overflowing with confidence and self love too.

I decided against voicing this thought, however, and the carriage fell silent for a while as I watched Brie munch on her pastries. There was still something I wanted to say, though.

“Lily… Sleep with me too.”

“I would rather not.”

Denied…

***

“So this is the hot spring…”

We’d stopped in front of a small cabin that stood amid the rising steam. Even from a distance, the heat was intense.

“Now then, please change into these,” Duke Neil said, handing all of us white garments.

“What are they?” I asked.

“Everyone is required to wear these garments to enter our hot spring.”

Huh. Okay. I accepted the garment—not that I could’ve refused—and entered the cabin. Inside there were two doors.

“This is the men’s changing room, and that one is the women’s,” the duke explained.

Following his instructions, I entered through the women’s

door and undressed so I could put on the white dress Duke Neil had handed me.

"It's so bulky. Is this standard for hot springs?" I wondered.

Although I'd told the duke I liked hot springs, this was actually my first time at one. My princess lessons had kept me very busy, and my brother had never been nice enough to take me anywhere. All my knowledge about this kind of place came from books.

"Um, I'm pretty sure normally you'd go in nude," Brie pointed out, tilting her head in confusion.

"Huh. Oh, Lily, are you not going in?" I asked my handmaiden.

"Of course not. I'm here as your attendant. I'll wait here."

"Oh..." Aw, man. I was hoping to bathe with Lily.

Brie and I put on our dresses and exited out the door at the back. We both exclaimed in awe at the sight of the huge milky-white hot spring. I could hardly contain my excitement; I'd only ever read about this kind of thing!

"It's sooo big!" Brie exclaimed. It was her first time seeing one this large too, and she was thrilled. "It almost feels like a waste for it to be just the two of us here..."

Next to the spring were a few small stools and soap, so we sat down and washed up. Quite the difficult task with these dresses on! I gathered and pinned up my hair to avoid getting it wet—I remembered a book mentioning that one shouldn't get one's hair in the water if possible. Thinking back on what the book said to do, I poured hot water over myself before heading to the spring. Slowly, I dipped my feet in, feeling the warmth spread from my toes as I gradually immersed my whole body.

"Oh, this is so relaxing," Brie murmured. Submerged up to her shoulders, she let out a languid sigh.

I fully understood how she felt. *Hot springs are so great...*

Following Brie's lead, I submerged myself up to my shoulders and exhaled deeply. This was different from taking a simple bath; the water was white and slightly viscous.

"Feels sooo good," I said, completely lost in the sensation.

"...Lettie?" My relaxed muscles immediately tensed at the sound of a voice that should not have been there. I turned around to find, as I thought, Lord Clarke sitting with us in the spring.

"Huh?! Wh-Why are you here?!" In a panic, I tried to cover myself—then remembered I was fully dressed, to my relief.

Fortunately, this fabric was suitable for bathing, and fully opaque!

And that's when it dawned on me: this was a mixed bath, and *that* was why we had to wear clothes!

I glared accusingly at the man sitting next to Lord Clarke. "You never mentioned this!"

"If I had, you wouldn't have come," Duke Neil pointed out with a friendly smile. He too was wearing a dress, while the other men seemed to be wearing pants of some sort.

"Of course I wouldn't have!" I snapped, losing my pretense of composure. This was too much!

Duke Neil didn't so much as flinch at my red-faced, angry approach. "This place is popular with newlyweds, and ideal for shy couples who are too embarrassed to bathe together in the nude. And I've booked it exclusively for us today, so no one else will be joining. Don't worry."

Like that made me feel any better!

Noticing my state, Brie came over with a groan. "If I'd known this was a mixed bath, I'd have charged the men for the view. I can't believe I inadvertently gave them a free peek!" I could tell she was frustrated, but I didn't exactly understand her thought process.

Having overheard Brie's muttering, my brother snorted. "You should be thanking *us* for looking at you."

"What did you say?!" Aaand now they were glaring at each other. What great friends they were. At any rate, we were all dressed, so there was no "view" to charge for.

Still, clothed though we might've been, I was embarrassed. All these men, watching me bathe…

I took a peek at the men around us. My husband. My brother. A child. A cross-dresser… Oh! Suddenly I felt much better!

Lord Clarke gripped my shoulders, for some reason. "Lettie." Ah. This feeling. It had been a while. "You're too close to Duke Neil."

Because I'd moved closer to yell at Duke Neil earlier, we were now at arm's length. Lord Clarke wedged himself between us, then moved me aside to put even more distance.

"You shouldn't get too close to a man while dressed like that," he chastised me.

Do I really need to be wary of Duke Neil of all people? I wondered… Not that voicing that thought would've been wise.

Instead, I simply replied, “I understand.”

Satisfied with my response, Lord Clarke let go of my shoulders and settled next to me. Right next to me, in fact. A little *too* close, maybe? I couldn’t help but be conscious of it, and the relaxation I’d felt earlier crumbled to dust, replaced by tense anxiety. We were bathing together! I glared at Duke Neil for bringing us to this place. We…we weren’t ready for this yet!

“I wish Maria was here instead of the melon lady,” Prince Louis lamented.

“Excuse me?! What was *that* supposed to mean?!” Brie snapped, and now she and the little prince were arguing while my brother casually read a book. Wasn’t it going to get wet?

“I meant what I said.”

“You irritating child!”

“I much prefer my pure Maria over someone like you!”

“As if *I’d* ever want a child like…you…” Brie trailed off suddenly.

Wondering what was wrong, I followed her gaze and saw something beyond the walls surrounding the hot spring. Something very, *very* big.

“Huh? What? What is that?” Brie stammered, staring at the looming figure in confusion.

The thing was covered in fur, had big ears, and its front teeth peeked out of its mouth. Pads were visible underneath its raised front paws, and its eyes were round.

A rabbit. A gigantic one. Five times the size of a person.

“A…rabbit?” Brie said, surprised. She sighed in relief. I was relieved, myself, but…were there really giant rabbits in this country?

Unlike the two of us, the men slowly backed away from the rabbit, and Lord Clarke gripped my shoulders again. “Leticia, do you remember what I told you in the flower field?”

“The what now?” Had he said something? I couldn’t remember.

“That’s a milou.”

A milou. Milou? What was that, again? I struggled to recall it.

Lord Clarke gently pulled me away, keeping himself in front of me. “A carnivore.”

Carnivore. Carnivore? Carnivore… Wait. Carnivore?! “A carni—”

“Shh!” Lord Clarke hurriedly clasped a hand over my mouth before I could scream, and I nodded vigorously in response.

As we slowly backed away, I made eye contact with the milou,

which turned its large frame toward us. *This is the end,* I thought, bracing for the worst as Lord Clarke held me close.

But nothing happened.

Still clutching Lord Clarke, I looked up at him as if to ask what was going on.

"Heeey!" came an unfamiliar voice. "You guys okay down there?" I looked toward the voice and saw a man standing on top of the wall. "Sorry about that! I was trying to kill it, but it ran all the way here! Didn't mean to scare you!"

There was no longer any sign of the milou, but the man had mentioned trying to kill it, so maybe it'd fallen on the other side of the wall. In any case, it was definitely gone, and likely thanks to this man.

Lord Clarke and I sighed in relief and let go of one another. "Thank you," Lord Clarke said.

The man beamed brightly in response. "Nah, that was my bad. I took a quest to hunt the milou, but I didn't finish it off fast enough. Sorry!" He was handsome, more rugged than beautiful, with the most developed muscles I'd ever seen. I'd definitely never met him before, but he felt familiar, somehow.

As I pondered this, Prince Louis yelled loudly, "Brother!"

Brother. Oh!

"The adventuring prince!"

***

"Ah ha ha ha! Man, I never thought I'd run into Louis here, of all people!" exclaimed Dale. Formerly a prince and now a commoner, he'd asked us to address him without any titles.

"We're so sorry for the trouble, and for intruding…"

"No, no, I was the one who insisted you guys come! Make yourselves at home!"

We were currently visiting Dale's home. Though he was a commoner now, he made good coin from adventuring and lived in a much bigger house than I'd expected. Even with all of us visiting, it didn't feel cramped at all.

"What a lovely home," I said. It wasn't opulent like a noble's estate, but the simple wooden construction exuded warmth. I liked it.

"Isn't it?! I worked hard on it!"

"Wow!" He'd made it himself? Amazing!

“I have a lot of kiddos, so I wanted to save as much money as I could.”

“For a former royal, this man sure is frugal,” cackled Dale’s wife Laura. She was a former adventurer who Dale had fallen head over heels for; he’d repeatedly asked her to marry him. It was easy to see why—the woman was a beauty! Her looks were vibrant and lively—a contrast with, say, Duke Neil’s delicate, ethereal features.

“Oh! By the way, Louis, our fourth was just born! Come look!”

“Brother! We *told* you to inform us of the birth of new children immediately!” Prince Louis complained. Just recently, he had mentioned that Dale’s fourth child hadn’t been born yet, so he hadn’t known. “It’s one surprise after another with you! We couldn’t even bring you a gift!”

The grumbling young prince was led to the baby and we, of course, followed.

“Ta-daaa! Fresh out of the oven! My fourth boy!” Dale announced proudly.

The baby was indeed very young, likely born just recently. It was small, with hardly any hair. Everyone collectively felt warm and fuzzy at the sight of the sleeping infant.

Prince Louis reached for the baby’s tiny hand, watching as it wrapped around his finger. “Oh, what a cutie… Hello, little one. I’m your uncle, Louis.” All of his earlier anger vanished, his expression softening instantly. What a doting uncle!

“I’ll bring a gift next time,” Duke Neil said, acting like a proper uncle to Dale while still in his usual feminine attire. “Congratulations.”

“Yeah! Thanks, uncle!”

Babies are so cute, I thought to myself, gazing at the baby in awe.

“I bet I can guess what’s on your mind,” Brie said, sidling up to me with a grin.

“You don’t have to.”

“You’re totally thinking you want Lord Clarke’s baby. Right?”

“I said you didn’t have to!”

“So you don’t deny it.” Brie’s words made me freeze, and she walked away with a grin, saying, “Ha ha! Gottem!” Damn it! She’d only come over to pick on me, that jerk!

Still, a baby. A baby, huh… Yeah… “No, not yet. It’s too soon,” I muttered to myself.

“Too soon for what?” asked the prince with the worst sense of timing known to man, tilting his head.

Lord Clarke could look at me like that all he wanted! I couldn’t say this out loud! But he nevertheless waited patiently for my answer. “Um…”

“Yes?”

“Look, maybe in the future…” I mumbled.

“Go on?”

“In the *future*!”

“Yes?”

“…I hope the baby takes after you!” That was it. That was all I could manage. Without waiting for Lord Clarke’s reaction, I hurriedly followed Brie out of the baby’s room. My cheeks felt like they were on fire.

“Wow, you’re so red!” said Brie. “What’s wrong? Heatstroke?” Apparently I was red enough for her to be concerned, and the heat wasn’t subsiding at all.

“Oh, what perfect timing!” Laura said. “Here, have some freshly squeezed milk!” She set down a large glass of milk on the table in front of me with a thud.

I gladly took it—that bath had made me quite thirsty!—then thanked her and took a sip of the rich, aromatic liquid. I’d never had freshly squeezed milk before, and I was surprised by how different it tasted from ordinary milk.

“It’s delicious!” I exclaimed.

“Why, thank you!” Laura’s smile was so radiant and uplifting. I figured it was this side of her personality that had made Dale fall in love.

“Nothing beats a nice glass of milk after a bath,” Brie said dreamily as she sipped her own glass.

“Um, where are the other children?” I asked, after looking around and noticing they didn’t seem to be home.

Laura, after taking a big gulp of her own glass of milk, replied, “They’re out boar hunting!”

Her…children…were out hunting boars. I could only nod in shock. What formidable kids…

“Heeey!” Dale called out. “The prince won’t move! He’s frozen stiff!”

Brie glanced at me with a smirk, and it was all I could do to look down, blushing.

***

After enjoying a veritable feast of boar meat, we returned to the royal palace.

"Why was *I* not invited to the hot springs?!" Crown Prince Nathan cried out in frustration, tears streaming down his face. Not that he *should've* been invited. "Damn it! If I'd known about it, I'd have sneaked after you! Uncle, you kept it a secret from me, didn't you?!"

"Of course I did," Duke Neil replied, making Prince Nathan scowl with resentment. Why did handsome men still look good even when grimacing? "There were ladies present. There was no way we could've taken you, Nathan."

"But *you* went, uncle!"

"I don't consider myself to fall into the 'male' category." Oh! So he didn't think so either!

"Louis and Lord Nadir went, though!"

"Louis is a child, and Lord Nadir is Lady Leticia's older brother."

"But from Lady Brianna's point of view, Lord Nadir is very much a man!"

Duke Neil glanced briefly at Brie before turning back to Prince Nathan. "Lady Brianna was happy about it, so I don't see the problem."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait," Brie intervened in a hurry. "That makes me sound like some sort of deviant! I was *not* happy about it!"

Duke Neil smiled innocently. "Oh? My apologies, then."

"And Lyle went too!" Prince Nathan insisted.

"Lyle did not go into the hot spring."

Just like Lily, Lyle had waited for us in the changing room. With attentions having shifted to him, he desperately shook his head. "They'd definitely have punished me if I'd gone in! I absolutely did not!" Classic Lyle, prioritizing his own safety.

The crown prince still seemed unsatisfied, shaking with frustration. "No fair! I wanted to see Lady Brianna's boobage too!" His dismay came from the bottom of his heart, but the subject matter was very questionable.

"I was fully clothed," Brie protested. "You couldn't see anything anyway!"

"Surely there must have been an accidental slip or two!"

"There was not!" What a lowbrow argument these two were

having. Even Prince Louis seemed put off.

"A*hem*." Lord Clarke cleared his throat, drawing both of their attention and halting their bickering. "I would like to offer my thanks."

Right! We had to end things on a proper note, after all. My expression of exasperation at Prince Nathan shifted into a neutral, polite one.

"Thank you for welcoming us here," Lord Clarke said. "We appreciate your warm hospitality. We'll be returning to our country now, but we look forward to seeing all of you again."

Ah, yes. We had to go home. We meant to get to this much sooner, but since Prince Nathan would not shut up, we ended up being significantly delayed.

"Do come again." Duke Neil saw us off with a serene expression, and we waved as we got into our carriages.

"Perhaps Lady Brianna could stay," Prince Nathan ventured, clinging to Brie.

"I will not!" she snapped, shaking him off and climbing into the carriage as the crown prince loudly lamented.

The king, incidentally, couldn't come to see us off because he still had a slipped disc, the poor man. As Duke Neil smiled and Prince Nathan mourned, the carriage began to move.

A lot had happened, but I felt a bit sad now that we were leaving.

"Leticia," Lord Clarke said, taking my hand. Yes, we were actually riding in the same carriage on the way back. It *was* our honeymoon, after all! "Let's do this again sometime."

"Yes, let's," I replied with a smile. He smiled warmly at me in turn.

"Hellooo? I'm still here," said Brie.

"Read the room, moron," Nadir told her.

"I can read the room just fine!"

I rocked with the carriage as Brie and my brother broke into an argument. This truly had been fun!

Next time, though, perhaps we could go somewhere without giant carnivores.

***

"Oh, yes! There was that too," I said, closing Lord Clarke's diary.

Our honeymoon…had been difficult, I thought to myself. How often did people nearly get eaten by carnivorous beasts during their honeymoons? After that incident, we were told milou usually avoided people, so you wouldn't normally see one at the hot spring. That one had only ended up there because it'd been running away from Dale. Duke Neil had personally apologized to us for the ordeal.

Well, it had been just an unlikely series of coincidences. Nobody ended up being eaten, so we figured it was fine.

"Ah, the hot spring…" Maria said, staring at me so intently I flinched. "I wanted to have a soak too…"

I managed a strained smile at her resentful gaze. She was still holding a grudge over being left behind to spite Prince Louis. "Well, Lily came with us, but didn't go in. Wouldn't it have been even sadder if you'd come along and had to wait in the changing room?"

"Lily is a dutiful woman, unlike me. If I'd been brought along, I'd have gone in without hesitation." She really shouldn't have sounded so proud about that.

"Prince Louis was with us, so if you'd been there, there could have been trouble…"

"I'd have gouged his eyes out."

"That's not something you should do!" One did not simply gouge out a royal's eyes! Or anyone's, for that matter! Bad Maria! Bad!

I did genuinely feel bad for not taking her, though. I really had just done it to annoy Prince Louis.

"We'll go with just the girls next time," I said.

"Really?! I'll hold you to that!" Maria's mood brightened immediately, and she began to hum as she cleared the teacups. She was so cute. That was probably why Prince Louis was so (one-sidedly) fond of her.

I idly stroked Lord Clarke's diary. He'd written about our honeymoon from his own perspective, but as I read it, I'd found myself recalling my own memories of the trip. In the end, I hadn't absorbed much of the diary's contents, but I was under the impression my name had come up a lot. It was probably best that I hadn't read it too carefully. Quietly, I put the diary back in the bookshelf.

"Oh! I haven't read that one yet!" Maria protested.

"Maria, the other books are fine, but you shouldn't be reading

Lord Clarke's diaries!" I did not want anyone else reading what was in them.

"I would never do something like that! I wouldn't want my curiosity to get me fired! That was why I was reading along with Your Highness…"

"Maybe you should tamp down your curiosity a little more."

Maria whined, dejectedly pushing the cart with teacups and snacks out of the room. "I'll try… Ack!"

Lily came in suddenly, startling Maria. "Excuse me, Lady Leticia."

"Huh? Lily? Why are you here?"

"Several changes have been made to the upcoming party." Lily glanced at the papers I had left on the table.

Come to think of it, Lord Clarke had said something along those lines too. "So I've heard."

"For this reason, it would appear we need to select new dresses." Lily's eyes gleamed sharply. "Which means we will be very busy! Lady Leticia, you'll be trying on the entire mountain's worth of dresses in the wardrobe!"

"What?! But we'd already picked ours out!"

"That won't do! We must select new ones that properly align with the changes!" Lily pulled open the doors to the nearby wardrobe. "Come, now! I'll make you the perfect crown princess!"

"Eek!"

A shiver ran through me under the force of Lily's enthusiasm.

***

"Congratulations on your marriage, Your Highness."

"My thanks."

The day of the party in question had arrived. Originally it had been planned for domestic noble guests only, but now it appeared foreign royalty would be in attendance as well. Thanks to Lily's determination that I outshine the foreign royals, my attire was flawless, and I must have looked like a perfect crown princess to all present.

Lord Clarke and I were still newlyweds, so guest after guest came over to congratulate us on the union. As I expressed my thanks, feeling a little awkward, a young girl approached us. She had long, wavy blue hair—an unusual color in Astarl—that swayed softly behind her with every movement. Her golden

eyes, reflecting the lights of the party hall, hinted at a strong will. She had a shapely nose, pale, pink lips, and skin like porcelain. Her every feature was beautiful.

"It has been a long time, Prince Clarke," she said, looking not at me but straight at Lord Clarke.

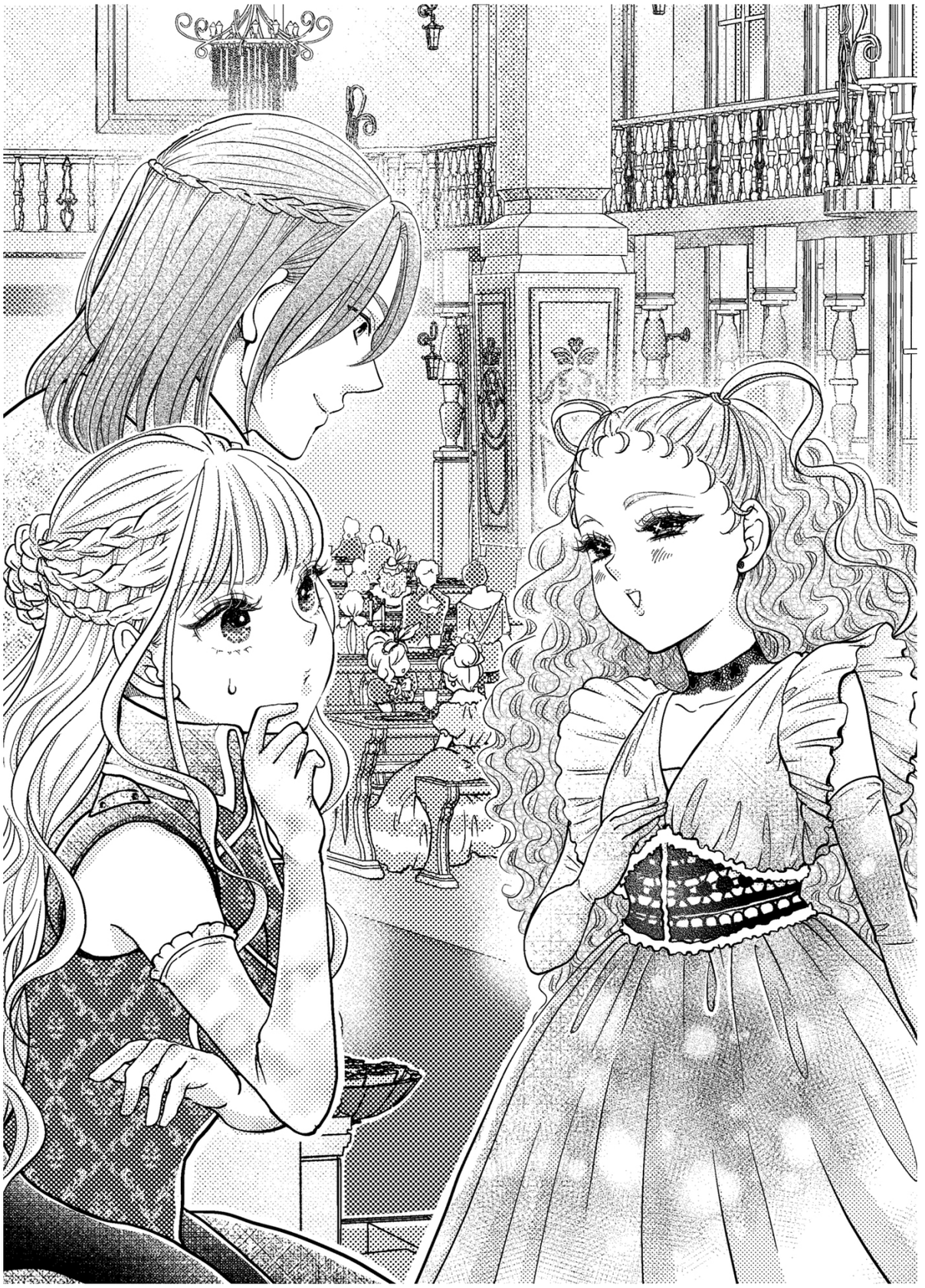
"Indeed it has, Princess Abigail," Lord Clarke responded with a smile. I didn't know who she was, but it seemed the two knew one another.

"Oh dear! I've asked you before. Please call me Abby," the girl said, glancing over at me.

"I couldn't possibly address a young lady so casually."

"There's no need for formalities. You and I are so close."

What? Close? What kind of close?



She was definitely looking at me as she spoke. How blatant! This was absolutely intentional! This girl was making a show of being close to Lord Clarke in front of me!

Although I was surprised to not have seen her before, given Lord Clarke's status as the crown prince, his good looks, and his gentle personality, it was no wonder he'd be admired by young ladies around our age. This girl was likely one such admirer, and probably trying to provoke me—his wife.

But we were already married, so I didn't see the point of her provocation. Wasn't it too late for that? She could provoke all she wanted, but Lord Clarke was taken.

"I'm a married man now, so I have no intention of being close to anyone other than my wife," Lord Clarke replied firmly—as he should!—and the girl froze.

"I... I see. You two must be quite close."

"We *are* newlyweds, after all."

The girl's face visibly twitched, and her composure crumbled under Lord Clarke's remarks. How thin-skinned for the one who'd started it. Lord Clarke's magnificent counter almost made me cheer. Do better, girl! Brie would have been much more scathing!

I wondered what kind of response she was expecting, anyway. I couldn't imagine any man being foolish enough to tell another woman she was better with his new wife right beside him. If Lord Clarke had been that foolish, I'd have gladly wrapped him up with a bow and handed him over.

"I cannot help but be envious of such devotion. Now, if you'll excuse me," the girl said, unable to mask her expression. She began to walk away, but then she stopped abruptly and turned to face me before leaving, saying, "Until we meet again." Those words had been intentional!

"Who was that girl?" I asked. She'd left without properly introducing herself to me, so I had no idea.

"She's a princess from the Kingdom of Clement. Do you know of Clement?"

"I do. It's quite far from here, right? It's unusual for a royal from there to come all the way here."

We'd had guests from there before, but those were usually just envoys. Their royalty rarely made the trip, since the distance between the two kingdoms was too great for casual visits. It took about a month each way, if I recalled correctly. That was why we didn't often meet their royals. Lord Clarke seemed very familiar

with her, however.

"Well…" Lord Clarke began reluctantly. "I spent some time studying abroad in Clement."

"What?" No way. When? I recalled no such thing, but from his expression, I could tell it was true. He seemed a bit sad. Wait! Oh no! This must've happened back when I wasn't paying any attention to him at all! "I-I'm so terribly sorr—"

"No, it's all right. My approach back then was terrible…"

Lord Clarke was trying to make me feel better! Me, who didn't know her own fiancé had been studying abroad! Or maybe someone had told me, and then I'd thought, "Great! Lucky me!" and pushed it to the back of my mind. Gosh! Who even did that? I did, apparently!

If it had been just a day or two, that'd have been one thing, but he had to have been gone for quite a while if he'd been studying abroad—and yet I couldn't remember that time period at all. Wait, actually… I did remember there was a time when I wasn't being invited to tea parties with him, and I'd thought, "Yay!"

No, really! My reaction had been to just think, "Yay!" What kind of woman did that? My goodness.

"Was it…about five years ago, perhaps?" I ventured.

"You remember?!" he said, looking at me with slight hope in his expression. Seeing him like that, I couldn't tell him I didn't remember him studying abroad, but did vaguely remember feeling lucky that I hadn't seen him in a while.

"Um, yes. That was when you went to study abroad, right?" Maybe? Please?

"Yes. It was exactly five years ago." Oh, thank goodness I'd guessed right! "I went to the Kingdom of Clement to study for about six months." I was so relieved I hadn't hurt his feelings. "Princess Abigail became very attached to me during that time. She was eleven years old then, so she must be sixteen now. Children grow up so fast," he said with a nostalgic expression that annoyed me a little.

Sure, perhaps he still saw her as a child, but she'd grown into a fine lady in those five years. He needed to be more aware of the situation!

"She's only a year younger than me," I pointed out, trying to subtly hint that she wasn't a kid anymore.

"You were lovely even as a child, Lettie." That was beside the

point!

I figured it was best for me to be straightforward. “That girl is clearly infatuated with you, Lord Clarke.”

“Huh? Really?” It was obvious to anyone with eyes. Was this man that oblivious to his own charm?!

Now that I thought about it, though, he *was* very sheltered, and given his royal status, he mostly interacted with certain women. Moreover, since I’d been his fiancée since childhood, he’d had few opportunities to spend time with girls around his age.

“Is something the matter?” Lord Clarke asked, puzzled.

“No, nothing,” I replied quickly. There was no need to tell him if he wasn’t aware. Abigail lived far away, and the two of them probably wouldn’t get to meet very often, so I decided to forget about it.

That was the plan, at least.

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“I am Abigail Clement. I shall be staying here for a time,” Princess Abigail declared, brimming with royal confidence and without a hint of humility. Lord Clarke and I were both visibly shocked.

“She’s come all the way from the Kingdom of Clement to study,” the queen, in queenly mode, said firmly. “And since she’s close to you two in age, I would ask that you all be good friends.”

“Y-Yes, of course.” I extended the foreign princess a hand. “I am Leticia, the crown princess. We’ve met before, yes? It’s an honor, Princess Abigail.”

Based on her demeanor during our previous meeting, I expected Princess Abigail to glare at me, but she smiled warmly and took my hand. Gripped it. Crushed it, practically. “The honor is all mine, Princess Leticia.”

She was smiling elegantly, brightly, all while clamping down on my hand with enough strength to nearly break it. This girl was…something else. But I couldn’t cry out in pain in front of Her Majesty, so I smiled back and squeezed her hand in return. With all the strength I could muster.

Abigail nearly yelped. “Ouc—”

“Is something the matter?” I asked politely, despite wanting to scream. Did she really think this would be too much for me?

Amateur.

I conveyed my thoughts through my gaze, and she bit her lip in frustration, forcing a strained smile. “Nothing at all! I’m so glad we can be good friends.”

“Likewise.” Indeed, we had so much in common! Like our complete distaste for one another, for instance.

Seeing Princess Abigail and me shaking hands and smiling, the queen and Lord Clarke beamed, thinking that we’d actually become friends.

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“So, what do you think?!” I asked Brie once I’d recounted the day’s events.

“About what?”

“The whole thing! No matter how you look at it, she’s after Lord Clarke, right?! That’s definitely why she came here to study, right?!” I’d seen right through Princess Abigail, and she’d still made no attempt to hide it! That handshake had probably been a declaration of war!

“So basically, you’re freaking out because another woman is now suddenly after your husband.”

“N-Not at all! Not at *all*, but still, nobody would feel great about their husband being chased after like that!” I was sure my feelings were perfectly normal. Anyone would be unsettled by a woman clearly interested in their husband! “Not that you’d understand, Brie… Not when you’re married to Nadir.”

My brother was unfriendly, power hungry, and had pushed to marry his sister off to the crown prince. I’d eventually come to understand that his actions around my marriage to Lord Clarke were partly for my own sake, and that the main reason he was obsessed with power was so he could fulfill his promise to Brie, but I still hadn’t come to terms with all of it. If my brother had actually *talked* to me about Brie and about his concern that our father had coddled me too much, instead of leaving me in the dark, I wouldn’t have sulked so hard about it all!

What was his problem, anyway?! Was he just socially awkward?! He was, wasn’t he?! He had to be! He *was* my brother, after all!

“Wait a minute!” Brie snapped. “Are you saying Nadir is unattractive?!” That was exactly what I was saying. She didn’t

seem to like it. “You’re his sister, so maybe you don’t see it, but Nadir is a good man, on the whole! He’s handsome! Wealthy! Powerful! And a bit pigheaded, and ruthless, and spiteful as a snake, that’s all!” In short, a very problematic man.

“I think personality is the most important thing in a man,” I pointed out.

“I like his personality!”

Normally seeing someone defending and gushing about their partner so vehemently would’ve made me feel warm and fuzzy, but hearing Brie praise my brother was damaging my ego. Was it because we were relatives? Also, did she *actually* like him? She *liked* this pigheaded, ruthless, spiteful snake man? Really?

“But he’s not popular with the ladies, is he?” I asked. Sure, he might’ve been a little bit popular back when he was single, but I didn’t think anyone would risk going after him now that he was married. He *was* my brother, after all.

“He is! Why, just the other day—” Brie quickly cut herself off. “Well, never mind that. This is about you. You.”

“Well, now I’m really curious!”

“So that girl, she’s aggressively pursuing His Highness?” Wow. She’d just ignored me.

“Well, she’s only just arrived, so she hasn’t had the time, I don’t think. She’s been busy unpacking, meeting with instructors to learn about this country, stuff like that.”

“Right, she’s here to study, supposedly. She can’t put all her focus on romance.”

Whatever her true intentions were, Princess Abigail had to fulfill her duties as a foreign student. So she’d been quiet so far, busily preparing for her stay here. But…

“Well, that ended yesterday,” I said.

“What?”

“From today on, other than attending lectures, she’ll be mostly free.”

“Oh, that means…” Brie gulped loudly. “There’s going to be a showdown! Ooh, there’s going to be blood!”

“Huh?”

Brie’s eyes sparkled. “Now the mistress candidate will fiercely pursue your husband, and he’ll be like, ‘Oh, maybe just this once,’ and fall for it!”

“Brie?”

“And then the mistress will try to assert her dominance and

push out the wife, but the wife fights back! A complete mess ensues!"

"...Brie."

"There will be poisonings, people getting pushed down flights of stairs, and assassins! A thrilling suspense drama!"

"Brie, have you been reading one of those over-the-top suspense novels again?"

"Do you want to read it? It's called *The Hidden Desires of Mistress and Wife.* The ending is a total twist!"

"Hey! I'm starting to get curious, so don't spoil it!"

"I brought it with me, I can lend it to you later. It's so intense! The characters are in such a messy situation!"

Brie's taste in books was a bit...off, but her books were always so entertaining. She had me totally hooked on suspense novels now. The last one she'd recommended was a thrilling story about the love-hate relationship between a wife and her mother-in-law. It was terrifying! The shock ending was still burned into my brain.

"Anyway! A young girl in love with another woman's husband... I'm so invested! I cannot just sit here like this!" Brie grabbed my hand and stood up.

"Whoa!" I yelped. "Hey, careful! You almost spilled the tea Maria made! If Prince Louis saw that, we'd be stuck here for an hour listening to him rant about what awful people we are to spill his precious Maria's tea!"

"Prince Louis isn't here right now!" He certainly wasn't, but he also had a knack for showing up out of nowhere. He was basically Maria's stalker, after all.

"Forget him! Let's go!"

"Go where?"

"Duh! To see the would-be mistress!" Mistress, she said. And considering our previous conversation...

"You mean Princess Abigail?"

"Yes!" Brie nodded.

"Wh-Why?!"

"Because it sounds fun! She's probably all over Prince Clarke right about now, no?"

"She wouldn't..." Even if being here to study was mere pretense, she wouldn't really try to make advances on Lord Clarke. Would she?

"She would too! She came all the way here for him, did she

not?" Brie asked, reading my mind and poking my forehead. "You need to stay ahead of your opponent! Anticipate her moves!"

"What's the real reason you want to go see her?"

"Entertainment," Brie replied cheerfully.

"At least pretend to be concerned!" She should've been prioritizing her friend's concerns over her own amusement!

"I *am* concerned. Roughly ten percent concerned. That's why I suggested we should anticipate her moves and stay one step ahead."

"Whose moves are we anticipating, now?" came an unfamiliar voice.

"What do you mean, 'whose'? Princess Abiga— Huh?" Brie turned in the direction of the voice.

Two people were standing at the door: Princess Abigail and her handmaiden.

"Wh-Wh-Wh—" I stammered, approaching the princess in shock. "Y-You can't open people's doors without knocking! It's rude!"

"I apologize for opening the door without permission," Princess Abigail said. "I tried knocking several times, but there was no response. After my twelfth attempt, I thought I heard my name, so I ended up opening it."

"Th-Then it's understandable that you did. Apologies for ignoring you…" We'd been so engrossed in our conversation that we hadn't heard her knocking. If Maria had been here, she would have noticed, but she'd gone to fetch more pastries.

Princess Abigail stared at us intently, and I broke into a cold sweat. She'd said she'd heard her name—had she overheard our conversation about her? What was it we'd been saying, again? Something about a mistress?

"Hello. I'm Abigail, the would-be mistress."

"We're terribly sorry!" Brie and I exclaimed in unison, bowing deeply.

Princess Abigail sighed at our perfectly synchronized movements. "I'm not bothered. It's only natural you'd have such conversations when the person in question isn't present."

We lifted our heads. Could it be that she was generous and forgiving? I looked up at her with hopeful eyes, but no, she looked evidently displeased. That was anger, no doubt about it.

"We're truly sorry," I mumbled. "We'll be more careful in the future."

“Please do.” Princess Abigail opened her fan, covering her mouth with it. It gave her a very noble, princess-like aura, which suited her really well.

“Um, would you like to come inside?” I offered. “Did you need something?”

“I did come here for a purpose, but I do not need to be inside.” She closed her fan. “I’ve come to declare war.”

“W-War?”

Princess Abigail pointed her closed fan at me. “I shall pursue Prince Clarke!”

“What?!” Her sudden declaration was bewildering to me. “Wh-Why are you telling me this…?”

She could’ve done that without letting me know. Going for a married man wasn’t something to boast about; it wasn’t like she needed to announce it. In fact, telling me meant I could try and intervene. So…why?

My thoughts must’ve been written all over my face, because she went on to explain, “I don’t like acting behind people’s backs.”

“I-I see…”

“And therefore,” she said, opening her fan again, “I am formally declaring war so that I may act openly!”

“O-Oh. Okay…” I still didn’t think pursuing a married man was something to speak so boldly about, but at least she was being honest about it.

She must not have liked anything underhanded. Well, trying to seduce a married man was underhanded in itself, but either way, I figured she was a straightforward young woman. Probably. We’d only known each other for a short while; I couldn’t be sure.

“I can’t help but notice you did not tell me not to do it,” Princess Abigail pointed out, surprised by my lack of reaction. Maybe she’d been expecting a dramatic confrontation.

“Um, well, if telling you not to do it would make you not do it, then—”

“I will do it whether you try to stop me or not.”

“Oh. I thought so.” My opinion wasn’t important, it seemed. All she wanted was to make her declaration.

She pointed sharply at me with her closed fan once more. “I will be cozying up to Prince Clarke from now on, fair and square! Watch me!”

“Um, can you really call it ‘fair and square’ when he’s already married?”

“I can because I have openly declared that I shall!” Was that how that worked? “Now then, I’m done here, so if you’ll excuse me.” Having said what she wanted to say, Princess Abigail gracefully took her leave.

“What’s her problem?” I muttered. And why was it that everyone I’d met lately was so…strong of character? Take Prince Louis, for instance! “Hey, Brie—”

“Yes! A showdown!”

“Brie?”

Brie’s eyes were sparkling once more. “This will be a gripping story, I just know it! Truth is stranger than fiction, after all!”

“Um, Brie?”

“You need to watch your back! On moonless nights especially.”

“Briiie?” Was I the victim in her scenario? “I’ll have you know I plan to live for another seventy years and die peacefully!” Surrounded by my great-grandchildren, even.

“Well, jokes aside…”

“Was that really a joke? Was it *really*?”

“It’s doubtful His Highness would leave you for that girl, but it nevertheless is quite unpleasant to have another woman trying to seduce your husband. Be careful, yes?”

“Of what?”

“Of directing your irritation at your husband and starting fights.”

I gasped. Right! In one of the books Brie had lent me, the relationship between the couple had deteriorated due to something like this! The wife had questioned her husband about another woman, hadn’t believed him when he told her he hadn’t been responding to the advances, and then she’d grown paranoid, and in the end—

“Nooo!” I wailed. “Lord Clarke’s going to die! By my own hand!”

“What?! What are you even thinking?!”

I couldn’t allow the tragedy from the book to repeat itself in real life! If I accidentally harmed Lord Clarke, the crime wouldn’t be just my own! My whole family would suffer the consequences! My parents, my brother… Wait! Even Brie would be affected! My best friend, suffering because of me!

“I *must* make sure that doesn’t happen!”

“I think your idea of a worst-case scenario and my idea of a worst-case scenario are a little different,” Brie pointed out evenly. How could she be so calm?! I was worried about her! “Well, it’s good to be mindful either way.”

“Yes…” I didn’t think Lord Clarke would be swayed, but there might’ve been a tiny chance. Just maybe. “So, if she’s going to openly chase after him, I should openly interfere too!”

“That’s the spirit!”

As we were getting fired up, Maria returned with more pastries and poured us another round of tea, which finally prompted us to sit back down.

“By the way,” I said to Brie as I enjoyed the warmth of my teacup. “What were you saying about women coming on to my brother?”

“No comment,” Brie replied flatly.

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“Princess Abigail said she would like to deepen her friendship with us, so we’ll be eating meals together for a while.”

The royals were all busy with their own affairs, so they typically took their meals separately. We were all summoned before His Majesty the King, which was unusual enough, and then he’d delivered the news.

“We may not be able to join you every time due to our busy schedules, you see,” added the queen, in queenly mode, “but perhaps you could dine with little Lettie and Clarke, Princess Abigail?”

“Of course. I do apologize for imposing,” the princess replied, with a beaming smile on her face that I didn’t recognize at all. I almost wanted to ask whether she was a different person from the one who’d visited me yesterday, but of course, I did not. Truly, she did seem like a different person! She was even smiling at me! Frightening. “This is my first time away from my homeland, you see, so I feel terribly lonely.”

Did she? Did she really? She’d nonchalantly declared she wouldn’t mind sitting next to Lord Clarke, then boldly taken the seat, that snake. “Lonely”? Really? I was sitting on the other side of Lord Clarke, of course. For a wife not to sit next to her husband when another woman was by his side would be unthinkable!

“Princess Abigail, you and Clarke know each other, don’t you?” the queen asked.

“We do!” the princess replied cheerfully. She must have been waiting for this to come up. “Prince Clarke and I grew close when he came to study in the Kingdom of Clement. Isn’t that right, Prince Clarke?”

She was staring at Lord Clarke so intently. I wished she wouldn’t glue her eyes to someone else’s husband like that. We were eating! She should’ve been looking at the sautéed duck that the head chef had masterfully prepared instead.

“Indeed,” Lord Clarke said. “We met about five years ago, and we were close in age, so we often spent time together.”

“We were always chatting,” the princess added provocatively, very clearly looking at me.

But thanks to my brother I was used to such provocations. Her taunts didn’t hold a candle to Nadir’s. I smiled confidently and took a bite of the sautéed duck, and Princess Abigail frowned, displeased. Hah! Thin-skinned, eh, princess?

“Some even thought we were lovers,” she continued in a slightly louder voice, glancing at me to gauge my reaction.

“Only a small number of people did,” Lord Clarke pointed out. In other words, most people didn’t see them as a couple.

Blushing, Princess Abigail muttered an embarrassed, “I suppose that’s true.”

Nothing was more mortifying than having rumors of a relationship denied by the very same person one was rumored to be with. We were enemies, but I almost felt like comforting the princess.

“But it is true that we were close, so it would make me happy to see you at ease here,” Lord Clarke added.

“O-Of course!” Princess Abigail exclaimed, her downcast expression lighting up at Lord Clarke’s kindness.

Ah, the face of love! She was so radiant, I was practically dazzled. How cruel of Lord Clarke to give her false hopes like this when he was a married man! I cast him a glare, but he just tilted his head in confusion at me.

Wait. Was he really unaware of what he was doing to her?! He didn’t know the power of his own charisma! I watched them as they chatted and laughed; Princess Abigail was blushing, desperately trying to keep the conversation going, and he was just responding serenely. He had to be clueless.

Wanting to confirm this, I leaned in to whisper in Lord Clarke's ear. "Lord Clarke, are you really unaware of Princess Abigail's feelings?"

He looked at me, puzzled. "What feelings?"

His expression was completely innocent. I felt as if I'd been struck by lightning. This man…was horrendously dense! The princess's affection couldn't have been any more obvious, and he hadn't noticed at all!

"Lettie?"

"Oh, umm…" How did I even respond to this? I knew he wouldn't be swayed by the princess, even if he knew the truth, but I also didn't need to tell him, right? And besides, even if it was someone like Princess Abigail, it wasn't right to reveal someone else's feelings. "Uhh…"

"Yes?"

"Princess Abigail…"

"Hmm?"

"…seems to really like duck," I finished lamely.

The princess, who had been shooting me a glare that screamed, "Don't you dare," was now making a face that screamed, "Duck?! Really?!"

She had a point, but look, I couldn't think of anything else! And she did seem to be enjoying the duck! It wasn't a lie. The duck clearly had her eyes sparkling more than any of the other dishes.

"Oh? Do you like duck?" Lord Clarke asked her. She nodded shyly in response. "Ah. Now that I think about it, I do feel like I was often served duck at the palace in Clement. Was it because of your fondness for it?"

"Yes. The head chef often prepared it for my sake," the princess replied, perking up at the mention of their time together in the Kingdom of Clement and shooting me a smug look.

The look of someone who had her own special memories with my husband. My husband! But if she thought something so small would intimidate me—the legitimate wife!—she was sorely mistaken.

"What was your routine like when you were in Clement, Lord Clarke?" I asked confidently, determined to show I wasn't fazed in the slightest.

Unaware that Princess Abigail was gritting her teeth, Lord

Clarke replied, “I went there to study, so that’s what I spent most of my time doing. Come to think of it, the fashion trends there were different too. Outfits were less formal than here, and I believe women’s dresses didn’t require corsets… Does that sound right, Princess Abigail?”

“Oh! Yes, that’s correct,” Princess Abigail replied, hurriedly masking her glare and plastering on a smile for Lord Clarke. “The weather is warmer in Clement than it is here in Astarl. In fact, it’s warm year-round, so we avoid stuffy garments such as corsets and favor more breathable dresses.”

“Huh…” How interesting that clothing differed so much from country to country. *I wish we didn’t have to wear corsets here*, I thought, rubbing my stomach. *They’re so uncomfortable!* “Oh, but the dress you’re wearing right now is typical of Astarl, so it requires a corset, right?”

Her dress had a similar shape to mine—it didn’t seem to be a corsetless dress like the ones she’d just described.

“This dress?” she asked. “Well, I am a visitor here, so it makes sense I would follow the local customs. I had a corseted dress custom-made.” She’d gone to all that trouble? Impressive!

Once upon a time, countries had been more insular, but currently there was freedom of movement between them, and studying abroad was a popular practice. That was how Prince Louis was able to live here so easily under the pretext of study. And since there were no strict rules, most people used products from their home countries, including clothing. It wasn’t completely unheard of to arrange for items that matched the host country’s tradition beforehand, but it wasn’t customary.

How diligent was this girl?

“Oh, I’d love to see a corsetless dress!” said the queen, intrigued, with stars in her eyes. “Princess Abigail, did you bring any with you?”

“I did bring a number of them, yes.”

The queen took Princess Abigail’s hand. “How lovely! You simply *must* wear one and show me!”

“Oh…” The princess seemed to be at a bit of a loss.

Sensing this, the queen’s brow furrowed apologetically. “Ah, but you don’t have to. My apologies for pushing the subject.”

Noticing how dejected the queen seemed, Princess Abigail hurriedly said, “Oh, no, it’s quite all right! I’ll have someone ready a dress for me right away!”

“Oh? Truly?”

“Yes.” The princess turned to the woman standing behind her, seemingly her handmaiden. “Could you take care of that for me?”

The handmaiden bowed her head and left the room, presumably to get the dress ready.

“I can’t wait!” the queen exclaimed, beaming. “Little Lettie and I will visit your chambers after the meal!”

Princess Abigail offered a smile of her own in turn.

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“Oh! So this is a corsetless dress!” the queen exclaimed excitedly.

“Indeed,” Princess Abigail said. “This type of dress doesn’t constrict the waist too much and is quite loose fitting. It’s made from breathable materials as well.”

The chambers assigned to Princess Abigail were quite spacious, with plenty of room for her, me, the queen, and our respective handmaidens. It was a clear display of hospitality toward the princess on behalf of the royal family of Astarl.

“In regions with warm weather, poorly ventilated garments would make life difficult, I imagine,” the queen remarked, looking with interest at the dresses hanging in the closet.

“That’s right. The dresses in Astarl emphasize form, but in my homeland, we tend to favor function.”

It was as Princess Abigail said—the dresses lining the closet were more practical and had fewer decorations, quite unlike the designs found in our country. There was no lace, and they didn’t have jewels or ribbons either. Possibly to combat the heat, the dresses left the shoulders bare and were designed to stay up at the chest on their own. Despite their simplicity, however, they did have an elegant beauty, probably due to the high-quality materials used.

“May I try this on?” the queen asked, making adorable puppy eyes at Princess Abigail. How precious! It was hard to believe this woman had a married son already! Too cute!

Her adorable expression made Princess Abigail blush. “Of course! By all means, try on any dresses you like,” she offered eagerly.

“Thank you. In that case, I think I shall try this one.” The

queen picked up a lavender-colored dress. “You try this one, little Lettie.”

“Huh?” I mumbled as the queen handed me a baby-blue dress.

“This is a unique opportunity!” she exclaimed. “Let’s all try them on.”

“Y-Yes, of course.” Truthfully, I *had* wanted to try one on too. I was very curious about how it’d feel to wear a dress with no corset. But…Princess Abigail and I were rivals. Was it truly all right for me to wear one of her dresses?

I glanced over at the princess and she let out a soft sigh. “By all means, Princess Leticia.” She looked like she’d more or less been cornered into giving her permission, but she’d given it all the same! That meant I could wear it. “I’ll go ahead and change as well,” she added, gently placing a hand on her stomach. “I’m not quite used to corsets yet…”

Ah. Yes, I understood perfectly. Corsets could be quite uncomfortable, even for someone like me who was used to wearing them daily!

“Since we’re not quite sure how to put these on, could we have our handmaidens observe the process, Princess Abigail?” the queen asked.

“Of course. This way, please.”

The queen’s handmaiden, along with mine—Lily—followed the princess, who took off the corseted dress she’d been wearing. With her own handmaiden’s help, she began to change into the corsetless dress she was more accustomed to. Since there was no corset to tighten, the process was quick: she slipped her arms through the sleeves and—voilà—she was dressed.

“How do I look?” she asked.

The soft fabric of her yellow dress gave her a gentle appearance. Though corsetless, the dress had a ribbon tied at the waist that beautifully accentuated her curves. She wasn’t wearing a petticoat either, so the skirt didn’t flare out. However, the light material swayed gracefully with every step she took. It was very elegant.

“Incredible!” the queen exclaimed.

Indeed, “pretty” would’ve been putting it lightly. The dress wasn’t just practical and easy to move in, but quite lovely as well. The soft material seemed comfortable. I wondered how it’d feel

to wear, growing more eager to try one on.

The queen chuckled softly. “Shall we try them as well?”

“Yes!” I handed the dress to Lily, who helped me out of my current dress and into the one I was borrowing. “Wow! It’s so light!” Much lighter than the ones I was used to!

The blue dress the queen had picked out for me was also made of soft, thin, fluttery fabric. It wasn’t tight around the waist and the fabric was loose enough that I could move freely; it didn’t feel restrictive at all.



“This would be perfect for an escape!” I said excitedly.

“Lettie, dear,” the queen cut in, “we know you’re free to run away whenever you like, but perhaps you shouldn’t declare it quite so boldly.”

“My apologies! I will continue to flee, however!”

“Well, that is admirable in its own right.”

I hoped she would overlook my fondness for running away. In this dress, I could probably climb trees more easily, run faster, and scale walls with ease. Why, this dress was probably the best thing ever.

“How much is this?” I asked. “I’ll buy it.”

“What?!” Princess Abigail exclaimed, shocked. “What are you saying?!”

Look, I understood her shock, but I needed to know the price! Whatever it took, I’d pay!

“Truthfully, I have some funds thanks to my brother.” Realizing I’d made it sound like Nadir was a doting brother, I quickly added, “Leftover allowance I never used.” Hold on. My correction did nothing to make him sound less doting.

In reality, I’d been so busy with my lessons that I’d never had the time to spend my allowance. My brother had always been more of a strict tutor than a loving sibling.

“I can give you one of these dresses,” Princess Abigail said.

“What?! Really?!”

“Of course. I’ve brought plenty. And it would be difficult for you to purchase one elsewhere, since they can’t be found easily in this country.” The princess had seemed so haughty earlier, but now she was like a benevolent divinity, magnanimously bestowing upon me the gift of a cute dress. How kind! Like a goddess of mercy!

“You have a point. Corseted dresses are the norm here, so even if stores wanted to sell them, nobody would buy them.” People tended to want to dress like their peers. Wearing something completely unfamiliar would make someone stand out and possibly get them labeled as eccentric or worse. “It’s a pity, though. These are lovely dresses.”

If people knew that dresses like these were worn by foreign royalty, there would definitely be a demand for it.

“Oh, I know!” the queen said in a moment of inspiration. She glanced between the princess and me, then continued, “Why don’t you two work together to popularize these dresses in

Astarl?”

Princess Abigail froze. “Huh?”

“I beg your pardon?” I had frozen too. “Wh-What was that just now, Your Majesty?” I was hoping she’d take it back.

She did not. “I’d like you, Lettie, and Princess Abigail to work together to make these dresses something every young lady wants.”

“Huh…?” Princess Abigail and I, working together? “Wh-Why us?”

Surely the queen could tell the princess and I did not get along. She might’ve seemed aloof, but she was a very perceptive woman. She had to have known about the princess’s feelings for Lord Clarke, besides.

“Well, Princess Abigail just arrived here and doesn’t have any friends yet. And the best way for her to learn about our culture is through interacting with others, no?”

“Th-That’s true, but…”

“You agree, don’t you, Princess?” the queen asked, smiling sweetly.

Princess Abigail couldn’t say no. Her expression grew strained. “Yes…of course…”

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“Ugh! Why in the world do I have to cooperate with *you*?!” Princess Abigail complained, slamming her hand on the table. She’d been hiding her feelings in the queen’s presence, but now that Her Majesty had left, she was showing her true colors.

Also, she must have hurt herself, because she immediately withdrew her hand and shook it. She was headstrong, but perhaps fragile too. I wished I could share some of my resilience with her.

“I must assume it’s a whim on the queen’s part,” I mused. I didn’t actually know what the queen had been thinking.

“Why with my rival in love, of all people?!” she shouted as she walked closer to me. “I would’ve gladly teamed up with *anyone* else, but why with my first love’s wife?! How am I supposed to stay motivated?!”

I understood! I understood completely! Why put love rivals together?! I’d thought the same!

“But since it’s a request from the queen herself, we must work

together," I said, carefully choosing my words to avoid further provoking her.

"I know. I'll do as Her Majesty requested, and I'll do it right. I just needed to vent." Still looking completely unconvinced, the princess sat down on the fainting couch. "So, how should we go about this? Trying to sell people on Clement fashion as is likely won't work."

"You're right." These dresses had been designed for life in the Kingdom of Clement, after all. They were suited for the climate and culture there, not for Astarl. While introducing the designs as they were would've likely generated some initial buzz due to their novelty, the interest wouldn't last. It wouldn't fulfill Her Majesty's wish. "Hey, Lily? The queen said she wanted to popularize dresses that put less of a strain on women's bodies, right?"

Lily, who had been standing a ways from us, nodded. "Indeed. While you two were standing around in shock, Her Majesty said, 'I heard the royal physician mutter something about how tight corsets are harmful to the body. Indeed, it doesn't seem healthy, does it? Harming yourself for the sake of beauty is pointless. These dresses, meanwhile, are both beautiful and less taxing on the body. It would be a win-win if they became popular!'" Lily's imitation of the queen's tone was perfect.

"Wow... You remembered every last word..." My handmaiden was so capable! "So, we don't just need to make it so the people of this country accept these dresses, we need to encourage them to wear them in the long term."

"Unfortunately, I'm not well versed in this country's people and customs," the princess said.

"Right... So ideally, we'll need help from someone who's deeply familiar with both this country and the Kingdom of Clement," I muttered to myself.

Princess Abigail and I exchanged glances, suddenly having the same thought. "Lord Clarke!"

***

"You want to make these dresses popular?" Lord Clarke asked, blinking. "Another strange idea of my mother's, I suppose..." He didn't seem surprised. He was probably used to the queen's antics.

“Um, we thought you’d be the most knowledgeable about both countries’ cultures and circumstances…” I explained.

“Well, I’ve never done anything like this before, so I’m not quite confident I can do it, but I might be able to assist at least a little.”

“Really?!” I was so relieved to see the light at the end of the tunnel of the queen’s task that I couldn’t help but exchange glances with Princess Abigail.

The princess quickly turned her face away in a huff. What a difficult girl!

“If we want people to wear these, we need to start by thinking about the fabric,” Lord Clarke suggested.

“The fabric, you say?”

“Yes. Unlike Clement, we have distinct seasons here. We need to use fabrics suitable for each season. Simply copying the dresses exactly wouldn’t work, since they’re not meant for our climate.” He touched the dress we’d brought as an example. “For example, it’s winter now. Wearing a dress like this, made for warm weather, would leave you freezing.”

“T-True…” It would be cold, even with a coat over it. And at, say, a party, the wearer would need to take off the coat and end up just shivering, too cold to dance.

“I think for this plan to be sustainable in the long term, we need to make different dresses for each season. And since it’s winter right now, our first priority should be dresses for spring.”

“Right. We want to report the results to the queen as soon as possible, so let’s start with spring dresses.” We could worry about the other seasons after that. Ideally, we’d work on everything simultaneously, but our immediate priority was to prepare for spring. “So we need to find someone knowledgeable about fabrics.”

“Not only that, but someone with experience in trade as well,” Lord Clarke said. “Ideally, someone used to dealing with imports.”

“Do either of you know anyone?” Princess Abigail asked.

I hummed, pondering this for a moment. Ideally, the person handling the fabrics would also know both countries well. And immediately, someone popped into my mind.

How could I not have thought of her at once? There was a perfect candidate right under my nose!

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“So that’s why you called me over?” Brie asked, carrying a large bag in her arms.

“Yes,” I confirmed. “You know a lot about other countries, right, Brie? You even have imported maid outfits in stock.”

Brie puffed out her chest proudly. “Of course! A merchant must familiarize herself with foreign products!”

“So, did you know about this type of dress?”

“Naturally. But I figured it wouldn’t be popular in Astarl, so I never went for them.” Brie sighed. “The lack of a corset is definitely the biggest issue. Corsets are the norm here, and not wearing one is seen as improper.”

“Oh my!” Princess Abigail exclaimed, puffing out her cheeks. “How lacking in taste must one be not to see the appeal of these dresses? Why, I find dresses that emphasize the bust far more vulgar.” She must’ve felt like her country’s dresses were being insulted.

“Well, it’s a cultural difference, that’s all,” Brie said, trying to smooth things over.

“And there’s a significant difference in climate as well,” my brother added to try and cover for Brie.

“Wait, why are you here, brother?!” I demanded. “I didn’t invite you!”

“Relax. I’m here as a sponsor for this endeavor.”

“A spon—” I paused. “Oh. Well, that’s fine, then.” We needed sponsors! Sure, this plan had been the queen’s idea and thus would likely be funded by the state’s coffers, but it didn’t hurt to have additional monetary support. It meant we could get even more done. “If you’re here, that means you think there’s a potential for profit, right?”

“Of course. I wouldn’t invest a dime otherwise.” As the heir to a ducal family, my brother had no financial difficulties, but he’d always been very strict with money. Apparently, he had a lot of trouble handling our father’s sloppy accounting practices, among other issues.

Indeed, I couldn’t imagine our father being any good with paperwork. He was a scatterbrained man, and by the time I was old enough to know anything, my brother had already taken charge of House Dorman’s affairs, leaving our father to essentially live the life of a NEET.

My brother seemed to take after our no-nonsense grandfather. I, meanwhile, didn't particularly resemble anyone—and I didn't want to think I was like our father. I fulfilled my official duties, so at least I wasn't a NEET! Really, my father should stop twiddling his thumbs and do his job.

Supposedly, one reason my brother had pushed for my engagement to Lord Clarke, and to separate me from our parents, was a fear that our father would spoil me rotten and I'd end up just like him. Nadir wasn't one for explanations, preferring to say only what was strictly necessary, so I'd only learned this after my wedding. He should've told me! Why didn't he?! I'd been mislabeling him as power hungry this entire time! He did hunger for power, though, so I guess that was fine.

"Well, regarding the matter of corsets, people will resist at first, yes," said Brie. "But with the right advertisement, they can come around." Skilled merchant that she was, she'd already started planning strategies while I was lost in my own thoughts.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"I'll explain later. For now, our priority should be getting these dresses made."

"Right..." I really wanted to know, but maybe the explanation would've taken too long? Either way, without the dresses, there wouldn't be anything to advertise. Our priority was indeed to make dresses suitable for this country.

"First, we need to figure out the fabric," Brie continued.

"Right. We want something that won't compromise the dress's design."

"In which case a soft, easy-to-manufacture fabric would be best."

"Are you well-versed in fabrics, Brie?" I asked. She was used to dealing with foreign products; hopefully she knew her stuff. "I figured you would be..."

"Hmph! As if a moneygrubbi— Er, a shrewd merchant such as I wouldn't be familiar with fabrics!" she boasted confidently, the way someone who prided herself in her mercantile skills would. "Besides, we have a sponsor! Nadir can handle all fabric-related matters!"

All eyes turned to my brother, who swiftly raised his hand. "We own a sewing factory."

Wait. We do?

I had no idea our family was involved in this kind of industry.

I'd been so focused on my princess lessons that I honestly had no clue how our family even made its fortune. My own family, and I knew nothing! I'd always assumed nobles made their living off politics and taxes, but maybe it was common for nobles to own factories and such?

Was my image of nobility outdated?! I'd been so isolated taking lessons that I didn't know what was considered normal, and I didn't really have much of a social circle beyond the people gathered here.

"Relax, Leticia," my brother said, noticing my anxiety. He placed a reassuring hand on my shoulder. "Not many nobles engage in business like our family does. We own a jewelry atelier, a sewing factory, a confectionery factory, and various other factories, as well as the numerous companies that actively handle these businesses. But we are, indeed, an exception. Our predecessor diversified…a bit too broadly." He looked dead inside.

From his tone, it sounded like our family dealt in things most nobles didn't normally. He sounded like he may have been even busier than royalty!

It made me want to express my appreciation. "Brother—"

"I've also set up a shop to handle foreign imports for Brianna, and even commissioned a new trading ship," he said, thwarting my attempt at comforting him and taking the opportunity for some subtle preening.

"Business has been great fun," Brie gushed, blushing behind him. *My* Brie! Gushing about a man! How could she?!

"Either way, rest easy. Our house can handle everything from design to fabric production and distribution," Nadir continued, patting his chest confidently. "And keep sending work our way! It's profitable."

"You're just as much of a money-grubber as Brie," I muttered. A perfect match indeed. But thanks to them, the plan could move forward. "Well, we can relax, at least."

"We're still in the planning stages, so it's not that simple," Brie cautioned, in contrast with my optimism. "We still need to decide on all the details and calculate the budget…"

As an experienced businesswoman, Brie seemed to be thinking much harder about this than I was. Good thing I'd roped her in! Experience was invaluable in matters like this.

She muttered to herself for a bit, and then her eyes began to

sparkle. “But if we can make this work, the profits will be great! Oh, I love big projects…!”

“You know, Brie, you got rich from marrying my brother, but you never stopped loving money, huh?”

“Those are two different things!” she protested. “I make money as a hobby now!”

“A fantastic hobby,” my brother said, nodding enthusiastically like the lovestruck fool he was. “It combines pleasure with profit.” Well, it *did* seem like a fun and worthwhile hobby.

“I do love a hardworking Brie,” I remarked.

“Thank you. I love me too,” Brie said. What marvelous confidence! I hoped her life stayed great.

“Lettie?” Lord Clarke called out as I nodded along with my brother, pondering my fondness for Brie.

“Yes?”

“Do you like hardworking people?”

“I suppose so, yes.” Most people would prefer a hard worker to a slob, right? This seemed like such an obvious answer.

Lord Clarke took my hand. “I’m good at what I do, Lettie.”

“Um. Sure…?” I was well aware of that.

He’d been raised from a young age to be king, taught everything he needed to know for the role. No one wanted an ineffective crown prince, after all. If he were incompetent at his job, surely the citizens would protest. There were hardly any complaints about him in his capacity as crown prince, which was a clear indicator that he excelled at his duties.

How did I know what people thought of him? Why, because I sneaked out sometimes, of course! Since I knew about his competence, I was puzzled by his question. Why ask me this now?

Maybe my lack of reaction was making him anxious, because he insisted, “No, really, Lettie. I’m very good at my job. Wait, that makes me sound like I’m not actually…” He was distressed for a moment, but suddenly gasped and brightened up. “I know! I should show you how good I am at working! I mustn’t waste any time! I need to go back to the office right now!” He began to hurry out of the room, but paused and turned back. “If I do well, go on a date with me!”

“Oh. Okay,” I replied. He looked even more motivated. *We could just go on a date anyway, though? No conditions necessary.* I kept that thought to myself.

“Your husband is very entertaining,” Brie said heartily.

Princess Abigail, meanwhile, was explaining the dresses in great detail to my brother. She was probably a hard worker too.

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All we’d done today was introduce Princess Abigail to my brother and Brie—we decided to discuss the specifics of the project during a more formal meeting later. My brother then returned to his work—he was a busy man after all, managing many companies, assisting with matters of governance, and overseeing House Dorman’s affairs.

Brie had been about to leave when my brother suggested she relax and have some tea, showing obvious concern for his wife—something he’d never shown *me*. Hmph.

“This isn’t what I expected at all,” Princess Abigail lamented dejectedly. Seeing the strong-willed princess like this made me feel bad for her. “Instead of us all working together harmoniously on a plan, I’ve become a sad woman assisting a man working hard to please his wife…”

That was true, but hearing it said out loud made it sound even sadder…

“D-Don’t lose heart, Princess Abigail!” I told her. “We *will* be working together! It’ll undoubtedly be a great opportunity.”

She bristled. “You’re his wife and you’re not even bothered!”

Whoops. I’d inadvertently added fuel to the fire.

“Of course she’s unbothered,” Brie pointed out. “It’s harder to divorce than it is to marry, especially among royalty. A divorce due to an affair would be absolutely scandalous. The odds of that happening are minimal. She has every reason to be confident.”

“I never intended to make them divorce!” the princess retorted, trembling with frustration and clearly offended.

Brie and I exchanged glances. What? Wasn’t she trying to steal Lord Clarke away from me? That was what I’d assumed from her behavior, but perhaps I’d been gravely mistaken?

“Um… Isn’t that why you came here to study? To steal Lord Clarke?” I asked hesitantly, worried I might’ve been wrong.

“What?!” Princess Abigail replied loudly. “Steal him?! I would never!” She shook her head vigorously.

Brie and I exchanged glances again. If her plan wasn’t to steal

him away, then what had everything she'd done so far been about? And based on what she'd said, it sounded like she still had feelings for Lord Clarke…

"Um—"

"Hey!" Prince Louis came barging in, without knocking as always, interrupting me before I could ask for further clarification. "Is Maria here?!"

"Have you heard of knocking?!" I demanded.

Realizing his blunder, Prince Louis looked around, flustered. "I-It wasn't on purpose, I swear!"

"Lord Clarke isn't here."

"You should've led with that!" And he was right back to his usual haughty attitude.

"I could tell him about this, though."

He bowed his head quickly. "I'm sorry forgive me I won't ever forget it again so please please please don't tell him."

"Why are you so scared of Lord Clarke, anyway?" Sure, Lord Clarke often scolded him, but he was generally kind. I didn't think there was any need to be so afraid.

Prince Louis shook his head dismissively. "Listen, that guy gets a glint in his eyes when it comes to you, okay? It's scary. And I'll have you know I've been coddled all my life! I'm not used to being chastised."

"Why do you sound so proud of that?" It was true that his father doted on him, and he probably hadn't ever been scolded much, yes. But what was I supposed to do with that information?

"He's terrifying when he's being intimidating! So please, please don't tell him."

"What impressive humility."

"Lyle! You plead too!"

Lyle looked visibly displeased where he was standing behind the prince. "No, thank you. I didn't do anything. You're the one who did something, Your Highness, so you're the only one who could reasonably be scolded here."

"You! And you call yourself my retainer!"

"It's not like I signed up for this job."

"Your attitude needs some work, if you ask me!"

"If you have any complaints, take them up with His Majesty! He was the one who assigned me as your retainer! Who would want to serve a haughty prince like you?!"

"What did you say?!"

“Oh no. Did I say that out loud?”

“You did it on purpose!”

Lyle’s lack of loyalty was truly impressive, but considering his master was Prince Louis, it made sense. I was used to watching them interact like this, but I decided to intervene this time, since Princess Abigail was present.

“Don’t fight in front of our guest,” I said, glancing at the princess, who quickly hid her face behind her fan. Concerning. “Um, Princess Abigail?”

She didn’t respond, remaining hidden behind her fan.

“Princess…?”

No response.

“Hmm?” Noticing the situation, Prince Louis stopped arguing with Lyle and walked closer to Princess Abigail.

She flinched, but kept her face covered with the fan.

“Oh?” Prince Louis tried to peek at her face from various angles, but she skillfully adjusted the fan to keep her face hidden.

They kept going for a while, and their intense standoff had them both breathing heavily until Prince Louis gave up and stopped. Princess Abigail let out a sigh of relief, but—

“You’re Princess Abigail, right?” the prince asked. She froze immediately. “Why are you here? Or are y—”

“Princess Louis! Let us converse!” the princess exclaimed, grabbing the prince by the arm. “Pardon me!” She whisked him away like a storm before he could say another word.

Brie, Maria, Lyle, and I were left behind, watching them go.

“May I have a cookie?” Lyle asked.

“Go ahead.”

Lyle took a cookie and trudged after Prince Louis. Godspeed to him.

“Something’s going on there,” Brie pointed out, making an exaggerated pantomime of adjusting glasses she wasn’t wearing. Was she trying to act like a detective?

“Like what?”

“How would I know?” She stood up excitedly. “Anyway, let’s go!”

“Wait, wait!” I grabbed her by the back of her collar as she tried to hurry after them.

Her clothing caught on her neck, and she let out a strangled croak like a squished frog. “What are you doing?!”

“I mean, you were about to chase after them…”

She gave me a look as though it were the obvious course of action. “Well, duh! This is a case waiting to happen!”

“You’ve been reading mystery novels again, haven’t you? Not *everything* is a case!”

“The protagonist of the novel I read yesterday said that’s a misconception!”

“Stop confusing reality with fiction! Maybe it’s just a reunion between friends who haven’t seen each other in a while!” I offered, trying to reason with Brie.

“It didn’t seem that way at all! They looked like they were going to cover something up!”

“Anyway!” I held out a cookie to the still-suspicious Brie. “You cannot invade people’s privacy! Absolutely not!”

“Okaaay,” Brie conceded. She took the cookie and nibbled on it. “Can I at least sneak a peek?”

“No!”

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“Rise and shine!”

I groaned, squinting as the curtains were flung open and the room flooded with blinding light, then pulled the covers over my head.

“Nooo, Mariaaa! You said my schedule was free today and I could sleep iiin!” I whined. “I’m not getting uuup! Go awaaay!” The covers were yanked off me midtantrum. “Nooo! Give them baaack!”

“Stop being a sleepy idiot! Go wash your face!”

Bereft of covers and with nothing to retreat under, I grudgingly washed my face with warm water from the basin placed in front of me. I took a towel offered to me and dried my face—then realized this wasn’t Maria at all!

“Why are *you* here, Brie?! Where’s Maria?!” I demanded.

“You only just noticed?!” Brie snapped, pulling me to my feet. “Good morning, sleepyhead! Get up!”

“Good morning!”

“Maria, hurry and help her get ready!”

“Yes, ma’am,” Maria replied. She’d been here the whole time!

Used to my morning grogginess, Maria swiftly dressed me, combed my hair, and tidied me up. What amazing skills she had!

Which, granted, she needed in order to be my maid in the first place!

Once I was ready, Brie grabbed me by the arm. “All right! Let’s go!”

I resisted. “Wait a second! Where are we going?!”

“Where do you think?! To where Princess Abigail is!”

“Didn’t you hear what I said yesterday?! Princess Abigail has a right to privacy too!”

“Does she? Even if she’s technically the other woman?”

I stopped resisting and started walking. “What do you mean?”

“His Highness is a busy man, so opportunities to talk to him are scarce, but they do present themselves sometimes!”

“They do? When?”

“Right now!”

I tilted my head. Lord Clarke had free time this early in the morning? Since when?

“You don’t know? The prince picks flowers for your room every day!”

“That’s news to me!” I did know the flowers in my vase changed daily, of course, but I’d assumed the servants were the ones responsible. So Lord Clarke had been the one bringing them? Huh…

“Look at you, smiling like a buffoon.”

“I-I am not!” I brought my hands to my cheeks. Surely I wasn’t grinning! Surely…

“So, that period of time early morning when he picks flowers is the ideal time to talk to him. And now that Princess Abigail has settled in and has not only free time but also something to talk to him about thanks to the dressmaking plan…she’ll definitely go to him!”

“That’s not necessarily true.”

Brie clicked her tongue disapprovingly. “You naive fool. If I were the one trying to win someone over, I’d go for it every chance I got. And I’m pretty sure she would too! Why would she have come all the way here from a faraway country otherwise?”

“Huh… Is that how you won my brother over?” I’d seen many young ladies throw themselves at my brother repeatedly with no success. How had Brie succeeded? Nadir didn’t seem the type to give in to stubborn attempts.

“Well, no. That didn’t work on him. It turned out I’d already won him over.”

“What?! Wait a second! I need the details!” She’d said that so casually! I was *so* curious.

Neither Nadir nor Brie had told me any of the particulars of how they’d ended up together. He wouldn’t answer me, and Brie would clam up whenever she got bashful. What exactly had led to their marriage? I was her best friend! She *owed* me those details!

And why had she chosen him?! I mean, *Nadir*, of all people. Nadir! I would’ve never! Nadir, the guy who sassed you back fivefold and couldn’t help but point out every single mistake you made. Nadir!

“I can’t imagine him saying sweet things to anyone. Did he really fall for you first? Are you sure that’s true? Are you sure it wasn’t someone else? Was it really my brother?”

“Enough with the suspicion already! It would’ve been a huge issue if it had been someone else, no?!”

True enough.

In the end, she didn’t give me any details, and we arrived at our destination: a royal villa a little ways from the palace. It was used by foreign royalty for extended stays, including for study purposes. This wasn’t the one where Prince Louis was staying, though—he was at a different villa.

Brie discreetly checked out the area from a shaded spot away from the villa. “This is where Princess Abigail is staying, right?”

It was indeed. “How do you know that?”

“I’m a duchess now! I’ve been to the palace many times, and Nadir told me I needed to familiarize myself with certain parts of the palace grounds. I don’t know about any areas that aren’t public, of course.”

It was true that my brother often visited the castle for his duties or to entertain guests of honor. Brie was his wife, so it wasn’t surprising she knew the castle’s layout. And Brie had been to the palace multiple times before that, anyway.

“Speak of the devil!” she exclaimed, quickly hiding behind a tree.

I followed suit just as Princess Abigail emerged from the villa. How fortunate we hadn’t been near the entrance! She would’ve run right into us.

“Come on! Let’s tail her!” Brie said.

“What? Why?”

“What do you mean, ‘why’?! It’s obvious!” Brie’s eyes sparkled.

“She’s going to try and win your husband over! We have to do something!” She couldn’t hide her excitement.

“We don’t know for sure that she’s going to Lord Clarke, and— Brie, you’re totally enjoying this, aren’t you?”

“Oh my goodness perish the thought why would you ever say that?”

“Look how fast you said that! That was practically a confession!”

As we quietly followed Princess Abigail, trying to remain unnoticed, Brie suddenly grinned. “Don’t you just love the taste of freshly brewed drama in the morning?”

“You mean the ‘smell’ of freshly brewed dram— Wait a second! You *are* enjoying this!”

“Oh! Look!” Brie pointed at Princess Abigail, now standing next to Lord Clarke. “See?! Ah, I *love* saying, ‘I told you so.’”

“You’re not even trying to be subtle about it anymore!”

“Aw, come on. What’s a little entertainment between best friends?”

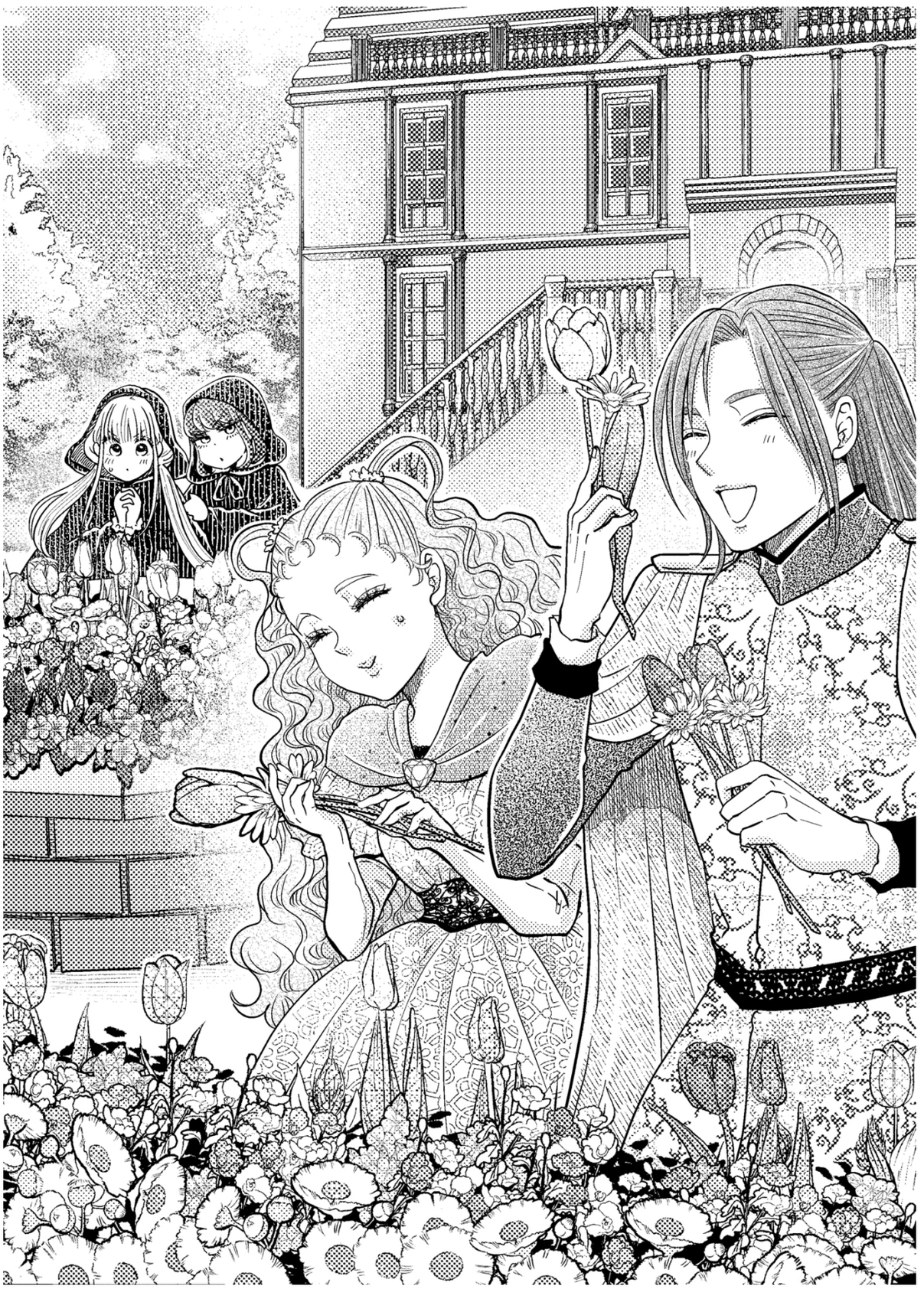
“Entertainment? Really?”

“Let’s sneak closer so we can hear better!” At her urging, I moved closer through the trees with Brie, trying not to be seen.

“Um, Prince Clarke?” Prince Abigail called out, tilting her head as she picked flowers.

“Yes, Princess Abigail?”

“What are we doing, exactly?”



“Picking flowers for Lettie’s chambers,” Lord Clarke explained as though it were obvious. It wasn’t. It really wasn’t.

He seemed oblivious to Princess Abigail’s expression, which screamed, *Okay, but why am* I *doing this…?* Were his eyes malfunctioning?

And there was no reason for the princess herself to be so conscientious in her flower-picking, but she seemed to be compelled by her diligent nature to carefully select each blossom, keeping color coordination in mind. Really, Princess Abigail, you didn’t need to be so meticulous!

“U-Um, Prince Clarke…?” she called out again.

“Yes?”

“Um…”

“Go on.”

“The weather is wonderful today, is it not?”

“It truly is.”

The princess fell silent, and that was the end of that. Was she a poor conversationalist? She’d probably come over to talk to Lord Clarke, but without anything to discuss, she’d ended up just picking flowers for her rival.

“Sh-Shall we talk about something?” she offered. She was making an effort, but it seemed clear she wasn’t used to initiating conversations. A vague opener like that was unlikely to lead to much.

Lord Clarke thought for a moment, then replied, “I go see Lettie every morning before she wakes up.”

“Huh? Oh. Right,” Princess Abigail muttered quietly, now that the conversation’s topic had unexpectedly shifted to me. Lord Clarke, however, remained oblivious.

Also, wait a second! I didn’t know he always came to see me before I woke up. Today was just full of surprises! I listened anxiously, waiting for what he’d say next.

“Lettie always fidgets with the corner of her covers,” he continued.

“I see…”

“She probably isn’t even aware of the habit, herself. Cute, isn’t it?”

“Yes…”

“Oh, and…”

I was mentally begging this man to stop, for Princess Abigail’s sake and my own. I wished he’d just look at her face—her

expression was indescribable. And my own face was probably bright red.

"Do you have a habit of fidgeting with the covers?" Brie asked.

"I don't know!" I snapped, turning away with a pout.

How would I know what I did while asleep? Was that a thing people generally knew about themselves? It wasn't, right? Some people snored, some people ground their teeth, but they had no idea! So of course I wouldn't know whether I fidgeted with the blanket!

Wait. This was important. Did I do anything else while I was asleep? I had to ask Lily or Maria sometime. What if I slept in a stupid position and ruined everyone's mornings?

While I was lost in thought, Lord Clarke continued talking to Princess Abigail about me, and her strange expression didn't change. Understandable. She'd probably been hoping to make pleasant conversation, not signing up for a monologue about his wife. Sure, she wasn't great at talking, but Lord Clarke was atrocious at reading the room.

Had he been more perceptive, he'd have noticed the princess's feelings and not recruited her to pick flowers for his wife. He was so oblivious! I didn't know whether to be worried or glad.

Princess Abigail continued to diligently pick flowers as she listened to Lord Clarke drone on and on. What a hard worker. She really didn't have to, though. It was okay. No, really, she needed to stop. I was feeling sorry for her! Here was this girl, supposedly trying to win my husband over, and I was over here struck by the urge to help her.

At the very least, Lord Clarke needed to stop making the poor thing pick flowers for me.

"I, um, I sort of regret coming here out of curiosity," Brie admitted. "This is painful to watch."

The growing urge to intervene was undeniable for both of us. "I feel the need to be nice to Princess Abigail now..."

Just then, another figure moved toward Princess Abigail and Lord Clarke.

"Oh!" The princess was the first to notice, freezing in place at the sight.

"Ah, you've arrived, I see," Lord Clarke said, showing no signs of surprise at the new arrival.

"Wait. That's..." Brie said, pointing a trembling finger at the

figure. No wonder! She probably didn't have good memories of this man.

"It's been a while, Prince Clarke. And though this isn't our first meeting, Princess Abigail, allow me to introduce myself." The man smiled charmingly. "I am Nathan Delbaran, crown prince of the Kingdom of Delbaran. And your fiancé."

Wait, who was whose what, now?

Prince Nathan was clearly looking at Princess Abigail—he meant he was *her* fiancé. Brie and I exchanged glances and a startled, "What?"

Princess Abigail. Prince Nathan. Engaged?

"Whaaat?!" Brie and I exclaimed in unison, loud enough to shake the nearby trees.

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"Hello, everyone. It's been a while, hasn't it? It's me, Nathan. Do you remember me? I remember you," Prince Nathan said, his eyes glued to Brie.

Specifically, to Brie's chest.

"How am I supposed to forget a man who constantly stares at my chest?" Brie retorted.

"I'll take that as a compliment," he said, still fixated on her bosom.

Just then, Nadir, who had just arrived at the castle, wedged himself between Prince Nathan and Brie, an angry vein throbbing in his forehead. Brie seemed relieved to have the view of her chest blocked.

"Ah, right... A shame, but I'll live." The prince gave up unusually fast and stopped staring. My confusion must've been evident, because he added, "She's a married woman now. Even I know staring would be inappropriate."

"Oh, so you do have a bare minimum of decency..." I realized the words were rude as soon as they left my mouth, but Prince Nathan didn't seem offended. Maybe he was used to hearing that kind of thing?

"Shocking, I know. But I am a considerate man, sometimes." A considerate man wouldn't have been staring at a woman like that in the first place!

"U-Um... Are you and Princess Abigail truly engaged?" I couldn't believe it. I had to ask!

“We are. The talks have been ongoing for some time, but the official decision was made about six months ago.” How recent!

Everything was coming together now.

“Pardon me for a moment,” Princess Abigail said. As she left the room, our eyes met, and she gestured discreetly for us to follow her.

I took Brie and we stepped out after her into the courtyard, where we found her picking flowers.

“You understand now, yes?” she asked, sighing deeply again. “*That* is my fiancé. Surely you can see why I’m desperate.”

“*That*…” Picturing Prince Nathan, Brie and I nodded knowingly.

“I can hardly believe they’re making me marry that…bosom-obsessed deviant! Well, no, the talks had been ongoing for a while, so I knew it was coming. But still! That doesn’t mean I can accept it!”

She was right. Knowing it was coming was a completely different matter from accepting it. I understood her completely—after all, I myself had refused to accept my own engagement, once! I’d tried to run away! Sprint away, even.

“You could try escaping…” I suggested.

“I could not possibly behave so irresponsibly,” she shot back. Right through my heart.

I did regret my lack of responsibility. At least now I was doing my job as the crown princess… Right…?

“I’m a royal, myself,” she went on. “I knew a political marriage was in my future, and I have no complaints about the match itself. He may be rotten on the inside, but he’s capable at his duties and beloved by his people. I have no qualms with marrying him.”

“So what do you have qualms with, then?” She sounded very prepared. Wouldn’t it have been best to go back to her homeland and prepare for her wedding?

“I do not wish to marry without any romantic experience!” she snapped, striking a nearby tree. It must’ve hurt, because she dropped into a crouch, clutching her hand.

“P-Princess Abigail, are you all right?”

“I-I am… I did not realize trees were so…solid…” Well, they *were* trees! But the princess’s statement sounded genuine, and she had the air of a sheltered lady to her, so perhaps she’d never touched a tree before. “I wish to experience a romance that makes my heart race, but… I cannot imagine having that with

him. But once I'm married, seeking romance elsewhere is out of the question. If I'm to do this, it has to be before then. And then I realized, oh! My first love! Of course!"

That being Lord Clarke.

"But Lord Clarke is a married man," I pointed out.

"Why, even better, don't you think?"

Better how? I wondered.

Princess Abigail shook her head lightly. "Since he's married, it cannot turn serious, no matter how much I pursue him. I can fully enjoy the experience of unrequited love with no risk of it ever becoming mutual. No one gets hurt, I get to experience love, and I'll be satisfied." She seemed confident that her plan was foolproof.

Brie had been silent so far, but now she raised her hand. "There's no guarantee he won't reciprocate just because he's married."

"What?" Princess Abigail sounded genuinely shocked. "Wh-What do you mean? He's married, is he not? Marriage is supposed to be a contract!"

"There are plenty of people who break that contract."

Princess Abigail let out a yelp of alarm. "Y-You mean infidelity? Does that actually happen in reality?"

"The fact there's a word for it is proof enough of that."

The princess seemed unable to close her gaping mouth.

I poked Brie's side. "Hey! Why are you scaring her like that?"

"It's much better for her to know than not! Imagine if she decided on a married man other than Prince Clarke and thought, 'Oh, it's fine! He's married!' and the man reciprocated, then what? It'd be a huge problem."

"Th-That's true..." It *was* possible Princess Abigail would want to enjoy romance (in the form of make-believe, unrequited love) elsewhere before her marriage. The princess had somehow been under the impression that a married man would never respond to other women's advances. But if he did, and refused to accept that she didn't actually mean it that way, she'd be in serious trouble.

"R-R-R-R-Reality is terrifying," stammered the unexpectedly naive princess, thoroughly shocked by Brie's words. She'd never considered this possibility before, and the thought had her trembling.

Poor thing. She couldn't fall for her own fiancé, but she

couldn't give up her dreams of romance either, to the point she was willing to settle for pretend one-sided feelings. All because her fiancé was like *that*.

"It's all right, Princess Abigail," I assured her. "Lord Clarke would never."

"Princess Leticia…" she murmured, looking at me with teary eyes.

"Your first love isn't some unfaithful wretch. Have faith!"

"You… You're right!" she exclaimed, cheering up. "Prince Clarke would never do such a thing! He's madly in love with you! I can pursue him with confidence!"

Hearing it said out loud like that was a little embarrassing. "Madly in love"? Was he really? Was that how everyone saw it?

"Thank you!" Princess Abigail said, gripping my hands in gratitude. "I shall have no regrets!" She gave us an energetic wave, and left.

I waved back with a smile, watching her go.

"Did you just encourage your opponent?" Brie asked.

"Oh." Oh no. Ohhh no.

I had.

And it was too late.

***

The next day, I was back at my family's home for the first time in a while, still getting an earful from Brie.

"Unbelievable. Who in their right mind goes, 'Oh, you can totally flirt with my husband! Go right ahead!'? Honestly!"

"I-I didn't say it like that."

"You practically did!"

I had not! I'd only said Lord Clarke wasn't the kind of unfaithful man to mess with another woman while he was married, that was all.

"Now look what you've done!" Brie pointed with her chin at Princess Abigail, who was eagerly talking to Lord Clarke. When the princess noticed me, she smiled brightly. "See?! She thinks you're on her side! She's being all friendly with him!"

"Isn't that a good thing?" I wouldn't have wanted to work together with Princess Abigail on the queen's requests while things were still tense.

"Don't come crying to me if she steals your man."

I shook my head at the exasperated Brie, smiling dryly. “You think someone who writes delusional diaries about me would actually look at someone else?”

Brie froze for a second, then brought a weary hand to her forehead. “Right. We’re talking about your husband here. Still…it’s amusing to watch it happen to someone else, but if I were in your shoes, I’d be put off.” Ah. So she was only having fun because it wasn’t happening to her.

“I think my brother would be more likely to do something like that.”

“No, no, no, no. He wouldn’t.” Brie cast an expectant glance at Nadir, who was also speaking to Lord Clarke and gestured at her not to interfere. “No, no, no, no. He wouldn’t,” she repeated, her tone a little more confident this time.

Though I’d said what I’d said, I was pretty sure my brother was quite fixated on his first love too. He probably had drawings of Brie hidden somewhere and kept track of everything she did. He was just *that* thorough, after all.

“Ugh,” Brie grumbled, “but it’s still frustrating to be treated like I’m in the way when I’m supposed to be working too.”

“My brother’s always been a solo player. He doesn’t know how to work with others.” Nadir didn’t have many friends either. The only person I could think of who he could call a friend was Abel.

Abel wasn’t intimidated by my brother’s personality, and the two seemed to get along well. I wasn’t sure what he saw in my brother, really, but he did call himself Nadir’s best friend.

Oh! And there was one other person who got along with my brother: Ben. When Ben was a child living in an orphanage, my brother had taken him in and put him to work as a butler. Why my perfectionist brother would take in someone so clumsy and prone to mistakes was a mystery to me, but Ben did have a certain charm.

Still, Ben was more like a pet. My brother would often yell at Ben like, “You messed up again, you mongrel!” and Ben would respond like, “I’m so sorry! I’ll be a good boy! I’ll roll over and everything!” and my brother would snap like, “Do not!” Ben was treated like a dog, and he acted like a dog too.

“Here you go, everyone!” my brother’s pet butler chirped happily. Ben began to set the tea in front of us when his right hand caught on a cup meant for Princess Abigail. “Ack!”

The tea spilled onto the skirt of her dress, instantly staining it

a light brown. Ben's face turned pale.

"Ben..." I muttered in exasperation at his perpetual clumsiness.

"Eeeeek! I'm sorry I'm sorry I'm sorry please don't behead me!" he yelped, prostrating himself with practiced ease. That was perfect! He must've had a lot of experience. Just how often did this guy fail at things?

"No one beheads anyone these days."

"Eeeeek! Am I getting drawn and quartered instead?! I don't want to be drawn and quaaaaaarteeerrred!" he wailed, clutching himself in fear. What kind of tyrants did he think people in high positions were?

My brother quietly moved behind Ben and picked him up by the collar of his shirt. "Ben."

"Nooo! Young Master, don't ditch meee! I'm confident in my incompetence! I can't survive out there! Please, don't abandon a pet!"

"You're not a pet!"

"I am now! Woof!"

"Shut your mouth!"

Oh, Ben...

Just as everyone's gazes turned warm and sympathetic, a familiar face appeared behind the butler. "Messed up again, did you, Ben?"

"Lily!" I exclaimed. She was supposed to be at the royal palace, working as my maid! "Why are you here?!"

"You have no major official duties coming up, Lady Leticia. Lady Brianna and Lord Nadir, meanwhile, are starting work on a project, and need the extra help. Therefore, I've temporarily returned to work as a maid for the duchy. I have obtained proper permission from the palace."

"I didn't know that!"

"We figured you might attempt to stop me if we'd told you." Who had told her that?! It had been Nadir, hadn't it! No one else would've done it!

I looked at my brother, but he feigned ignorance and patted Ben on the head.

Ugh! How infuriating! Still, Lily wouldn't have returned to the duchy of her own accord, and if proper protocol had been followed, there was nothing I could say. But it was really infuriating!

“You must come back to me, Lily…”

“I’ll do my best.”

Wait. Do her best?! She was coming back, right? Right?!

“Excuse me a moment,” she said, taking Princess Abigail’s hand and helping her up from her chair. “The stain has set in, but it hasn’t been long. We may be able to salvage the dress if we wash it quickly. Some of Lady Leticia’s clothes are still at this residence, so you can change into those if you’d like. This way, please.”

“Th-Thank you,” the princess stammered as Lily led her out of the room. Oh, my beloved, swift, efficient handmaiden!

“Leticia,” my brother began, “how about we keep Lily and send you Ben instead—”

“No!” I refused immediately.

Ben sank to the floor with an expression so dramatic it practically had a sound effect. “Everyone’s so mean to me… I’m just a useless puppy anyway…” He really did see himself as more dog than person. Maybe he should’ve been working harder as a person, not a pet!

Feeling sorry for the sobbing butler, Brie—now the lady of the house—gently placed a hand on his shoulder. “You have good points too, Ben! I’m sure of it!”

“Like what?”

“Like… Ummm…” Unable to come up with anything, Brie fell silent and Ben started crying again.

My brother stepped in next to the speechless Brie. “Brianna, if you coddle him, he’ll get even worse. Leave him be. He’ll stop crying when he gets hungry.”

He’ll stop crying when he’s hungry? I echoed internally. Now that I thought about it, he did always stop crying as soon as it was mealtime.

“Pardon us,” Princess Abigail said as Lily brought her back.

“The princess is done changing,” Lily declared. How quick! Fantastic as usual, Lily!

“Oh, you look lovely!” I exclaimed. Princess Abigail was wearing a dress of mine from when I was still growing, just entering adolescence. She was small for her age, so it fit quite well.

Especially around the chest.

As I pondered how I used to be flat too, the princess glared at me. Then she looked at herself, wearing my old dress, and back

at me, and the dress I was currently wearing.

“I-I’m still growing!” she pouted angrily, still managing to look cute. “Anyway, we have work to do! Let us proceed with the discussion!”

Back to the original purpose of our visit. Indeed, I wasn’t here to visit family.

“Right! I wanted to discuss something about the dress’s design,” Brie said, spreading out a piece of paper with a dress design—likely of her own making—for all to see. She pointed at the design. “The dress fastens at the chest, so the shoulders and arms are completely exposed. I’m concerned about its acceptability in Astarl, where people tend to dislike showing too much skin.”

This was true. I’d never seen any dresses in Astarl like the ones from Princess Abigail’s homeland. It would be quite a challenge for people who typically didn’t expose so much skin to wear something this revealing.

“We do not wear these dresses as is in Clement,” Princess Abigail explained.

“Huh?” Brie and I said in unison. Brie asked, “What do you mean? Is this dress not complete?”

“The dress itself is complete. But…” the princess trailed off, looking around. After a moment she picked up a blanket that Lily had brought—probably to keep the princess warm after she’d gotten wet. “We do this,” she continued, draping the blanket over her shoulders. “We wear something over our shoulders like this. Clement isn’t just warm, but sunny, too, so we wear these for temperature regulation and protection from the sun.”

“That’s fantastic!”

“Oh?” The princess seemed surprised by Brie’s enthusiastic response.

“Of course! If we make not only dresses but also shawls, people can mix and match. They can pick a shawl they like and change it based on what they feel like wearing that day. We sell both the dress and the shawl and make a fortune!” Brie, with her keen business acumen, already had a vision for sales.

“That way the dress wouldn’t be too revealing, and it will be easier for people in Astarl to accept it,” Lord Clarke chimed in, equally enthusiastic.

“Then we plan to release both the dresses and the shawls at the same time,” Nadir said. As a sponsor, he had no objections,

and so I didn't either. Fashionable shawls sounded fun, and the idea was exciting.

"Well then, let's get starte—" But Brie was interrupted by the door opening. "Oh. I forgot about him," she muttered as she looked at the new arrivals beyond the door. "Prince Nathan. And Prince Louis, and Lyle, on top of that."

"Hey! What do you mean, 'on top of that'?!" Prince Louis protested. "I am not an afterthought! Lyle might be, but I am not!"

"Why do I get to be an afterthought? I'm not one either!" Lyle protested back. "I should come first!"

"*You* should come first?! Don't be presumptuous!"

"This is workplace bullying! I'm being bullied!"

As the prince and his attendant continued to bicker, Prince Nathan smiled. "Hey there. We figured we'd stop by."

"Just…casually? Like that?" I asked. He was a crown prince; shouldn't there have been more pomp involved?

"Actually, I called him over," Brie murmured apologetically. "I figured it would be nice to have different fabrics, not just from our own country, since we're trying to popularize a foreign dress. I thought it would be great to get cooperation from Delbaran, which has an even more diverse culture than we do and thus a variety of unique fabrics. The queen already gave her permission."

"My uncle often makes his own original clothing from those fabrics," Prince Nathan pointed out. I could imagine Duke Neil having fun playing with fabrics and trying out different combinations. "Once the dress is completed, we'd like to try and popularize it in Delbaran as well."

"Now it's a three-way international collaboration," said Lord Clarke. The project's scale had increased significantly. What had started as a whim from the queen had grown into a sizable venture.

"Should you be away from Delbaran for this long, Prince Nathan?" I asked.

"It'll be fine. My stay will be longer than initially planned, but this is a part of my duties too. Louis is still too young to handle matters like this, and since my fiancée is here as well, I can stay a while as a representative of Delbaran and get closer to Princess Abigail while I'm at it. Don't worry, my father and his poor, ailing back will handle affairs in Delbaran."

I wonder if the king's thrown out his back again.

Prince Louis tilted his head in genuine puzzlement. "Why is father so prone to back problems? He's the king. He shouldn't be lifting anything heavy."

You. You're the heavy thing he's lifting, everyone thought in unison, though nobody said it out loud. The king's beloved son was completely unaware of his role in his father's agony.

"All of that is to say, I'll be staying here at the palace a while longer so we may all work together," Prince Nathan declared.

"What?!" Princess Abigail was shocked. Perhaps she hadn't been informed. "Y-You're staying at the palace?"

Prince Nathan smiled. "Our first joint project as a couple, and our first time living together! I look forward to it, Princess Abigail."

"Y-Yes, I do as well..." she murmured, uneasily shaking hands with the prince. She'd just made plans to aggressively pursue Lord Clarke! Now her fiancé was here, and wanting to act as a couple to boot! Awkward.

"Oh, it's out in the open, then?" Prince Louis asked. "I guess I have no reason to stay quie— Mmmph!"

"I'm so grateful for your company, Prince Louis!" Princess Abigail exclaimed, dragging him away. "Please excuse us! We need to have a little chat in private!"

The little prince seemed to know Princess Abigail, so they had to have met before. I did remember a time when he'd been away, and Maria had been all, "What a relief!"

...And that had probably been when the king threw out his back again.

Wait, Princess Abigail was gone! This was my chance to ask what I'd been curious about. "Um..." I checked to be sure she wasn't on her way back before addressing Prince Nathan. "Princess Abigail is your fiancée, yes?"

"She is indeed."

"And you don't mind?"

"Mind what?"

I glanced over at Brie. "I thought you were chasing after a certain ideal." Boobage. He was looking for the ideal boobage.

Brie cast a frosty glance at Prince Nathan from behind Nadir. My brother smiled at the prince with the smugness of a married man. I hated that face.

"Well, it would be ideal if my fiancée had the perfect boobage,

but…” Prince Nathan glanced enviously at Brie and Nadir. “I’m in no position to pursue such a thing anymore, and a political marriage was to be expected. Besides—” Something came flying at Prince Nathan’s head, hard, interrupting him. “Ow! What the…?”

He looked at the object in question—a high-heeled shoe. In the direction it had come from stood Princess Abigail, one foot now shoeless.

“I’ll have you know,” she hissed, her beautiful features twisted in anger, “that *I’m* the one who has to settle for an old man like you because of this arrangement!”

“O-Old…?!” Prince Nathan, who hadn’t been even slightly bothered by the implication that he was a pervert, now looked profoundly shocked.



From the perspective of the sixteen-year-old Princess Abigail, Prince Nathan, who was quite a bit older than her, would indeed look like an old man.

“I may be your fiancée, but…!” The princess glared sharply at him. “I’m still single! And I’ll do as I please!” She approached Lord Clarke and took his arm. “Which means I will pursue Prince Clarke!”

Lord Clarke was stunned. Prince Nathan couldn’t recover from the shock. Nadir and Brie continued to blatantly flaunt their wedded bliss. Lyle seemed like he didn’t really care at all.

Oblivious to this tense and surreal situation, Prince Louis declared, “I’m hungry.”

***

We had the angry Princess Abigail return to the palace with the hungry Prince Louis, and I explained the princess’s situation to Lord Clarke. With her bold declaration, it made sense to just tell him all about it.

“Wait, she was pursuing me? Really?” To my astonishment, Lord Clarke truly hadn’t noticed the princess’s behavior. Her very obvious advances. I felt a bit sorry for her.

“She was clearly showing her affection,” I pointed out.

“Was she? I don’t recall that.” He tilted his head. “But she was really nice. She even helped me pick flowers for you.” Which had been a tragic misunderstanding caused by the princess’s diligence and the prince’s obliviousness…

“You really need to be more sensitive to the feelings of others, Lord Clarke.”

“I don’t really care about anyone other than you, Lettie.”

Ugh! The unexpected heart flip! Lord Clarke gave me a curious look as I clutched my chest. This was exactly what I meant! Though right now I liked the fact he was oblivious to my feelings!

“I see, though… I get it now,” he continued, nodding. “I was wondering why Princess Abigail would come here to study instead of going to her new fiancé’s country. There’s still time before the wedding, but she’s such a conscientious person, she couldn’t have behaved freely in her home country. And she hardly knows anyone here, which is likely another reason she came.”

“True…”

Her upright nature had been clear from the start. After all, she’d only ever approached Lord Clarke at the palace. If she were seriously targeting him, she could’ve used the excuse of being from another country to suggest exploring the town together or something like that. She was a smart girl, so she’d probably thought of that, but she’d chosen not to act on it. Most likely she’d wanted to avoid any rumors spreading in town, so she’d chosen to pursue Lord Clarke only within the confines of the palace, where news was less likely to spread.

“Princess Abigail is still a teenager,” Lord Clarke mused. “She must have things she wants to do too.”

“And she’s at the age where one yearns for romance,” I added. She wanted to experience love because her fiancé was a weirdo, but she didn’t want to cause any problems for anyone. “I understand how she feels.”

I’d tried to escape so many times because there were so many things I’d been unhappy with. Let’s not talk about how I’d also gotten caught every time.

“Oh, by the way,” I asked, “what did you mean, ‘there’s still time before the wedding’?” That had made me curious.

“Ah, right. Well, Princess Abigail is still young, so their marriage is planned for a few years from now.”

“What? I wish they’d done that for me!” Why couldn’t my youth have been considered too? I was only one year older than her.

“If you hadn’t kept trying to run, we could’ve delayed it a bit more.”

“Urk…”

I had dug my own grave.

Then again, if we hadn’t married, maybe I’d still be taking princess lessons. Perhaps getting married had been for the best after all. Lord Clarke had told me before that my education was “almost perfect” and that we could wrap it up, but if our marriage had been planned for further in the future, things might have been different.

No matter how capable you were, you’d forget things once enough time had passed since you learned them. It was likely my princess lessons would’ve continued in order to prevent that. If I’d been useless right after marriage, I would’ve faced a lot of criticism from people demanding to know what I’d been doing up until then. I’d worked far too hard to slack off at the end and

get criticized for it! I would've been devastated. In tears, even.

"Old... Old, she says..." Prince Nathan repeated, still not over the shock. "I'm sure thirty-two must seem old to a teenager, but...I feel young at heart... She didn't have to say it like that..."

Now I felt bad for him.

But we had more pressing matters at hand. "Um... Are you okay with that?" I asked.

"With what? Being thought of as old?" Not that!

"Princess Abigail's declaration that she'll be pursuing Lord Clarke. She basically publicly stated her intentions to cheat..."

"Oh." Prince Nathan finally lifted his head. "That's fine. As Clarke mentioned earlier, she's still young, and probably not fully on board with the engagement. Let her do as she pleases."

Huh. For a pervert, he'd handled that very maturely. I gained a little bit of respect for him.

"Princess Leticia, your thoughts are written all over your face," Prince Nathan observed.

"Oh, my apologies... I was just thinking about how you're not just a pervert..."

"That's not a compliment, Lettie," Lord Clarke said. But still, being a pervert was problematic!

"I'll have you know I'm not just some deviant who would settle for anyone. I was simply chasing after my ideal."

"That makes you a demanding pervert." Which seemed even worse. "Oh, I've been meaning to ask..."

"Yes?"

I looked at Lord Clarke and Prince Nathan. "Are you two close? You're so informal with one another."

The two of them spoke at the same time: "He's my best friend." "He's my friend."

"Huh?" "Huh?"

Prince Nathan had smiled, calling Lord Clarke his "best friend," but Lord Clarke had only called Prince Nathan a "friend." There was a significant difference between the two things, and judging by Prince Nathan's expression, he thought the same thing.

"C-Clarke," Prince Nathan stammered, staggering. "Am I so trivial to you?"

"Um, no, it's just..."

"One blow after another today... I guess I'm just an old, delusional, perverted buffoon."

To be fair, no one had actually said that.

We'd just *thought* it.

Despite being a grown man, Prince Nathan started to cry, feeling sorry for himself.

"Nathan," Lord Clarke said with a serious look, placing a hand on Prince Nathan's shoulder. "I've never said it outright, and I know I only said 'friend' just now, but you're a very important friend to me!"

"Oh, Clarke!" Prince Nathan exclaimed, putting an arm around Lord Clarke's shoulders. "Thank you! You're the only one who would call me a friend despite my being a pervert or whatever."

Ah, so Prince Nathan's interests had made him lonely... Meanwhile, I had Brie and Maria as my dearest friends. Our hearts were connected! I glanced over at Brie, expecting a look of adoration, but she just glared at me instead. Why?! Why was I the only one thinking about our wonderful friendship?!

"You're my best friend, right?!" I demanded.

"How do I put this?" Brie replied. "Your love is a bit much."

"Isn't too much love better than too little love?!"

"That's exactly what I mean." Ouch! My feelings! Why couldn't she accept my love?!

Prince Nathan patted my shoulder and gave me a warm smile. "Chin up, princess."

"I don't want *you* comforting me!" An old man! A pervert! A sad sack whose best friend only saw him as a friend at best! His fiancée hated him! He'd won the problematic bingo! I hadn't sunk so low yet! I...hoped.

"So, Nathan, you're saying we *don't* need to stop Princess Abigail from pursuing me, yes?" Lord Clarke asked again to be sure.

"Yes, it's fine. Just a cute act of rebellion before marriage. If she goes through with the marriage without doing anything like this, she'll probably always regret not doing it."

He was probably right. People did tend to fixate on what they couldn't do—especially things they'd never have the chance to try again. Those regrets tended to last a lifetime.

"All right. I agree with you, so I'll allow it without turning her down."

"Thank you."

"There are three things you must do here," said Nadir, who had been observing silently.

“Things I must do?” Prince Nathan echoed.

Nadir raised a finger. “One, since you’re giving your permission, you must not complain about this issue no matter what.” He raised another finger. “Two, you allowed it, so you must not interfere or get jealous.” He raised a third finger. “Lastly, you must make an effort to grow closer to Princess Abigail.”

Prince Nathan blinked at the third statement. “Grow closer? Really?”

“Really. You’re physically near each other now, so you should interact. Her country is a long way from yours, and with your duties as the crown prince, you won’t be able to visit her casually. This may be the closest you’ll get to her before the marriage.”

My brother’s words made sense, and Prince Nathan seemed to agree. “You’re right. I did decide to stay and participate in this project partly to deepen my relationship with Princess Abigail. It’s only sensible that I should make an effort to grow closer to her.”

“Exactly. You can’t just leave everything to Prince Clarke. If this matter is to be resolved on a fundamental level, you must make an effort as well.”

So basically Nadir was saying that Prince Nathan couldn’t get away with letting someone else do all the hard work, just in more polite terms.

Prince Nathan shrank a bit, and meekly mumbled, “Okay…”

***

The day after Princess Abigail’s declaration, the four of us—Lord Clarke, Princess Abigail, Prince Nathan, and myself—awkwardly gathered for breakfast. The queen and king had specifically told us to make sure we included Prince Nathan too. After yesterday’s events, we all wished they hadn’t.

During the meal it was easy to focus on eating instead of the awkward atmosphere, but once we were all done, we had no distractions to help. As a maid served us tea, it became clear no one knew what to do or say.

The first to make a move was Prince Nathan. Following the advice Nadir had given him yesterday to grow closer to Princess Abigail, Prince Nathan approached her with a bright smile. I could only imagine how much he must have had to psych

himself up.

"Prin—"

"Do *not* speak to me, old man!" she snapped immediately.

The prince deflated under the force of the crushing blow and crumpled onto the floor. Being called an old man had devastated him utterly.

As a teenager myself, I could see her words as simple statement of fact, but I supposed if I'd been in my thirties and someone called me an old woman I'd have felt insulted too. Granted, most people would have more tact than to call a crown princess that…

"Lord Claaarke…" Princess Abigail called out in the sweetest, most affectionate tone she could manage. She seemed a little embarrassed, probably because she wasn't used to speaking that way, which made it all the more endearing. She was clearly determined to go all out with her flirtations, especially in front of Crown Prince Nathan. She *had* made a very grand declaration, after all.

I, meanwhile, was no longer feeling uneasy about her closeness to my husband and watched with a warm smile. Go Princess Abigail!

She nervously approached Lord Clarke. "Um, would you perhaps be interested in a da—"

Princess Abigail cut herself off and began muttering to herself. I sneakily strained to eavesdrop.

"No, wait. We can't go on a date. What if someone saw us? Word would spread like wildfire. No, that won't do. A tea party, perhaps? But Lord Clarke isn't like that old man—he's busy every day. I couldn't possibly ask him to make time for me! No, that would be selfish. But I can't do nothing… Otherwise, nothing will change…"

She was seriously overthinking things! How could a princess be this considerate?! Were her parents saints?!

The princess kept going on about how this wouldn't work, and that wouldn't work—I very nearly told her she had my permission to do whatever she wanted. But before I could, she suddenly looked like she'd figured it out.

"Oh! Please allow me to join you and Princess Leticia for tea!" she exclaimed confidently, looking like she thought this was a splendid idea.

She could've just not included me. Really, there was no need

to overthink all of this… But then again, if I said she could go ahead and do it without me, it'd ruin her chance to be with Lord Clarke at all. She probably wouldn't be willing to join him for tea without me.

"Then why not have Nathan join us as well?" Lord Clarke suggested, offering a hand to Prince Nathan, who was still in a heap on the floor.

"I'll go!" the prince exclaimed, springing back to life like a fish returned to water.

Princess Abigail's expression instantly twisted into a disgusted frown. And that, no doubt, was another critical hit to Prince Nathan's ego. This poor man—his emotions were snapping in opposite directions every few seconds. He had to be getting whiplash. I was sure it was hard on him to be so loathed by his own fiancée… But then again, he'd dug himself that grave. I couldn't really say anything in his defense.

Pull yourself up by your bootstraps! I thought to myself, silently cheering him on.

"Very well," the princess acquiesced. "I suppose he *is* my fiancé. Even if I'm not all that fond of the idea."

Prince Nathan looked like he was about to cry. How was he going to handle any of this if he was so easily shaken? It was only the first day of Princess Abigail's quest to win Lord Clarke's affection, and he was already on the verge of falling apart.

"I have some free time today," Lord Clarke said. "Shall we have our tea now?"

The four of us decided to stay and have tea and pastries together. I called for Maria to serve us; I really needed some sort of comfort in all this awkwardness.

"Um, what's happening?" Maria asked. She wasn't involved in the whole dressmaking business, so she didn't understand the situation. I explained everything in a hushed whisper, and her eyes immediately lit up. "Oh! Fun! How did it get to this point?"

Oh. Right. She looked like an angel, but she was actually a giant gossip.

"I don't know either," I admitted. And I really didn't. How had it come to this? I resisted the urge to bury my head in my hands; the tea party was more important.

As usual, Lord Clarke recommended some desserts for me while casually nibbling on pastries. Prince Nathan tried to speak to Princess Abigail with no success. She, in turn, was so tense

from trying too hard that she was practically a statue. And I was sitting here wondering what my role in all this even was.

Maybe things would've gone more smoothly without me. If nothing else, Princess Abigail would've had more chances to speak to Lord Clarke.

"Here, Lettie," Lord Clarke said, serving me a slice of chocolate cake that he presumably found delicious.

"Th-Thank you," I replied, wishing that he'd directed his kindness at Princess Abigail instead, just this once.

"Ah, it must be nice," the princess murmured as she watched Lord Clarke and me. We both turned to look at her, and she quickly covered her mouth with both hands, startled at the realization she'd said anything out loud.

What exactly could've been so nice? The cake, perhaps? I offered it to her.

"Oh, no, I don't mean that I want to eat the cake...but I gladly accept. Thank you." She probably couldn't refuse something that had been outright offered to her—she dutifully took the chocolate cake.

If it wasn't the cake she'd been envious of, then... "Were you talking about having the cake served to you?"

Princess Abigail nodded. "Well, it's just... It's very romantic. You two are already married, sure, but it's also clear you care for each other, and I couldn't help but think how wonderful that must be."

I hadn't even realized it until she pointed it out. The action was so natural for us, but now that I thought about it, it really was the kind of thing people only did for those they cared about.

"In contrast," the princess continued in a self-deprecating tone, looking down at Prince Nathan with a sigh, "this man can't even do that. He keeps trying to talk to me, but a gesture like that would mean so much more. Oh well. I suppose I'm asking too much of someone who's merely my partner in a political marriage." She stood up. "I appreciate the tea and pastries, but I must excuse myself. I'll see you in the afternoon when we discuss the plans for the dresses."

The princess made sure to finish her chocolate cake before excusing herself. Meanwhile...

Prince Nathan flinched when Lord Clarke and I looked at him. "Y-Yes?"

"You could be a little more smooth," I pointed out.

“You’re a grown man,” Lord Clarke added. “Surely you could do something to make your fiancée happy?”

Indeed, Prince Nathan was thirty-two years old. At that age, he should’ve had plenty of experience. It couldn’t have been that hard to figure out what he could do to make a young girl happy.

The prince fidgeted with his fingers hesitantly for a moment. “I have no experience,” he admitted at last, with a look of resignation.

“What?” Lord Clarke and I blurted out in unison. What did he mean, he had no experience? Wait, was he…? No way!

“I’ve never been in a relationship,” he clarified.

“Huh? Huh?!” I was completely speechless. That couldn’t be! “But Prince Louis says you’re always chasing after the ideal boobage!”

“He’s not wrong. I did think it would’ve been nice to find a woman with my ideal figure, so I did approach women who were close to that ideal. But I’m the crown prince; I can’t just make moves on a woman over something like that.”

“But you were chasing after Brie!”

“She was my type, yes. But we weren’t engaged or anything, so I didn’t go all out. And of course, at the time I wasn’t engaged to Princess Abigail either.”

W-Well, it was true that he hadn’t actually done anything to Brie.

“I’m sure you heard Lady Brianna scream, but I was just sneaking into her chambers to leave her a message and flowers. I thought she’d be pleasantly surprised when she woke up, but she must’ve been a light sleeper, because she woke up immediately and kicked me out.”

“Of course she did! You entered her chambers without permission!”

“But Clarke told me he leaves flowers for you in your chambers every morning.”

He’d copied Lord Clarke! That only worked with me because I was a deep sleeper. It was best not to do it otherwise. Besides, without a good rapport with the sleeper to begin with, that kind of thing could easily backfire.

“You shouldn’t do that unless you’re absolutely sure the other party won’t wake up and that your feelings are mutual,” I told him.

“What?! Really?!” The prince looked genuinely shocked, like

he'd truly believed this was a gesture a lady would appreciate.

"Prince Nathan, you really *don't* have any experience with romance…"

"I told you so." This was not an "I told you so" moment, Prince Nathan!

"So you don't even know how to grow closer to Princess Abigail…"

"I haven't the foggiest." Prince Nathan let out a deep sigh. "What do women like? What do they not like?"

He may have been…well, like that, but he was just as pretty as Prince Louis. Between that and his status as crown prince, he should've been quite popular with women. The fact he hadn't dated anyone until now suggested that he was serious and diligent like Princess Abigail—even though he didn't seem that way at all.

"I suppose this will have to do. Maria!" I called out, glancing subtly at Maria, who promptly handed me something.

"What's that?" the prince asked.

"My favorite book," I declared with a sly smile, placing my favorite romance novel before him. I read it whenever I had nothing better to do, so Maria always kept it handy for me.

"Oh, the one I put on the bookshelf!" said Lord Clarke, looking pleased. He had indeed chosen this book, so it was probably to his liking—meaning it was a romance novel suitable for men to read as well.

"You're telling me to use a novel as reference?" Prince Nathan asked skeptically.

"Don't underestimate the power of romance novels!" I snapped.

"Eek!"

Oh. Whoops. I'd gotten a bit too intense. *Take it down a notch, take it down a notch.* I smiled gently at the prince. "Romance novels are full of the things women dream of."

"R-Right…"

"They let us live vicariously through the characters and experience things we wish our beloved would say or do for us."

"Right…"

"And *this* book in particular, you see…!" I exclaimed, holding the book up in front of him. "This is a story where the female protagonist initially dislikes her fiancée, but gradually the two become closer and fall in love! Just like the two of you!"

“You basically just said she hates me.”

“She does.”

“I’m starting to expect this sort of treatment…”

I pressed the book into Prince Nathan’s hands. “Don’t be embarrassed that it’s targeted at women. Just read it!”

“Is this really going to help me understand what women want?”

“I read it myself, for Lettie,” Lord Clarke pointed out. “I found it helpful, and genuinely interesting.” Lord Clarke was the one who bought romance novels for me—and more and more often lately. He probably enjoyed reading them too.

I understood that! It was hard to put them down once you started reading them. Our bookshelf was getting pretty full, though, so maybe it was time to dedicate a room specifically to romance novels.

“I wonder if you can really learn from fiction…” Prince Nathan mumbled.

“You can,” I insisted. “It beats being clueless and panicking like you did earlier.”

“Urk…” Ooh, I’d hit a sore spot. Prince Nathan gritted his teeth.

“There are plenty more where this came from, by the way.”

“Huh?”

“A single book won’t be enough for you to understand women.”

Hmm. Did Prince Nathan go pale? No, no. I must’ve been imagining it.

***

That afternoon, we met at the Dorman estate to discuss the dress endeavor.

“Oh, this design is splendid!” Princess Abigail exclaimed. “You have such wonderful fashion sense, Lady Brianna.”

“Thank you, Princess! I knew you’d have a discerning eye!” Brie cooed sweetly, clearly delighted. Was Princess Abigail trying to steal my best friend too? Over my dead body! *I* was Brie’s best friend!

I wasn’t sure how things would go, what with the situation this morning, but Princess Abigail had come out of her room by the afternoon and was diligently seeing to her duties. Which, her

being the serious princess she was, wasn't surprising. However, she was still ignoring Prince Nathan's attempts at interacting with her, focusing instead on eagerly chatting with Lord Clarke. She seemed to have bounced right back from her low mood.

I understood her intentions, and I didn't feel jealous when she spoke to Lord Clarke, but seeing Prince Nathan struggle to close the gap between them did make me feel a little bad. Still, he'd more or less caused this situation with his thoughtless comment, so I wasn't going to intervene.

Plus, I knew it wasn't a good idea for outsiders to meddle in matters like these; he'd just have to figure it out on his own. For now, I really thought he should read that romance novel. The novel made it very clear that when someone was giving you the cold shoulder, you ought to give them space.

"I called you here today to show you this," Brie said, chuckling excitedly as she opened a door leading to another room where a wide variety of fabrics were spread out. "Ta-da! Behold, the results of my motivation! A mountain of fabrics! A nationwide project such as this calls for it, after all. Besides, you can practically smell the money—er, the waves this will make all over the country!"

She was very bad at hiding her true intentions. Really, her honesty was almost refreshing.

Princess Abigail picked up some of the fabric, looking impressed. "Oh gosh. I've never seen such a variety of fabrics. In Clement, we mostly stick to a few traditional kinds."

"I imagine it's difficult to use a wide range of fabrics there due to the climate. But if you'd like, we can make you a dress with fabric you can use even after you return home, princess."

"Oh?" The idea had clearly never crossed the princess's mind. She looked up at Brie, still holding the fabric. "You can make me a dress I could wear even in Clement?"

"Indeed. It must get stale after a while, wearing only the same fabrics over and over. Since we fortunately have all sorts of fabrics here, I'm sure we can find something that will suit the climate in your homeland as well."

"Oh, but I'd feel bad making you go out of your way to accommodate me," Princess Abigail said, looking somewhat guilty.

"You don't need to worry about that," my brother chimed in. "As it stands, this project will bring great benefits to us and our

country, but there's nothing in it for you specifically, correct?"

"No, but... Still, I'm already imposing by staying at the palace..." Humble to the core, this princess. How modest! I'd have taken everything offered to me.

"This is a completely separate matter. You should receive some compensation for your efforts."

"But..."

"Oh! In that case...!" Brie clapped her hands together, looking as if she'd just had a brilliant idea. "Think of it as helping us by advertising the dress!"

"Advertising?"

Brie nodded enthusiastically. "We'd love to sell these dresses in the Kingdom of Clement as well!"

"Truly?"

"Yes!" Brie's eyes sparkled like a lovelorn girl's. Which made sense, since she was infatuated with money. "We'll definitely have fabrics that suit your country, and I'm certain many people there would love to try a new design! They'd sell like hotcakes!"

"Like...hotcakes."

"But to pull it off, we need publicity." Brie pointed at Princess Abigail. "We need you!"

"Y-You need me...!" Now Princess Abigail was starting to get excited too.

"It all depends on how well you wear it and how much attention you draw! So..." Brie took the princess's hands in hers. "Please do this! For my money!"

"I shall!"

I wasn't sure I agreed with the reasoning, but...I supposed Brie was at least being very honest about her priorities...

"Since you're familiar with your country's climate, Princess, we'd really appreciate your cooperation!"

"Of course! I shall do my best, for everyone's sake!"

"And naturally, we'll be gifting you the dress, so do choose something to your liking."

"Yes!" Now motivated, the princess began to browse the fabrics. Having others depend on her seemed to really psych her up. I was happy to see her so enthusiastic about helping, since she'd seemed so hesitant earlier.

I nudged Prince Nathan with my elbow. "Now's your chance! Pick a fabric you think suits her!"

"Huh? Me?"

“Who else?!”

“R-Right! Me! Okay, then!” Prince Nathan approached Princess Abigail and offered her a fabric he thought she might like. “How about this one…?”

“This isn’t suitable for my country’s climate. If you can’t even be bothered to learn the bare minimum about your fiancée’s homeland, please step aside.”

Prince Nathan deflated at the blatant rejection and trudged back.

“That didn’t work at all,” I mused.

“I mean, I don’t know anything about fabrics… It’s not really something I deal with…”

“But you have an uncle who’s all about fashion!”

“*He* is, yes, but *I’m* not! I’m banking it all on being devilishly handsome, no thanks to my father’s side of the family!”

“But you look exactly like your uncle Neil, who’s your father’s brother, so didn’t you actually take after your father’s side?”

While the prince and I spoke, Princess Abigail stepped closer to Lord Clarke. “Um, Prince Clarke?”

“Yes, Princess Abigail?”

“Um, what do you think about this fabric?”

“I think it’s nice. Oh, by the way, what do you think?”

“About what?”

“This fabric here. Do you think it suits Lettie?”

Princess Abigail froze on the spot. She’d just asked for his opinion on a fabric for herself; she probably hadn’t expected him to turn around and ask her for an opinion about something for his wife. Honestly, I hadn’t expected it either.

Lord Clarke, oblivious to the awkwardness of the situation, was looking at the fabrics with a serious expression. He seemed to be genuinely enjoying himself as he continued to pick out fabrics he thought I’d like. “Maybe this one? Oh, this one looks good too…”

Perhaps infected by his enthusiasm, Princess Abigail began looking between me and the fabrics and started to pick some out as well. “How about this one? I think it’d suit Princess Leticia.”

“Oh! You have great taste, Princess Abigail!” Lord Clarke exclaimed, pleased by the suggestion.

Princess! Now wasn’t the time to pick out fabrics together for me! Sure, this was probably the least awkward things had been all day, but she was trying to have a pseudo romance! How was

she supposed to achieve that like this?! I wanted to tell her as much, but the two of them were so enthusiastic that it was hard to rain on their parade.

"Shouldn't you be the one doing that?" I asked Prince Nathan.

"Weird. Why is the atmosphere suddenly lively now that they're picking out dresses for you? I don't get it."

I didn't get it either.

"Women are such a mystery," he muttered to himself.

"Remember, don't just pick out the fabric for the dress! Pick something out for the shawl too! Oh, we're going to be so busy in the coming weeks! And we're going to rake in *so* much money!" Brie's eyes were gleaming even brighter than before. Marriage had done nothing to temper her business spirit. "I've prepared a few prototype dresses that I figured might be helpful, and I'd like to hear everyone's opinions. Lily!"

Answering Brie's call, Lily appeared seemingly out of thin air, promptly bringing out several mannequins wearing dresses one after the other. "Here they are."

"Always so efficient!"

Lily looked pleased with Brie's compliment. How odd. I always showered Lily with praise, but I'd never seen her react like this. Why not, Lily?! Wait! Did this mean I was special?!

"I can sense an incorrect assumption in the air," Lily remarked.

"Best to ignore it, Lily," Brie advised.

"I'll do just that." Lily left the room, rubbing her arms as though she'd gotten goose bumps.

Five mannequins with dresses draped over them were now lined up in the room.

"Wow!" Princess Abigail exclaimed. "Seeing the dresses actually finished is something else!"

"Isn't it? Isn't it?!" Brie was just as excited. "These were made with fabrics suited to Astarl's climate, by the way."

The dresses had a similar design to the ones the queen and Princess Abigail had worn before, but they overall felt very different.

"Just changing the fabric makes such a big difference," I mused.

"It does. That's why the fabric is such a core component of dressmaking," Brie said, looking over the dresses.

"These will definitely be a hit! I want to wear them too!"

"Exactly! And we grew up in this country—if we feel that way,

other people are bound to take well to them too. Oh, and I was thinking of offering not only ready-made dresses, but also custom-made ones where the customer could choose the fabric," Brie added. "The ready-made ones would be mass-produced from the same design. We could change the styles each season and regularly introduce new designs to keep people interested and buying."

I listened intently. It sounded like a great idea.

"And the custom-made ones would be more expensive, but the clients could pick their own favorite fabrics and make the dresses their own! I bet nobles who hate the idea of wearing the same thing as everyone else would flock to those!"

Brie was practically glowing with passion as she explained her business plan. We all clapped for her.

"Wow! That's amazing! What a wonderful idea!" Princess Abigail gushed.

Brie huffed proudly and rubbed her nose. "Go ahead. Call me a genius."

"What about men's clothing?" asked Prince Louis, who had been silent up until now. Everyone blinked in surprise at his question.

"Men's clothing?"

"Yes. If the women's clothing in Clement is unique, the men's clothing is probably also different from what you can find in this country."

Huh.

We all turned to Princess Abigail. "We do have unique men's clothing as well," she said.

"I knew it! So why don't we make men's clothing too?" Prince Louis suggested. "I don't want to just watch. I want to wear something."

"That's not a bad idea. Ideally, we'd make matching sets of men's clothing and dresses… But…"

"But…?"

"We don't have any samples, so that makes it difficult." Brie had never seen the clothing herself, so she would have to design something based on only descriptions. This was risky and could lead to mistakes in production, which she wanted to avoid.

"We do have a sample," Princess Abigail said matter-of-factly. "One of my knights is carrying some. I'll have him bring the clothes over soon."

“Oh, thank you, Your Highness!” Brie exclaimed, thrilled, as she squeezed the princess’s hands. “Now we can sell both women’s and men’s clothing! What a fantastic stroke of luck!” She looked like she might start drooling at the thought of all the additional profit she could make. When she noticed us watching, however, she cleared her throat and quickly returned to her usual demeanor. “Anyway. The plan is to go ahead with the dressmaking, as we’ve discussed, but there’s still one important thing left.”

Something important? I wondered what it could be. It felt like we’d already decided on almost everything. What could be missing?

“We need to promote these dresses!” Brie explained, tapping one of the mannequins.

“I thought we were already going to put out ads?” I asked.

“We are, of course. Flyers, newspapers, billboards, all of that. But there’s an even more effective method of promotion.” Brie looked at me with a sly smile. “You’re going to wear them around, Leticia.”

“Huh?! Me?!” I pointed at myself.

“That’s right. There’s no better advertisement than a royal wearing these dresses. When people see you in them, they’ll think, ‘I want to wear something like that too!’”

Would they? Really? My doubts must’ve showed on my face, because Brie tapped the mannequin again.

“You may not realize this, but you’re very popular. People love the crown princess, okay?”

“O-Okay.”

“And when someone you admire wears something, it makes you want to wear it too, okay?”

“O-Okay…” Why did it feel like she was explaining this to a child?

“Oh, and of course, since you’re also very popular, Princess Abigail, I’d appreciate it if you could wear the dresses both here and back in Clement, as we discussed earlier.” Brie rubbed her hands together.

“Ah, right,” said the princess.

“Now, as for the gentlemen…!” Brie pointed sharply at the men in the room. “I’m counting on all of you to help with promotion as well!”

The men nodded, seemingly having no objections.

“Do all that you can! Now, look forward to the finished products! You’ll be our spokespeople, so I’ll make sure to create something amazing!” Brie was practically on fire, lost in a daydream about the future. “Oh, I can hardly wait… All that money rolling in…”

“Um, Nadir?” I called out to my brother, who had been quietly observing as Brianna took center stage.

“Yes?”

“What made you fall for a money-grubber like Brie?”

“Everything,” he replied without missing a beat.

Well, if he was happy, he was happy.

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“I’m so excited about the dresses!” Princess Abigail chirped, bubbling with enthusiasm. She was so cute. She’d invited me for a sleepover, so we ended up spending the evening together in her quarters.

Brie had also been invited, but she’d declined, claiming she was busy. She’d been caught up in the excitement of the dress business and likely had a lot to do, so I just supported her decision.

“My country is very conservative and doesn’t easily accept other cultures, but since it’s only a change to the fabric of our traditional dresses, I’m sure these will be well-received!” Princess Abigail gazed out into the distance, envisioning the dresses’ popularity. “And they’re considering setting up a factory in Clement eventually due to the high costs of importing from Astarl due to shipping fees and other expenses!” She let out a sigh of admiration. “Lady Brianna is such a strong, independent woman…”

Indeed, Brie was a grounded, determined woman who seized the moment. It was rare to see a woman handle so much on her own, even in Astarl, and I admired her for that too. All I could boast about was being a quick runner.

“Do you look up to her?” I asked.

“Yes, very much so,” the princess confirmed with another dreamy sigh. “As I mentioned earlier, my homeland is very conservative. Women are expected to stay at home, and not being assertive is considered a virtue.”

“Wow, that’s so outdated.”

“Isn’t it?!” Princess Abigail eagerly latched onto my words. “It’s so draconian! That’s why I’ve never had much freedom. This trip to study abroad was my first act of rebellion.”

“Did your family oppose the trip?”

“They absolutely did.” The princess looked up, as if recalling what had happened. “They said that since I was already engaged, there was no need for me to study. That it was best for women to be meek and submissive. But I managed to convince them with the excuse that if I was to marry into a multicultural country like Delbaran, I needed to learn more about different cultures.”

“Wow. You had it hard…”

It wasn’t uncommon for royalty to study abroad; cultural exchange could help a nation prosper and stabilize its economy. If Princess Abigail faced such strong opposition, it meant her country valued quietly minding their own business and staying within their own borders more than the benefits of cultural exchange.

“Is that why you’re a bit insecure—because of how restrictive things are in your country?”

“Huh? Is that how I came across?”

“Yes. For instance, you have a hard time accepting gifts, and you’re always so mindful of everything. I think you should be more confident.”

“Confident, you say…”

“You’re very lovely and a kind, sincere person, Princess Abigail.”

“I-I am?” she said bashfully.

“You are! I may not know about your country, but I want you to know you’re a wonderful young lady.”

Princess Abigail hugged her pillow tightly. “I was wrong about you…”

“What do you mean?”

“I thought you lived a blessed life, with everything handed to you on a silver platter.”

Well, I did, but she didn’t need to be so blunt about it.

“But that’s not the case, is it? You’ve been through a lot. I hear your education was very strict.”

Memories of my princess lessons flashed through my mind. They’d been so grueling… Truly, I’d endured a lot. Brie would’ve thrown in the towel immediately.

“One must endure hardship to find happiness,” I mused.

Princess Abigail fell silent.

“Princess?” I called out anxiously. Was she feeling unwell?

She lifted her head, determination burning in her gaze. “I don’t want to have any regrets. I’ll do my absolute best.”

Ooh, don’t tell me…! I thought to myself, feeling a thrill of excitement.

“I’m going to be even more aggressive in my pursuit of Prince Clarke!”

“Wait, *that’s* what you were thinking?!” And here I’d been, thinking she was going to put in the effort to get closer to her actual fiancé, Prince Nathan. “Do you hate Prince Nathan that much?”

“I do.” She turned away, pouting. “He’s a bosom-obsessed old man. I hate him.”

Well, it was true he was older and a boobage enthusiast, so I didn’t really have an argument against that… “But you know, he’s never dated anyone.”

“Huh? At his age? And as the crown prince? Why?”

“Well, he thinks he can’t date anyone he’s not engaged to.”

Princess Abigail seemed to be getting a bit confused. “What? Then why doesn’t he treat me like we’re dating? He was so passionate about Lady Brianna.”

Defending this man was a real challenge. “Maybe it’s because you’re still so young? He’s much older, and he’s never dated anyone, so maybe he doesn’t know how to act as your fiancé.”

“I disagree.” There went my attempt at a defense. The princess was so frustrated her hands were trembling. “I know exactly what the problem is,” she said, placing a hand on her chest. “These!”

Wait, “these”?

“I saw the look on his face when we first met for our engagement! He looked at my face, then my chest, and made a face like, ‘Hmm,’ all right?! What kind of man looks at a lady’s chest and goes, ‘Hmm’?! Sure, perhaps mine isn’t as impressive as Lady Brianna’s. But I’m still growing! They could still develop! And besides, that’s just rude! Don’t you think so, Princess Leticia?!”

Prince Nathaaan! How could she have felt anything toward you but disdain?! Indefensible! Simply indefensible!

“That’s why I’ll continue to do as I please until the wedding,

and I don't care what he does!" With that, the princess pulled the covers over her head and went to sleep.

"Oh boy..."

The prospects for these two were grim indeed.

***

Princess Abigail was panting as she tried to speak.

"P-Pwince Clarke." Aw, she flubbed it! How cute. The princess lowered her face in embarrassment and tried again. "P-Prince Clarke! Good day."

"Good day to you too," replied Prince Clarke, who'd stopped by for afternoon tea.

The princess looked satisfied with her successful greeting. Despite having yet again declared her intentions to pursue him yesterday, she still couldn't bring herself to come on too strong. Or maybe this was already too forward for her?

"P-Prince Clarke, is there anything you really lik—"

"Lettie," he replied before she could finish.

Oh? Oh! Me. It's me. I struggled to keep my lips from curling into a smile.

Princess Abigail let out a deep breath. "Oh, that's wonderful!"

"Huh?" I mumbled, surprised by her reaction. Every other time she'd responded to Lord Clarke's declarations, she'd sounded lonely and wistful, but this time her voice was filled with genuine admiration.

"I would love to be adored so," she said. "You're so blessed, Princess Leticia, to have someone who expresses his love for you so directly, day after day."

"O-Oh, um. Am I?" I let out a nervous laugh.

What was happening with her? Up until now I'd gotten a "lucky *you*, sucks to be me" vibe from her, but now it was gone entirely. She was looking at me adoringly. Wait.

"Does she see me as a friend now?" I whispered to myself.

It seemed likely. Before I'd been her first love's wife, but now I was a friend. Maybe it was last night's sleepover that had changed her feelings. Either way, that was a good reaction from her, and I was happy. She seemed the type to be very positive about her friends.

Meanwhile, a certain guy's mood kept sinking lower and lower... I meant Prince Nathan, of course. Every time Princess

Abigail said anything, the poor man just got more and more depressed, poking at his plate instead of eating his cake. Which I wished he would just eat already!

"Oh!" The princess turned her attention back to Lord Clarke. "Could you name something you like other than Princess Leticia?"

"Huh? Other than Lettie?"

"Yes, please."

Lord Clarke crossed his arms, frowning in thought.

"..."

"..."

"..."

"..."

He was taking way too long to think about it.

"U-Ummm—"

"One moment, please."

Well, what else could we do but wait? The rest of us exchanged glances and decided to start eating our pastries. Lord Clarke continued to think, and finally his face brightened, like that of a child who'd just found something neat.

"Romance novels!"

"R-Romance novels..." Princess Abigail seemed unable to mask her surprise.

"Yes. I've been reading them with Lettie recently," he explained bashfully. "It's a shared hobby of ours."

"Oh, how wonderful! A husband and wife, sharing a hobby! What could be better?" the princess said dreamily. "Even just the fact you're willing to help me like this is something that could never have been possible without the trust between you two."

This was absolutely true.

The only reason I'd allowed this was because I knew Princess Abigail had no ill intent and simply wished to experience love vicariously. Otherwise, even if there was no chance at all that Lord Clarke would ever look at anyone else, I still wouldn't have felt comfortable with someone aggressively coming on to him. Who knew what they'd do! I'd have needed to take precautions.

"I-I also..." Prince Nathan tried to join the conversation but trailed off, scratching his cheek awkwardly. "Do I have a hobby...?"

Princess Abigail stared at him in chilly silence.

"Wait, wait, wait! I do!" the prince continued, desperately

racking his brain. “A hobby. I have one. What is it…? What do I like, again…? Boobs… No, other than those. Boobs… No, I already said that…”

Prince Nathan bit his lip.

“Boobs!”

“That’s it?!” After all that thinking, all that came to mind were boobs?! This man was a downright boobophile! And that answer had sent his approval rating into the negatives!

“Huh,” Princess Abigail replied with disinterest, shooting Prince Nathan a gaze so cold a blizzard may as well have been blowing from behind her. “I see. Well, feel free to engage in your bosom hobby as much as you please during our engagement. I won’t stop you.”

Wow. Her casual approval of her fiancé’s infidelity was shocking.

Prince Nathan, realizing his mistake, hurriedly tried to fix things. “No, you misunderstand. I do like breasts. But it’s more…an artistic appreciation. And it doesn’t mean I’m only attracted to well-endowed women. The size of my future wife’s breasts is irrelevant to me.”

“Is it really?” the princess asked, finally actually reacting to the prince’s words. Score! Keep at it, Prince Nathan!

“Of course! And besides,” he continued, feeling a burst of confidence, “I can always look forward to seeing how they develop!”

Frankly, finding the words to describe the look on Princess Abigail’s face at that moment would be impossible. All I can say is that Prince Nathan’s words drove her anger to a peak.

“I refuse to continue breathing the same air as this man!” she declared, standing up and dashing away at an incredible speed.

“Princess Abigail!” I called out, standing up to follow after her. Prince Nathan and Lord Clarke both got up as well, but I stopped them. “You two will just complicate things. Stay here!”

Especially Prince Nathan. Him trying to follow her was the last thing we needed.

I hurried after the princess, but she slipped through the guards like she had some sort of device on her legs that let her glide through the air. She had leg strength to match Brie’s! Were strong legs a staple of young noble ladies these days?!

“Wait,” I attempted to call out, gasping for breath. “Wait, haaah, wait…” My words refused to rise from my burning lungs.

I'd been slacking off on my escape drills, and now I had no stamina!

Finally, Princess Abigail ran out of the castle gates.

"Nooo!" I shouted, but she didn't stop, and the two gatekeepers just stood there in a panic. "Hey! Why didn't you stop her?!"

The gatekeepers slumped their shoulders apologetically. "M-My apologies... I would've stopped anyone coming from outside, but I didn't expect someone to burst through from inside the castle at that speed..."

"Me neither..."

Oh, this must've been their first day on the job. Seeing the two young guards looking so downcast made me feel a little bad, but still! I couldn't just say nothing!

"Lord Mathias might try to run out as well, so make sure you pay attention from now on!"

"Yes, ma'am!" they replied in unison, snapping to attention with a salute.

I looked beyond the gates, but Princess Abigail was nowhere to be seen. "What do I do...?"

She'd just bolted out without an escort. Anyone would've been able to tell she was wealthy, especially with the dress she was wearing, but she had nobody to keep her safe. Perhaps people would take her for a runaway noble in a difficult situation. If so, she could attract the wrong crowd. A girl running away from home was an easy target, after all.

"I should find her..."

"If you're going, Princess Leticia, we will go too," one of the guards said.

Yes, of course. That made sense. But if I had soldiers with me, it would be obvious at a glance that I was the crown princess, and getting the guards to change into something inconspicuous would take far too long.

"No, I suppose I shouldn't go," I said, reluctantly stepping away from the gate and making my way back to my room.

There, I quickly changed into the town girl outfit I had hidden in my closet.

"Ah, this feels perfect." I hadn't worn this in a while, but it was comfortable and easy to wear. I wished I could wear clothes like this every day.

Oh, but when the dresses we were making in collaboration

with Princess Abigail were finished, I'd be able to wear those! Life would be much easier then.

Just in case, I left a note saying I was going out to look for Princess Abigail and would be back by nightfall. I was sure I'd be fine, but now if anything happened and I was late, they'd know to come looking for me.

"Here we go." I opened the window and jumped onto a tree.

Normally, there would've been guards around here, but since some of the personnel had been reassigned to the villa where Princess Abigail was staying, the area around me was less heavily guarded. They'd probably assumed having guests over would make me stay put. And it did!

Until this very moment!

I nimbly hopped from tree to tree, making my way to an unguarded gate. After lightly landing atop it, I checked to make sure nobody was following me, and went into town. Nobody paid me any attention as I walked, so I seemed to have successfully blended in with the other townsfolk.

"She must not be near the castle anymore," I mused, looking around. With legs that fast, she was more likely in the town proper by now. I made my way toward the town center, praying to myself, "Please, let Princess Abigail be safe from weirdos!"

The town was bustling with activity, as always. With so many people coming and going, finding her could be quite the challenge, even if her fancy dress made her stand out. I'd figured it would've been embarrassing to a girl her age if a large group came out in search of her, especially given the circumstances surrounding her escape, so I'd decided to come looking by myself, but... Maybe I should've brought soldiers along after all, even though it would've delayed the search efforts.

Then again, what if she *did* run into danger while we were busy getting ready?

For now, I figured I should search the places she was likely to have gone to. Which would be...where, exactly?

"A general store? A café? No, she's in a foreign country, so...a souvenir shop?" I muttered to myself. As I walked, I noticed a sign. "A bookstore..."

I had a hunch, so I stepped inside.

"There are so many kinds of books in this country." Princess Abigail was casually chatting with an elderly woman.

"There are," the woman, who looked to be the shopkeeper,

replied. “Thanks to influence from the Kingdom of Delbaran, there’s been an increase in variety recently.”

“Princess Abigail…” I called out.

“P-Princess Leticia?! Why are you here?!”

“I should be the one asking that. Why are you in a bookstore?”

“Well, Prince Clarke mentioned he enjoys romance novels, right? I thought it might be nice to give him one as a gift.”

A surprise gift for Lord Clarke? Really? “He likes stories where a prince and a young woman end up together,” I told her.

“Oh, is that so?! Madam, do you happen to have any books like that?!”

The elderly shopkeeper led her to the appropriate section, and I followed along.

“My, there are so many!”

“A prince falling for a young woman is a classic theme,” the shopkeeper explained.

Filled with enthusiasm, the princess began to diligently rummage through the section, reading the summaries on the backs of the books.

Since I had some time to kill while I waited, I decided to browse the selection myself. I picked out a few books and bought them. Princess Abigail, however, still seemed to be struggling to make a decision.

“Have you picked one yet?” I asked.

“I’ve read so many synopses that I don’t know which one is best anymore…”

A classic case of choice overload. I picked up one of the books she’d been contemplating. “Lord Clarke had good things to say about this author’s work.”

“Then this one would be a perfect choice!” Her face brightened as she headed to the register, but then she let out a startled, “Oh!” I looked over and she gave me an apologetic look. “Could you lend me some money…?”

Ah, right. She’d rushed out in such a hurry she hadn’t brought any money with her. I went ahead and paid for her book as well.

“I’m so sorry. I’ll pay you back later…”

“It’s not very much. Don’t worry about it.”

Princess Abigail shook her head vigorously. “No, I must! A gift is meaningless if it’s bought with someone else’s money!”

“Y-You have a point.” It wouldn’t truly feel like a gift if she didn’t buy it herself. For her sake, we agreed that she’d pay me

back later.

When we stepped outside, we were faced with three rough-looking men.

“Well, whaddya know. There really is a rich lady here.”

“And a regular one. Servant, I guess?”

“We can just grab her too.”

Princess Abigail had indeed attracted the wrong crowd…

I raised my hands in surrender.

***

“We’ve been captured,” Princess Abigail said.

“We have,” I agreed.

The men had brought us to some sort of warehouse and tied our arms in front of us, leaving us feeling helpless.

“This is my fault,” she went on, despondent. Her eyes welled with tears. “I was reckless…”

“Well, if we’re going to play the blame game, I came by myself and didn’t bring any guards…”

My intention coming by myself had been to avoid both attracting attention and unnecessary delays, but I should really have been more thoughtful.

“And they had us blindfolded on the way, so we don’t even know where we are,” she lamented.

“Even if we knew, we can’t contact anyone…” We were, unfortunately, not telepaths, and we had no means of sending coded messages. There was no way to let anyone know where we were. “At least they didn’t gag us, and they tied our hands in front of us.”

“They tried to tie my hands behind my back, but they stopped when I said it hurt.”

Our captors weren’t trying to be rough with us, it seemed. This was probably less about a grudge against the wealthy and more a simple ransom scheme.

“I’m glad we can talk,” I said. “In a situation like this, it would be even more unsettling if we couldn’t speak to one another.” If we couldn’t talk at all on top of being restrained, we would’ve been much more terrified.

“Conversation truly does help calm the mind, doesn’t it?”

Looking out the warehouse window, I noticed it was already night.

“I wonder if they’ll return our books,” the princess mused. The men had taken our belongings when they tied our hands. All Princess Abigail had on her was the book she’d bought, and I’d only had my books and coin purse.

“They probably don’t have any use for them. Once they get what they want, I figure they’ll give us the books back, right?”

Though it wasn’t like they’d needed to confiscate a bunch of romance novels in the first place. I figured they’d taken everything as a precaution. The books had been in paper bags, so they couldn’t have guessed what was inside.

“It’s impressive how you two are just chattering away in a situation like this,” said one of the three men, bewildered. He was sitting nearby, keeping an eye on us.

“There’s not much else to do,” I pointed out.

“And it doesn’t sound like we’re in any danger of being killed,” the princess added.

The man looked even more taken aback. “Still, most people wouldn’t be this calm. What kind of life do you two normally lead? Do you guys just…get kidnapped on the regular?”

“I’ve never been kidnapped,” Princess Abigail replied.

“This is my second time,” I said.

“Your second time?!” My second time. Once by Prince Louis, and now by these people. “And it was the servant that got kidnapped, not the lady?!” The man was shocked. Then again, the kidnappers had mistaken me for a servant, and servants didn’t often get kidnapped. It was best that he continued to think that, so I didn’t correct him.

“In a romance novel, this is right about when a dashing hero would come to the rescue,” Princess Abigail mused.

“Yes, but this is reality, unfortunately. We’ll be lucky if anyone finds us this quickly.”

“You guys mind being a *little* more tense about this?”

I ignored the kidnapper and decided to take advantage of this time alone with Princess Abigail (and the kidnapper, but he didn’t count) to ask her something I’d been curious about.

“Say, have you been enjoying spending time with Lord Clarke?”

“Huh?” Her voice trembled slightly. She was clearly not expecting that question.

“I’ve been watching you two, and it looked like you were very diligent about trying to make a move, but…it didn’t seem like you

were legitimately enjoying spending time with him."

Princess Abigail hesitated for a moment before replying, "You're probably correct." How honest! "I was just frustrated. When that man kept looking at other women, I thought, 'Oh, I'm going to end up married without even knowing what love is.'"

The princess's voice was quiet as she spoke.

"But watching Prince Clarke interact with you made me understand that romance is only enjoyable when the feelings are genuine. Prince Clarke may have been my first love, but I don't think I'm in love with him anymore. Trying to pretend to have romantic feelings isn't doing anything for me... I realized this very quickly, but I was still stubborn about it."

She gave a self-deprecating smile.

"I think it's about time I start behaving myself. I'll stop."

"Pri—" I caught myself midword and coughed, hurriedly closing my mouth. That was close! I almost let it slip that she was a princess! It was better for our identities to remain undisclosed.

Princess Abigail smiled. "I'm glad I came to this country. I've had valuable experiences here, and I got to become friends with you."

"It's not too late for you to fall in love, Lady Abigail!" I exclaimed, touched by her words.

"Huh?" She blinked in surprise.

"You have a fiancé! You should try falling for him."

"Falling? For *him*?" Well, I understood how she felt. It was hard for her to imagine falling for someone she had zero fondness for at the moment.

"How much do you know about Pri— Erm, about Lord Nathan?"

Princess Abigail seemed puzzled by the reasoning behind my question, but replied anyway. "Um, I know he likes women's chests and that he's a pr—" She coughed. "Pretty important man."

"Anything else?"

"Huh?"

Taken aback by my further probing, she tried to come up with an answer. But she couldn't think of anything.

"See? You don't really know him, do you?"

Her gaze lowered.

"You probably haven't interacted with him much, have you? You two live far apart, and I doubt you have many opportunities

to talk." She didn't respond, so I continued, "That's probably why you've had to rely on other people's opinions of him to form your own, right?"

Princess Abigail lifted her head quickly, as if struck by a sudden realization. "I might've been looking at him with prejudice..."

"Exactly."

"I've never really thought about what he's like on the inside." She fidgeted with her feet. "I've spoken of him as though he were the worst kind of man, but I'm in no position to judge. I've based my dislike on him solely on his love for bosoms. I've been unfair."

Honestly, I didn't know much about the prince either beyond his extremely obvious fondness for boobs. But during his time here in Astarl he hadn't really seemed like an unpleasant sort. He'd acknowledged Princess Abigail's desires and shown her kindness. He sounded like a considerate man. Perhaps that was one of his strengths?

"Right... I shouldn't have immediately given up on getting to know him."

"Indeed. A person's flaws don't necessarily define them."

Princess Abigail's face brightened, as if a weight had been lifted from her shoulders. "I feel so much better. I really am glad I came to this country."

Seeing her expression, I couldn't help but smile too.

"Seriously, what the hell is wrong with you two?" the kidnapper asked. "How can you just talk about romance stuff while this is going on? That's what you were talking about, right? Romance? What is happening? Again, what's *wrong* with you two?"

We pretended not to hear him.

"Even Lord Clarke has his flaws," I continued.

"Truly?! Other than being madly in love with you?!"

Was that a flaw?

The kidnapper began muttering to himself. "Are they ignoring me? Is that a thing people do? Do these women have no fear?"

I continued to ignore him and turned my attention back to Princess Abigail. "Well, see..."

Before I could share Lord Clarke's flaws, however, a loud bang rang out.

"Wh-What was that?!" the kidnapper exclaimed.

“An explosion,” I replied.

“An explosion, indeed,” Princess Abigail agreed.

“Why are you two so calm?!”

Various noises echoed outside the warehouse, and then everything went eerily quiet.

“The noises stopped,” the man whimpered. “This is freaking me out. What’s happening out there?”

“You know, for someone who looks so tough, you sure are pathetic,” I told him.

“There’s nothing we can do about it, so being scared is a waste of energy,” Princess Abigail pointed out.

“How are you two not in shock?!” The warehouse door swung open, and the man quickly hid behind us. “Eek!”

“Lettie!” Lord Clarke called out from the door. Just as planned! “I saw your note saying you’d be back by night, but when you weren’t, I came to get you.”

“I’m glad you saw the note,” I said. It was a good thing I’d had the forethought to leave a note, even in my haste.

Prince Nathan emerged from behind Lord Clarke, flanked by soldiers, holding the two kidnappers’ heads tightly under his arms.

“I-I can’t breathe,” one of them gasped.

“H-Help…”

No one was willing to help them, of course.

“Princess Abigail! Are you all right?!” Upon spotting the princess, Prince Nathan immediately dropped the two men to the floor—they both groaned in pain. He rushed over to her, and when he saw the frightened man hiding behind us, his expression soured. “You coward! How dare you take defenseless women hostage!”

“What?! N-No, I didn’t take them hostage—” The man had only been hiding out of fear, it was true. It hadn’t been his intention to use us as hostages. He tried to stammer out an excuse, but in this situation, no excuse would’ve worked.

“Enough talk!” The prince punched the man square in the face.

“Guh!” The kidnapper fell backward, out cold.

Wait, he’d also subdued the other two men earlier, hadn’t he? Was Prince Nathan a capable fighter…?

“My brother practices martial arts as a hobby,” said Prince Louis, inexplicably standing next to me as Lord Clarke untied my

ropes.

"Whoa!" I yelped. "When did you get here?!"

"They dragged me along to help. But it sounds like I wasn't even needed."

"I was even less needed!" Lyle grumbled. "I finally had some time to relax…" Both he and Prince Louis were in their pajamas, so they probably had indeed been relaxing.

"They didn't even give us time to change. Maria would cry if she saw me like this."

I doubted Maria would care whether or not the little prince was in his pajamas, but I felt sorry for him and kept that thought to myself. Instead, I asked, "So Prince Nathan is into martial arts?"

"He is. Our family traditionally enjoys physical pursuits. Father may be old now, but he was once a master of spearmanship."

"Wow." Now that I thought about it, Prince Louis's other brother, Dale, was a muscular adventurer too. "You know, you said '*our* family,' but…you don't look the part," I remarked, eyeing his unimpressive physique.

"I take after my uncle Neil, all right?! I do not need muscles when I look like this!" he retorted defensively.

As I bantered with the flustered boy prince, a voice from outside shouted, "No! Stop! Leave my brothers alone, please!"

All of the kidnappers, still on the ground, began to stir at the voice.

"Idiot! Don't come in here!"

Looking toward the source of the voice, I saw a young boy. He ran into the warehouse and stood protectively in front of the three men, then bent down deeply, bowing his head. "This is all my fault! I'm so sorry!"

"What's going on?" asked Prince Nathan, who'd been about to subdue the kidnappers further.

"I'm… I'm sick, and the surgery is really expensive, so my brothers, they…"

"Th-This has nothing to do with him!" one of the men shouted. "We did this on our own!"

"Yeah! We just wanted to get money for the surgery from some rich people! We were gonna return the girls safely! The kid's not involved!"

"Hey, dumbass! Telling them the reason pretty much spells out that he *was* involved!"

Since the boy had called the men his “brothers,” the four of them were likely siblings. Upon closer inspection, they did all share a resemblance.

“We couldn’t afford his surgery, and we got desperate… We’re sorry! Just, please, don’t do anything to him! Punish us instead!” pleaded the man who seemed to be the eldest brother, bowing his head to the ground.

The other two followed suit, pressing their own foreheads to the floor. The one who’d been talking to us earlier looked to be the youngest of the three kidnappers.

“Still, I can’t allow this to go unpunished,” Lord Clarke said with a guilty tone, making the brothers squeeze their eyes shut in despair. “But you don’t seem aware of who you kidnapped, and it sounds like it was done on impulse. Given the circumstances, there’s some room for leniency, I think. How about a month of unpaid labor?”

The three brothers lifted their heads in shock.

“Y-You’re letting us go…?”

“It looked like that’s what Lettie would want,” Lord Clarke said, glancing at me. How could he have known? I hadn’t said anything…

I approached the three and asked, “By the way, where are our belongings?”

“Oh, um, over there…” the eldest replied, pointing at the paper bags with our books and my coin purse.

I handed Princess Abigail her book and retrieved my own along with the purse.

Since I rarely ever spent money at the castle and only spent small amounts whenever I went out, my coin purse was quite full. My brother had also recently given me a significant sum, so the small purse was stuffed with gold coins. It was so heavy that even Lily had commented on it, asking me why I didn’t just deposit it all somewhere.

I casually dropped the coin purse in front of the youngest man. “Oh no! I dropped it! Ah, but I’m heading home anyway. I don’t really need it anymore.” Okay, fine, maybe I was being a little too obvious.

The man stared at me in confusion. The second eldest brother nudged him, and he quickly picked up the coin purse. “U-Um… You dropped this, ma’am.”

“Nooo!” I lamented. He was a kidnapper! He wasn’t supposed

to be a good person! Since my intent hadn't really come across, I decided to try making it clearer. "I said, I *dropped* it! But I *don't want it anyway*! Get it?"

I had to maintain the pretense of having dropped it. No matter how sympathetic I was to their plight, they *had* committed a crime. I couldn't simply give them money outright, so I had to make it seem they'd just taken something I didn't want anymore.

Finally catching my drift, the man pressed the coin purse to his chest. "Thank you…! Oh, thank you…!"

The other brothers, also in tears, repeatedly expressed their gratitude.

"Enough with the thanks! Just make sure you don't kidnap people again!"

"We won't! We're so sorry for doing something so stupid! We were just desperate!"

Their situation really must have been dire. Looking more closely, I could see their clothes were tattered. They all had large frames, but they still looked gaunt. They had to have been saving every bit of coin they could for their little brother's medical treatment.

We really needed to put more thought into supporting the sick people of our country. Contemplating the work ahead of us, I turned to Lord Clarke—and let out an involuntary "Eek!"

That was the face. The angry smiling face. "You know why I'm upset, don't you, Lettie?"

"Y-Yes. I'm sorry I sneaked out of the castle on my own!" That had to have been it. I'd been reckless and put Princess Abigail in danger as well. I felt terrible. I really should have thought things through before acting.

"Even in an emergency like this, you *must* always have at least one guard with you. That way they can shield you, or go fetch help. You *have* to follow this rule."

"Yes…" I had no excuse.

We were only safe because the kidnappers had turned out to be decent people. If real miscreants had taken us, things would not have ended on such a peaceful note. I'd grown complacent, used to nothing happening whenever I sneaked out. I needed to always act like danger was just around the corner.

"I'm glad you're safe," Lord Clarke said, embracing me gently. He was trembling a little. I'd really worried him sick.

I placed a hand on his back. “I’m so sorry…”

“I’m still here, you know,” Prince Louis said, suddenly appearing out of nowhere.

“Waugh!”

Right. He *was* here.

“Think about how I feel! I get dragged along when I’m not even needed, I can’t flirt with Maria, and now I have to watch other people being romantic! And I’m tired! Exhausted. Sleep is essential for children! Early to bed, early to rise! That’s how it goes!”

For someone who hated being treated as a child, he sure made it a point to remind us of his age in situations like this. But he really did look tired. His eyes were drooping, and under normal circumstances he would’ve been too intimidated to come between Lord Clarke and me like this.

Oh, right. It was nighttime already. Bedtime for children.

An apologetic Lyle popped in suddenly. “I’m sorry about him. The prince is just a very conscientious child.”

“I need to sleep if I’m to grow up quickly! I must grow into a handsome man and sweep Maria off her feet!”

“If you keep acting like a brat, that’ll be difficult.”

“You think I’ll still be like this when I’m all grown-up?!”

“Yes. You’ll be a child at heart.”

“How dare you! Once I’m grown up *and different* I’ll strip you of your noble title! Just you wait!”

“What?! That’s too harsh! It’s not fair punishment for such a tiny quip!”

“I’ll do it. Watch me.”

“Spoken like a true child.”

“I heard that!”

Watching the bantering duo, I quietly slipped away from Lord Clarke. Now that Prince Louis had mentioned us being romantic, I was all embarrassed!

“Wait! How’s Princess Abigail?!” I gasped, looking around for her.

“Oh, he’s so handsome,” she mused with a dreamy sigh, gazing at Prince Nathan. Wait. A dreamy sigh? “Muscles concealed under his garments. Such virility when confronting danger at a time of crisis. Oh, how attractive…” You could practically hear the hearts at the end of her sentences as she continued to gaze at Prince Nathan like he’d hung the moon and

stars.

“Um, Princess Abigail?”

“Ah!” Startled, she turned to me. “U-Um, it’s not… It’s not what it looks like…” Oh, it was. It was exactly what it looked like.

“Are you smitten with Prince Nathan?”

Princess Abigail turned bright red and gave a small nod. “I never imagined he had such a side to him. Or that my feelings would change so abruptly.”

Though she still seemed a bit confused, she kept stealing glances at Prince Nathan. Unmistakably enamored glances. The prince, meanwhile, was giving the four brothers tips on how to build muscle. What the heck?

“That’s what love does,” I told her.

“So this is love… I see.” She brought a hand to her chest and glanced at Lord Clarke. “I believe my feelings for Prince Clarke were more admiration than love.” It wasn’t unusual for young girls to confuse the two feelings. This was probably the actual first time she’d fallen in love.

“I think this is your true first love.”

“My first love…!” Princess Abigail blushed, covering her face with her hands.

“It’s a wonderful thing that your first love is your fiancé.” It had been the same for me, after all.

“You’re right… Oh, but…” Princess Abigail looked at Prince Nathan again, then frowned. “He…likes women with generous bosoms, doesn’t he…?” She glanced down at her own modest, but still cute, chest.

Nooo! Prince Nathan’s love of boobs had ruined everything!

I quickly tried to come up with a way to cheer up Princess Abigail. “He, um, he said he could look forward to their development!”

Princess Abigail’s expression brightened. “That’s right! I can still grow!”

“Princess Abigail,” Prince Nathan called out, approaching her with a smile. “I’m so glad you’re safe.”

That smile might as well have been an arrow through her heart. The princess clutched her chest. “Oh…”

To think a simple smile could elicit such a reaction… She really was down bad.

“A-Are you okay?!” he asked in a panic, looking like he was about to call for help. “Did something happen to you?!”

“No, I’m fine. It’s just…an old ailment acting up.”

“Are you sure that’s fine?! Someone get a doctor to check on Princess Abigail!”

“I’ll be fine. I’m sure it’ll go away if you pat my head a little,” she said sweetly. Subtle!

Somewhat puzzled, Prince Nathan gently patted her head, and she looked very pleased indeed. “You must’ve been so scared,” he said. “I’m sorry I couldn’t protect you.”

“No, this was my own fault. I apologize for acting rashly.” She bowed her head. “I’m also sorry for my cruel words earlier. I went too far; I realize that now.”

“Well, um, it’s true that I am…an older…man…” His own words seemed to be hurting him.

“No, no, that’s not true at all!” Princess Abigail took Prince Nathan’s hands.

“Princess?” He couldn’t hide his surprise at the unexpected contact—Princess Abigail had been avoiding him, after all.

“Prince Nathan, there’s no doubt in my mind that you’re the most dashing gentleman in all of the land.”

The prince froze. “Dashing…?”

“Yes! Your physique is magnificent! Well, not that I’ve seen it directly, but it’s clear even underneath your garments! Your biceps, easily capable of knocking grown men out! Your pectorals, so powerful they wouldn’t even flinch if struck! And your triceps, supporting your fabulous body!”

Princess Abigail sure knew a lot about muscle groups. Did she have a thing for muscles…?

“The way you kicked those men’s behinds was gallant beyond compare.”

“W-Was it?” the prince stammered, preening a bit at the praise.

“I shall cease my pursuit of Prince Clarke.”

“Huh? No, you don’t have to if you don’t want to. You’re young, and—”

“No!” Princess Abigail shook her head firmly. “I misunderstood my feelings for Prince Clarke! I had not a shred of romantic interest in him!”

Her declaration was so firm that Lord Clarke, somewhat awkwardly, muttered, “Why does it feel like I just got dumped…?”

Even if he wasn’t interested in her, hearing her say those things so bluntly must’ve still felt a bit odd. I got that.

Princess Abigail’s determined gaze bore into Prince Nathan. “I shall become the woman you desire!”

“Huh?”

“So, please, give me some time,” she continued, smiling warmly.



“I shall ask Lady Brianna to teach me how to grow melons!”

Nooo! What was she doing?! She really was the type to get carried away and make bold statements, wasn’t she? Also, she could ask Brie for help until she was blue in the face, but Brie’s measurements were a matter of genetics.

“Uh, I… Thanks…?” Prince Nathan seemed unable to keep up with how quickly things were changing. Understandable, frankly. A girl who’d openly despised him not long ago was suddenly all over him. It was flattering, but also very confusing.

“I’ll become worthy of your love!”

“Um… You don’t have to worry. I would never cheat.”

“That’s not what matters! I want to be loved!” She was *really* going for it.

“Huh? Well, of course I’ll love you as my wife once we’re wed.” She was being blatant about her feelings, and he still wasn’t getting it? Why not?

Oh. Right. He had no experience with romance! He’d never been in a situation like this before—he *couldn’t* get it!

Princess Abigail kept rambling on, and Prince Nathan continued to miss the mark entirely with his replies. I wondered how much longer this was going to go on.

“Um.” Lyle raised his hand. “Prince Louis is asleep. Shall we head back?”

Prince Louis was draped over Lyle’s back, snoozing peacefully.

***

“I’m so glad we made it in time for your return home!” Brie handed Princess Abigail a dress. “I made this dress with the particulars of Clement in mind. You should be able to wear it just fine in your own country! Try it on!”

The dresses from Princess Abigail’s home country were simple, without much decoration. The one Brie had made, however, had ribbons and a bit more glitz, just like the ones worn here in Astarl.

“These decorative ribbons are thin and light, keeping the heat in mind. And they’re removable too! The material is easy to wash, since I figure you likely sweat a lot in Clement. It’s breathable as well, so you’ll be able to wear it comfortably there.”

Princess Abigail’s eyes sparkled as she took the dress. “This looks incredible! Are you sure I can have this?”

“Of course. In fact, it will be good publicity for us if you wear it, so we should be the ones thanking you.” They’d already begun to prepare in earnest to launch the line of dresses in Clement; even local factories had been arranged for. Brie worked fast! “Now please, we don’t have much time, so try it on!” Brie pushed the princess and the dress toward a handmaiden.

“This is so easy to move in! I like it!” Prince Louis announced as he came out of the fitting room, wearing what looked more like children’s clothing than clothes for adult men.

“Oh, how cute!”

“I am not cute! I am *handsome*!” The little prince pouted angrily, but that did nothing to make him look anything other than cute.

In Astarl, men often wore collared shirts that opened at the front, and while the men’s shirts in Clement were similar, they didn’t have collars. That alone already gave them a much lighter feel.

Like Prince Louis, the other men had finished putting on their outfits and returned from the fitting room one after the other.

“This feels quite functional,” my brother said, looking at the clothes from a businessman’s perspective.

Lord Clarke seemed satisfied as well. “I like my usual look, but this is nice too.”

“I think mine are a bit too tight,” Prince Nathan remarked. “I might prefer something a little bigger.”

Prince Nathan, a martial arts practitioner, had a muscular physique. While my brother and Lord Clarke were both fit as well, Prince Nathan was the most solidly built of the three. His current outfit made the contours of his muscles pop—he really stood out.

“Oh, that was a request from Princess Abigail,” said Brie.

“What?” Prince Nathan looked puzzled.

An excited squeal rang out. “Oh, how marvelous,” murmured Princess Abigail—who had just finished changing—as she held her nose with one hand and gave a thumbs-up with the other.

Wait. Was she getting a nosebleed? Princess Abigail!

“Tight-fitting clothes that show off a man’s physique are so wonderful… My eyes have been blessed…”

“I’m a little scared for some reason,” Prince Nathan said, hiding behind my brother.

“Nooo!” Princess Abigail wailed at the loss of her eye candy.

“Now you know how I felt,” Brie told him.

“I’m so sorry. I understand completely now.” Prince Nathan was probably feeling exactly the same way he’d made Brie feel back when he kept rudely ogling her chest.

“You changed so quickly, Princess Abigail,” I remarked. She’d only just left, and she was already back!

“Ah, yes. I’m used to changing into this style of dress, after all. And above all, there are no corsets necessary, so getting dressed is a much quicker process. That’s the main advantage of dresses like this.”

“Being able to change quickly and the reduced bodily strain are big pluses,” Brie agreed, all businesslike.

“Thank you. I’m sure the people of my country will love these.”

“I’ll make sure to get them on sale over there as soon as possible!” Brie’s mind was probably filled with thoughts of money at this point. “Now for today’s main event! Leticia!” She pointed at me. “You walking around in that dress will be the ultimate form of advertisement! We’re counting on you!”

I looked down at my own dress. It was made of very light chiffon material and weighed almost nothing. The color was a soft cream, with scattered pink embroidery keeping it from looking overly simple. The ribbon at the waist was pink to match the embroidery, giving it an overall soft, cute feel. The dress bared my shoulders fully, and so I had a shawl wrapped around them. That was pink as well, to match the dress, and kept me from feeling cold and exposing too much skin.

Above all, though, the thing that stood out to me the most was how easy the dress was to move in. Without a corset, there was nothing constricting me.

“This is great!” I declared.

“I know! I put a lot of effort into it,” Brie said. “It’s a key advertising piece, after all.”

Advertising piece or no, it was a cute dress, so I didn’t mind.

“Now then,” Brie continued, turning to Princess Abigail, “let’s see the princess off in her new dress.”

Indeed, today was the day of Princess Abigail’s return home.

“I’ll miss everyone,” she murmured sadly. Most of us fell silent—we felt the same way.

“Don’t be so down!” said Brie. She and my brother were the only two who didn’t look gloomy. “We’ll make it easier for us to see each other!”

“Huh?”

Brie smiled coyly. “Well, now that I think about it, the difficulty of going to Clement right now means that if we can make a vehicle that makes travel there easier, it’ll be hugely profitable.”

I was left speechless—she could turn even the disadvantage of poor transportation into a business opportunity.

“But it takes a month to get there by carriage,” said Princess Abigail. “Can you really make something like that?”

“We just need to build something that’s not a carriage. Maybe something that can go as fast as a carriage at full speed. Or something that can fly through the air, even!”

“Pfft!” Prince Louis sputtered at Brie’s idea. “I’ve never heard of a flying vehicle. There’s no way such a thing could be possible.”

“Oh, you never know. In the past, even iron ships were ridiculed. People said there was no way they could float. It’s not impossible, right?”

Prince Louis groaned and fell silent.

“I’ll make it happen, guaranteed!” Brie insisted. “Look forward to it, Princess Abigail!”

The princess’s eyes welled up with tears. “Oh, thank you… It would make me so happy to be able to see everyone whenever I want!”

There was a knock at the door. “Princess Abigail, it’s time.”

The moment of farewell had finally arrived.

“Well then… Could you all please see me off?”

We nodded and followed Princess Abigail out of the room. As we stepped out of the castle, we found ourselves surrounded by a crowd of people.

“Princess! Come again, okay?!”

“Princess, you’re so beautiful!”

“Take care!”

The citizens had been informed about Princess Abigail’s departure and had all gathered to catch a final glimpse of her. Stalls had been set up here and there, making it feel like a festival.

Just as Brie had planned.

We walked alongside Princess Abigail, smiling and waving at everyone.

“What are they wearing?”

“Look at that dress. I’ve never seen anything like it.”

“Oh, but it’s so pretty. I wonder where I can buy one?”

As Brie had anticipated, the reception was positive. There should be no downside to selling these dresses.

“What’s that outfit His Highness has on?”

“It looks easy to wear. I like it!”

“Mommy, I want to wear that too!”

The men’s clothes were also well received. I could see Brie grinning next to me at all the reactions. We kept walking and smiling at everyone until we finally arrived at Princess Abigail’s carriage.

Once she got inside, it really would be goodbye.

“Princess Abigail…” I said quietly.

Her stay here had been difficult at first, when she’d treated me as a rival in her pursuit of Lord Clarke. Somewhere along the way, though, she’d become something of a cute little sister to me. I was a royal too. I wasn’t in a position to travel freely. When would I be able to see her again?

“Please don’t make that face!” the princess said brightly. “Lady Brianna promised to develop a new method of transport, and in a few years, I’ll be married into the Delbaran royal family. It’ll be much easier for us to see each other then.”

Indeed, if Princess Abigail married Prince Nathan, she would live closer to us.

“You’re right,” I agreed, hiding my sadness behind a smile.

“I’ve caused so much trouble for all of you. Allow me to apologize once more. Looking back now, I’m quite embarrassed of it all, but I will cherish the memories of all our moments together.” She gently pressed a hand to her chest. “I’ll write all of you.” Then she turned to Prince Nathan and declared, “Next time we meet, I’ll have an hourglass figure! Look forward to it!”

Caught off guard, Prince Nathan could only respond with an awkward, “Okay…” Was he a pushover? He was a pushover.

Princess Abigail finally got into the carriage and leaned out the window toward us. “Thank you, everyone! Take care!”

As she waved goodbye and left, I waved back, feeling a wave of loneliness wash over me. “Oh… She should just come live here…”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Brie chided, making me even more dejected. I did *feel* that way, but I didn’t mean she really should!

“By the way, where’s my brother’s carriage?” Prince Louis asked.

“Huh?” everyone responded in unison.

“What do you mean, ‘huh’? My brother was supposed to return home at the same time as the princess, no? Didn’t he adjust his work schedule before he left for this exact reason?”

Prince Nathan suddenly turned pale. “I-I forgot…to arrange for a carriage…”

“What?!”

Since Prince Nathan had completely forgotten to mention it, we hadn’t been made aware of his return plans, so naturally, the Kingdom of Astarl hadn’t prepared a carriage for him either.

“Wh-What shall we do?” I asked nervously.

With a strained expression, Prince Nathan replied, “Please allow me to stay here a while longer…”

He ended up staying for an extra week before finally departing.

When I later informed Princess Abigail of this via letter, she sent me an excited twenty-page response. I wanted to write back with just, “Love really is blind.”

Well, as long as they were happy, that was all that mattered.

Side Story: A Beloved's Flaws

After being rescued from the warehouse, Princess Abigail and I were examined by the royal physician to ensure we hadn't suffered any injuries. We were found to be unharmed, and, finally, we could relax in my chambers.

"That must've been quite the ordeal!" Maria said with concern. Or rather, based on her expression, eighty percent concern and twenty percent dying to hear what happened.

I understood her. It wasn't every day that a kidnapping took place, and once they knew the victim was safe, it made sense that people would want to know the details.

Or, well, kidnappings were *supposed* to happen rarely, but it had happened to me twice already in a pretty short amount of time. Which made me a veteran kidnappee! If she wanted to know the story, I would tell her!

"What?! You gave them all your money?!" Brie, who had been quietly listening to my retelling, set down her teacup in shock. "What a waste! There was a lot in there, right?! You should've just given them what they needed and brought back the rest!"

True, there had been a tidy sum in my coin purse—enough that even after the kidnappers paid off their brother's medical treatment, there would still be money left over.

"But they seemed to be strapped for coin, so I figured they could use the rest to help with living expenses..."

"That's too much! I know they'll have to do unpaid labor as punishment, but their basic needs like food, clothing, and shelter will still be met! Besides, most criminals are driven to crime by circumstance, you know! They're not out there committing crimes for fun! No amount of money will ever be enough if you keep handing it out to every kidnapper you pity!"

She had a point. I had no argument against that.

"Oh, what a waste. I could've used that money," she grumbled.

"Do you want me to give you money?"

"No! I don't want our friendship to be transactional!"

Did she want my money or not?! Still, hearing her say that felt nice. Yeah! Our connection didn't come from money! It came

from the heart! Huh? Wait, didn't we start talking like this *because* she was being paid? Whatever! It didn't matter! Sure, Lord Clarke had been paying her, but now our friendship had nothing to do with money anymore! Right?! Brie *had* just said she didn't want our friendship to be transactional, right?!

"Don't you agree, Princess Abigail?" Brie asked.

There was no response.

"Princess Abigail?" I called out too.

The princess still seemed lost in thought. "Oh," she murmured dreamily, "he was so dashing…"

Ah. She was still thinking about what Prince Nathan had done.

"To each their own," Brie remarked. She couldn't understand the prince's appeal. "Things will get harder from now on, though, Princess Abigail."

"How so?" the princess asked, paying attention now that the topic had changed to romance. A true blushing maiden.

"Listen. Right now, you're in love and everything about him seems wonderful. But soon enough you'll start noticing his flaws."

Princess Abigail looked like she'd just been struck by lightning. She probably hadn't considered that. "His flaws…!"

"That's right. And once you see his flaws, you might become completely disillusioned." Brie turned to me. "Right, Leticia? You've seen Prince Clarke's flaws, haven't you?"

"Huh?" I mumbled lamely, suddenly dragged into the conversation.

"Don't 'huh' me! Name some of Prince Clarke's flaws."

"Lord Clarke's flaws," I echoed, thinking about it. Nothing came to mind.

"There must be something! Anything!" At this point, Brie seemed to be asking out of sheer curiosity.

"Hmm…" I thought and thought. "Oh!"

Ah, yes. That one side of Lord Clarke. I remembered now.

***

"Hey Brie, let's check out the palace for a bit."

"I don't think a palace is something you 'check out for a bit,'" Brie replied, munching on macarons.

"Oh, words, words! Come on!"

I grabbed her and we quickly walked down the castle

corridors. The soldiers we passed occasionally just quietly bowed their heads and didn't try to stop us. I wasn't trying to escape today, so that made sense.

"Are you sure an outsider like me should be wandering around the castle?" Brie asked. "I don't want to get in trouble."

"It's fine! You're allowed to be in the castle, Brie."

"Nothing is less believable than you saying it's fine." She followed after me, grumbling all the while. "So, are we going somewhere?"

"Yep. Right here." I took a map I'd tucked in my pocket and showed it to her.

"Eek! That's a map of the palace!" Brie turned her head away sharply to avoid looking at the map. "You shouldn't be showing me that!"

"Tsk, tsk, tsk! Sure, it's a map, whatever. Look here!" I turned her face toward me and spread the map right in front of her.

She looked annoyed, but blinked upon taking a closer look. "What are these doodles?"

"It's a treasure map!"

"A treasure map? It looks like a child drew this." She wasn't wrong. This was clearly a map drawn by a child.

I chuckled. "You see, this is Lord Clarke's treasure map!" Indeed, Lord Clarke himself had drawn this. "I asked the queen about this, and she told me, 'Oh, thiiis? Claaarke drew it. I remember him excitedly going on about some treasure he'd hidden! Perhaps it's still where it's marked on the maaap.'"

"Wait, is that what the queen sounds like normally?"

"That doesn't matter right now!"

"It matters to me!"

Ignoring her shock, I continued to follow the map.

Brie followed along, muttering to herself. "I used to look up to her as the pinnacle of elegance... Well, I suppose this is fine... Gap moe..." What in blazes was "gap moe"? I'd have to ask her later.

"Here we are!" I declared as we stopped in front of a certain room.

"This doesn't look like a room you'd hide treasure in."

"That's the point! Now, this is where you come in, Brie."

"So you brought me here for a reason."

I pointed to the lock on the door. "This lock uses letters to open, but I can't read what's on the map..."

It looked like there were words written on the map that would open this door, but I couldn't read them. Deciphering the childlike scrawl was too difficult for me.

"You mentioned you interacted with kids a lot in the past, right? I thought maybe you'd be able to read it."

"Good memory. Let's see..." Brie read the letters on the map as she fiddled with the lock, and soon it clicked open. "There we go."

"Brie, you genius! Bless your childlike heart!"

"That's one comment too many!"

"Let's see here..."

"Hey! I'm talking to you!"

Ignoring her, I excitedly flung the door open, eager to see what kind of treasure awaited us.

"Uhh..." Brie mumbled, a strange look on her face. And for good reason too.

"What the heck...?"

Inside the room, a bunch of incomprehensible objects were scattered around. Weird statues, weird lumps of clay, weird paintings—just a mess of inexplicable miscellany.

As we both looked at each other in confusion, a voice called from behind us, "Lettie!"

"Lord Clarke?"

A slightly breathless Lord Clarke approached us, giving me a reproachful look. "Lettie, that map..."

"Oh! Umm..." I struggled to come up with an excuse, but drew a blank.

Brie, of course, was gone in the blink of an eye. No fair! She should've taken me with her!

As I stood there flustered, Lord Clarke grabbed my shoulders firmly, his expression unusually serious. "Lettie, I..."

I straightened up. "Yes?!"

"I..."

Swallowing hard, I waited for him to continue.

Finally, Lord Clarke seemed to gather his resolve. "I...have no artistic talent whatsoever..."

"Artistic...talent...? What...?"

"Look at this room." He spun me around to face the mess of inexplicable objects. "I made these a long time ago."

"Really?!" These cosmic horrors?!

"I have absolutely no artistic talent..." he repeated. "But every

member of the royal family is expected to take art classes, so…"

"Ohh…" That made some sense now. Lord Clarke had probably made these as a child.

"Even without any talent, I still tried my best. To me, they were treasures, in a way…"

So that was why he'd made the treasure map! I gingerly picked up one of his treasures, and…still couldn't tell what it was. But it was the fruit of young Lord Clarke's labors…

"I think it has its own charm!" I managed to say.

"Lettie…!" Lord Clarke's eyes welled up with emotion.

He closed my hand firmly around the mysterious object. *Wait, no—*

"I'll give this one to you, Lettie!"

"Thanks but no thanks!" I said firmly.

I didn't want to have nightmares about it!

***

"Huh. So that's what happened after I left," Brie mused, nibbling on a cookie.

"Oh! Does that mean…" Maria began, pointing to a certain spot in the room, "…that strange object over there is one of Prince Clarke's creations?"

There was indeed a mysterious object made of unknown materials in the room with us.

"Apparently, it's titled 'Dancing Lettie,'" I explained.

"That's *you*?!" Brie exclaimed, looking between me and the exotic piece. "Well, it's okay. It only looks like you around the waist."

"Wait, it does?!" I'd thought she was going to say it didn't look like me at all! Now I was anxious!

"Anyway, what did you think when you found out about his flaws?"

"Huh?" What *had* I thought when I found out about Lord Clarke's atrocious—erm, *artistic* talent? "I…thought it was endearing," I replied bashfully.

Brie made a face. "Yeah, yeah, yeah. Happy dumb couple. Enjoy your bliss. Whatever."

"What's the matter, Brie? Does that chip on your shoulder hurt?"

"Rude! I do not have a chip on my shoulder!" Brie turned to

Princess Abigail. “Anyway, this is abnormal, so please don’t take it as the standard.”

Abnormal?!

“Well, what about you, then, huh?!” I demanded. “You must know about my brother’s flaws!”

“Nadir doesn’t have any flaws,” Brie replied with a perfectly straight face. The fact she seemed to honestly believe that made me feel strangely warm inside. Ah, love…

I patted Princess Abigail’s shoulder gently. “If you don’t mind his flaws, you’ll be fine.”

“That’s true,” the princess replied.

Looking at Brie, who seemed puzzled by our reaction, I had to conclude…to each, indeed, their own.

Afterword

Hello readers old and new! My name's Izumi Sawano.

Thank you for picking up a copy of Volume 3 of *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons*!

Lettie and Clarke love one another, but their relationship just wouldn't move forward. I found myself wondering how to give those two a push, and went... "Oh, right! I could have a rival noblewoman in the picture!"

Thus was Princess Abigail born!

Well, she's a rival, yes, but like I've said before, when writing *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons* my goal was not to have any truly villainous characters, so the princess is a really nice girl.

Also, I imagine those of you who read the honeymoon arc weren't expecting *him* to make a comeback. Honestly, while I was writing it, I wasn't expecting Prince Nathan to show up again either! I'm the type to figure stuff out as I go, not much of a plot planner...so while I was writing I thought, "I want the rival to have a fiancé too. Maybe I could have that engagement be the reason she's decided to hit on Clarke. Well, Nathan kind of sucks, so let's make it so she came to Astarl because she couldn't stand him!" And since I didn't have a plan, I wasn't sure what the end would be either. I was writing and wondering where it was going at the same time.

By the way, the reason Nathan didn't name martial arts as a hobby was because it's such a routine thing for him now that he didn't even register it as a hobby.

Also, I mentioned this in the afterwords for Volumes 1 and 2 as well, but *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons* is getting an anime adaptation! It's all thanks to your support, to the wonderful manga version drawn by Uri Sugata-sensei, and to everyone involved with this work! Thank you!

I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all those who have worked hard on the publication of this book. Thank you all so much!

To those of you who chose *I Want to Escape from Princess Lessons* out of the countless books available out there: Thank you so, so much. Here's hoping you pick up my next book as well.

Izumi Sawano
May 2024





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