
Author:
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My Fiancé Cheated, But a New Love Rings! 2


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Role: Varroyce's fiancée
Lunatietta Dearbless (Lunetta)
Age: 17
Height: 155 cm
The second princess of Magyck. The quiet type, Lunetta loves researching magic. She now finds herself returning to her homeland to come to terms with her past.
Role: The Crown Prince's Fiancée
Sophelia von Lotus (Sophie)
Age: 15
Height: 160 cm
Sophelia endured plenty as the crown prince's fiancée, but after witnessing him cheating on her, Sophelia hit her limit. Together with the royal knight Livionis, Sophie makes her escape and sets out on a journey in pursuit of freedom and happiness.
My Fiancé Cheated, But a New Love Rings! 2


Role: The "Usurper King" of the Neighboring Kingdom
Varroyce Elsarte Athkylos (Vyce)
Age: 31
Height: 170 cm
With a foul mouth, but a heart of gold, Vyce takes good care of those around him. A trustworthy confidant, he is engaged to Lunetta, the princess of Magyck.
Role: Knight
Livionis Warrion (Livio)
Age: 16
Height: 190 cm
The eldest son of a house famed for producing generations of unstoppable knights. With the help of his family and peers, Livionis has now made his escape with his beloved Sophelia.

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# Chapter One: Strolling Down Soup Road

Someone was singing.

The song was warm. Soft. Kind.

*Maybe this is what a lullaby sounds like?*

Though she was adrift in a light slumber, there was something about the song that almost seemed to tickle Sophie's heart—something that made her want to keep on listening. But at the same time, it felt like a bit of a waste to keep her eyes closed. Now, just what was she to do?

She hesitated, as if she were bobbing along in the waves. Unable to resist the sights beyond the song, Sophie slowly opened her eyes.

Greeting her blurred sight was a warm ray of sunlight, a swaying lace curtain, and—basking in the brilliant light pouring from the window—an exceedingly beautiful figure.

*Huh? Is that an angel?*

Sophie blinked once and then again—but the angel didn't vanish. Fair enough. After all, he *was* human. It seemed to defy imagination. But it wasn't her imagination. Or, then again, maybe it had been? The man was handsome enough to incite just a bit of confusion, but when Sophie lifted her face past her hands, Livionis looked at her and beamed.

"Oh, are you up?"

She was going to go blind from the radiance!

His beauty was bathed in heavenly light. Sophie couldn't help but squeeze her eyes shut. *There's no getting used to a face this handsome, huh?*

His black hair swayed and glistened like an angel's halo. Every time he blinked, his eyes burst with a dazzling wave of amethyst. His pale skin and shapely lips were as precious and tender as a young

girl's, but there was no mistaking the sturdy, well-trained muscles visible even through his shirt.

In other words, Sophie's ears had apparently been graced by a song from the gods' greatest masterpiece. *Wait, what?* Sophie's ears felt like they might explode—out of sheer joy, that is.

"Livio, were you singing just now?" Her heart pounding with excitement, Sophie lifted herself up. Looking up, she saw that Livio's face had turned bright red.

"What? W-Wait, you were listening?" Livio stammered. "More importantly, did I wake you up? I'm so sorry!"

"Don't apologize. It was a wonderful song," Sophie replied.

*I could've sworn an angel was playing its heavenly flute!* That was what Sophie had actually thought, but she opted to stow the thought away and smile, only for Livio to let out a hysterical yelp.

"Bwaah! Wond—? M-M-My..." Livio stuttered. "Oh man... This is so embarrassing..."

Livio sank his cheek into his right hand as his gaze fell to the floor. *And just WHO. SAID. YOU. COULD. BE. THIS. ADORABLE?!*

*"Sit down, you!"* Sophie's happy-go-lucky brain bounced and skipped around in the throes of her first love, now barking out orders in her head like a seasoned war veteran. *"You are charged with the crime of being entirely too cute! And for your crime, I sentence you to the harshest punishment available! You are hereby sentenced to adorn yourself with flowers! And with that—court dismissed!"*

Having changed vocations from military general to judge, what Sophie's happy-go-lucky brain envisioned was a mighty angel graced with flowers and lace. In other words, she was fully awake now, any hint of drowsiness long gone.

Sophie cast her mind back on the tumultuous wave of events that had transpired.

After encountering her half sister and her fiancé having a little too much fun heave-*ho*-ing around with each other at an evening party, Sophie had resolved to run away, only to be whisked away by an extraordinarily handsome hand. Together, they'd made their way to an inn, where Sophie had taken a nap in his arms. *Ha ha ha, now*

*there's a turn of events!*

The thought of how warm Livio's chest had been as she'd pressed her face against it or how she'd looked like a dolt in her sleep or such was enough to make her want to leap through the window that very moment... But displaying such eccentric behavior would take courage in and of itself.

Sophie resolved to avoid any such ideas that would put Livio's kindness to waste and got out of bed. His face still burning red, Livio beckoned Sophie to the table.

"Care to eat? You haven't had anything since morning, right?" Livio asked, presenting Sophie with an apple pie.

*Between the apples that went into this pie and that handsome, blushing face of yours, I wonder which is redder?* The thought occurred to Sophie, but she stopped short of teasing Livio out loud.

He was just entirely too cute, so all Sophie could do was chuckle and nod. "I'll just go wash my face first."

"Sounds good!"

*See? This is what I mean by just too cute!*

After washing away the unruly tides of her heart, Sophie returned to their room, only to find the apple pie sliced up, with a piping hot cup of tea beside it. Sophie looked at Livio in surprise.

"For you," Livio said, smiling.

*"For you," he says!*

The men that Sophie knew never prepared tea for themselves, and they *certainly* wouldn't prepare it for a woman. It was as unthinkable as the castle suddenly splitting in two. And yet, the "unthinkable" was right there, wearing clothes and beaming at her with a stunning smile.

"I thought the same thing yesterday morning," Sophie confessed, "but...the fact that you can prepare tea and meals? It really is quite impressive, Livio."

Livio looked puzzled for a moment before laughing.

"While I'm terribly honored at the compliment, I would say there are a good deal of men like that in the Knights, you know," Livio replied. "It's just expected that you take care of your own needs yourself. There aren't any maids or butlers to wait on us, after all."

According to Livio, the tea in the Knights' break room had apparently been brought in by various knights, but they'd lost track of who brought in what, so guessing what type of tea the tea leaves were for was a chance for a bit of small talk.

Sophie couldn't help but laugh as she imagined a broad-shouldered knight tilting his head to the side with a teacup in hand.

"Different types of teas call for different steeping times and temperatures, right? Part of it is the fact that those brutes aren't suited to dealing with details like that in the first place, so every now and then, they wind up with a nasty mess! But no one bothers to organize the tea, and there's always more of it whenever you look. Nothing but idiots, the whole lot of them!" he said with a laugh.

However, the tea Livio had prepared was quite delicious.

Sophie remembered the sun-bathed breakfast they'd enjoyed beneath the trees as a warmth filled her chest.

"Oh?" Sophie sighed.

"And what sort of tea is this?" Livio asked, leisurely propping his chin up on his hand. His lips curled up in a roguish yet adorable grin. He was way too cute.

"It's Darjeeling tea," Sophie answered with a laugh.

"You're absolutely right," he replied. "I should've known it'd hardly be a challenge for you!" He gave a delighted chuckle and lifted his teacup.

Livio looked every bit as graceful and beautiful as a noblewoman. Sophie could've simply watched him like that all day long, but that would've made her look too suspicious, so instead, she peeled away her gaze with no small effort and sank her fork into the slice of pie in front of her.

Sophie had never considered herself a fan of sweets, but the pie seemed tantalizing somehow. The very moment she placed a bite into her mouth—

*What a wonderfully fragrant wave of cinnamon and apple!* The pie's airy sweetness was irresistible, tightly bound together by a bow of spices. Sophie was moved, awash in a joy that she'd never found in any of the palace's charming, dainty sweets crafted by world-class pâtissiers.

"This is wonderful!"

"The innkeeper's certainly quite the cook!" Livio replied. "I had three slices myself!"

*Isn't that a bit gluttonous? Buuuut, then again, he's really cute when he laughs like that, so all's well! Besides, I can understand why he'd want to scarf it down like that!*

Sophie gave a hearty nod.

"I got it near the front desk, so please just let me know if you'll be having more," Livio said, beaming with that oh-so-sweet smile of his.

Sophie gave an ambivalent nod back. One piece was plenty for her.

"By the way," Livio started, grinning from ear to ear as he watched Sophie bring another bite of pie to her mouth. He continued as he poured her a second cup of tea. "I was just looking at the map, but for our next destination, was there anywhere in particular you wanted to go or hoped to visit, Lady Sophie?"

*Where I want to go... Where do I want to go...?*

Sophie furrowed her brow in thought, prompting Livio to laugh.

"You don't have to think so hard about it," he said. "Just traveling around without a goal in mind is enjoyable enough. Even setting your goal as foods you'd like to try or places you'd like to see is plenty of fun."

"Foods I'd like to try..."

That. That was...brilliant. It was absolutely wonderful! It was a splendid, magnificent idea! After all, Sophie had only just awoken to the joys of eating. She'd never been a fan of sweets, but with how amazing they now tasted, Sophie was certain there were culinary experiences sure to surprise her the whole world over—that's right, all over the world!

"Oh."

"Oh?" Livio echoed.

What was she to do? Sophie furrowed her brow.

The *whole world*? There was something that came to mind, but it wasn't like she *had* to have it. She didn't even know what the dish was called or which country it came from. Was it even worth going

to all the trouble of mentioning?

Noticing Sophie's hesitation, Livio tilted his head to the side. "Don't just swallow it down, Lady Sophie. Yeah?"

"Ngh!"

That was *looooow*—as low as low could go.

*Hey, God—take a look at this. You're the real felon here. See what you've created? Thanks for that.*

He had his brow furrowed and his head tilted to the side—he was bigger than Sophie, but there he was, looking up at her with puppy-dog eyes. *Excuse me? How is he even doing that? I don't know how that even works. That's so sly! And so cute! Ha haaa! I get it now. That's why the heroes in those popular romance novels fall in love the moment the heroine gives them puppy-dog eyes!*

The magnetism pulling her toward Livio was something else. And this one stunningly beautiful knight hadn't let up on being a supermagnet even once. There was no way she could ever hope to resist that. Sophie didn't have the slightest clue how a man larger than she was could pull off making puppy-dog eyes at her, nor did she have any hopes of being able to imitate it, but that was all fine and well. Sophie *was* blissfully happy after all.

Sophie opened her mouth, subtly casting her glance to the side. She wanted to look at him, but she couldn't. *C'mon, read the room!*

"I-I heard there was a red, spicy soup in the country to the east, and, uh, it's been on my mind ever since."

Livio's eyes snapped open.

*"She's a glutton! Like we could go all that way just for something so simple! How ridiculous can you get?"*

But Livio didn't say any of that. She knew there was no way he ever would.

But still, telling people things just based on her emotions? Saying what she herself wanted? She just couldn't get used to it.

Sophie felt her chest tighten as she painfully laid aside her logical impulses. Then, just when she was about to clench her hands atop her knees—

"That's great!"

Sophie gasped.

Trails of blueberry stardust shot out from Livio's eyes, glistening before her. "I'm curious about that spicy soup myself!" he replied. "And besides, my trusty steed's named after a tea from the east, right? I'd always wanted to try the tea myself. Wow... That'd be a blast!"

Livio was positively beaming, laughing so happily that Sophie came within an inch of tearfully demanding to know just what was so funny.

Sparkling light spilled from his eyes, glistening before an unexpected shadow fell across his gaze. "Oh, wait..."

Sophie's heart stirred anxiously, noticing how uneasy Livio seemed—how he looked like he was struggling for words. Just as Sophie was imagining the rejection she might hear, Livio spoke up, his eyebrows drooping down.

"I'm not the best with spicy foods," he said, "so I'll look quite unseemly when I try it. Promise you'll still like me?!"

Sophie blinked before bursting into sidesplitting laughter. "That's the last thing you have to worry about!"

After having slept in and taken a nap for the first time in her life, Sophie's day had come to an end in the blink of an eye. While they were originally supposed to look into the previous day's incident in which massive monsters had attacked the town, before they knew it, it had already gotten dark, much to Sophie's chagrin. Far from criticizing her, however, Vyce, the king of the neighboring land, seemed completely unconcerned.

"So, as far as our investigation today," Vyce said, bringing up the topic at dinner that night, "the long and short of it is that we didn't find a thing."

Upending his ale, Vyce gulped down the contents as his fiancée, Lunetta the witch, nodded in agreement.

"We searched over a considerably large radius, but I didn't feel any of that unsettling magical energy," Lunetta explained.

"You'd think there'd be tracks or somethin', right?" Vyce added. "Y'know, a sign that it *had been there*. We looked up and down for something like that, but we couldn't find a thing."

"Almost as if it just appeared out of nowhere, right?" Livio asked.

Vyce nodded.

Livio sighed. "Just as I expected... I tried asking the townsfolk, but apparently not one of them noticed those beasts drawing near. But how could you *not* notice? Especially with how humongous those things were. They were all saying it was just as if they appeared out of thin air."

Now that Sophie thought about it, when Livio had defeated the first monster only for the second to appear immediately thereafter, no one had noticed its massive frame until it cried out. The monsters had been huge enough to look down on a two-story building, so it certainly wouldn't have been out of the ordinary if they'd made a bit of noise stomping or flapping around. Even then, it had been completely out of the blue when they heard the second beast's cry.

"If you think about it with any measure of common sense, it should be impossible," Vyce replied, "but we saw what happened with our own eyes. There's gotta be something that made that possible."

"You mean something that would make the impossible...possible?" Sophie murmured.

"For example..." Lunetta answered in a voice as clear as a bell, "perhaps someone stowed those monsters away and then, well, *brought them out*."

"Is that even possible?" Sophie asked, startled. "I mean, bringing out...monsters?"

Lunetta turned her head to the side. "Probably?"

"I believe it might be a type of special contortion magic," Lunetta continued. "The type that expands receptacles and such—the kind of magic used to make your carriage or your bag larger."

"Oh, those rare items that go for a hefty price, right? I tried looking for them today, but of course no one was selling them."

Magical carriages and bags that you could toss anything into were apparently the dream of adventurers and knights alike. It allowed them to cut down on baggage while on the move, so it only made sense. They could chuck in whatever they felt like and carry it all around with ease. While it depended on how big such receptacles were on the inside, apparently there were some that were expensive

—and expansive—enough to carry a whole nation.

"They're really nice, huh?" Livio said.

"Ummm..." Lunetta spoke up. "I can do that, you know. Shall I cast a spell on your bag?"

"Huh?"

"Let her help you out. The spaces she makes are pretty handy on account of how crazy huge they are," Vyce explained.

Lunetta, fiancée to the king of a nation, was a witch capable of carrying around a whole nation herself.

Livio hurriedly waved his hand in the air to dissuade the two of them, who spoke of unearthly feats as if they were nothing at all. "We certainly don't have the money to pay for that!"

Sophie gave an energetic nod in agreement. The two of them had made their escape with the absolute bare minimum.

"Is that so?" Vyce sneered.

*W-Wow, that's a nasty expression!* The chief suspect making Vyce look so criminal was none other than his deep indigo eyes with their piercing gleam.

"So, you're saying those monsters had had that sort of magic cast on them, and they'd been stored in some bag or carriage, right?" Sophie asked, feigning ignorance.

In situations like this, trying to change the topic was the only thing she could do. Vyce sneered again at Sophie's attempts to get back on topic after Lunetta's remark. His face had *I see right through you, but hell, I might as well play along* written all over it. *Uhhh...*

Vyce lifted up his mug of ale. "Seems like it'd actually stand out *more* that way."

Sitting beside Vyce as he gulped down his beer, Lunetta tilted her head to the side again. "You think so?"

Placing his mug back on the table, Vyce pointed to Livio with his thumb. "He stores his sword in something, doesn't he? It was one smooth motion for him—it wasn't like he was 'bringing out' anything. Wonder if they weren't able to do that sort of thing? Like, they had to break something to let them out...or something like that."

"That just sounds like you're talking about bombs and shells,"

Livio replied.

"War would never be the same with monsters bein' used like that," Vyce grumbled. The wrinkle across his forehead grew even deeper. "What a load of bull..."

"Fascinating," Lunetta added with a nod.

"'Fascinating' is the last thing it is!"

"No, not the monsters," Lunetta replied, moving her brow just the slightest bit. "That earring of yours, Livio—is that a magic gem?"

"Hmm? Yes, it is," Livio answered. "I circulate my own magical energy through my sword to assimilate it into this stud." He touched his right ear. The black magic gem was as beautiful as onyx and matched Livio's black hair well.

Incidentally, when these magic gems were distributed to the knights, they were made into a variety of forms, from necklaces and rings to bracelets and more, based on their user's preferences. What was more, because their color changed based on the magical energy of the user and their own weapon, they were a cause for great joy from the knights who were able to master them. In other words, they were perfect for those who wanted to proclaim, "Like hell I'm gonna wear the same accessory as those other bastards!" A part of Sophie felt like she understood it somehow, while another didn't at all.

Lunetta stared at Livio's black magic gem.

"Normally, they can't be used for organic matter."

"Why's that?"

"Because it's too bothersome." Lunetta plucked up a roll from the plate. "It's difficult to circulate magical energy through organic matter without changing its properties—far more so than inorganic matter. First and foremost, the number of items that could be stored is limited—only one item can be stored in a single magic gem. It'd be far quicker to buy a bag you could stow two or three items in. Would there be anyone who'd want to put time, money, and magic into carrying bread around only for it to taste significantly different?"

"There *are* types like that, though," Vyce answered. "Like a performing magician or someone who'd want to secretly carry around emergency rations."

"Alternatively, they could've just been some criminal or creep," Lunetta answered without hesitation before tearing her roll in two with her tiny hands. Seeing warm steam rise up from the bread, Lunetta returned it to her plate.

"It's no easy matter to circulate enough magical energy to assimilate a monster into a magic gem in the first place. But if the monster itself had been so ravaged by magical energy that it would disappear completely with purification magic, then that changes things entirely," Lunetta explained. "If you don't mind changing properties of the target, then logically, storing it in a magic gem *is* possible. So, if you wanted to carry around a monster that badly...you'd have to be a criminal or a creep."

"So, in other words, more than those massive monsters, it's that creep or criminal or whatever the hell they are we should be worried about."

Vyce took his own roll—that he hadn't touched since splitting it in two much earlier—and thrust it toward Lunetta. "Take it."

Lunetta lifted her head up and handed Vyce the plate with her own roll on it.

Watching the two exchange their rolls, Sophie and Livio couldn't help but stare.

Vyce furrowed his brow. "She's got a sensitive tongue."

"Wow." The speaker of this less-than-insightful remark? Livio.

"Wow," he'd said. *Wow.*

Since Lunetta was busily munching away at her roll but hadn't even touched her steaming bowl of beef stew, it wasn't hard to believe that she had a sensitive tongue. That must've meant she wasn't the best with piping hot food—apparently people like that could burn their tongues very easily.

When Sophie had still been the crown prince's fiancée, she'd often eaten cold food because she'd eaten in the castle or her manor. How long did it take to carry food from the kitchens across a sprawling building, you ask? Long enough for piping hot bread to get cold, that's how long. They'd had to check the food for poison and such too.

While she had never burned her tongue on food before, since

making her escape from the castle, she'd had freshly made food and been just fine, so she probably didn't have a "sensitive tongue." Sophie had never known the struggle of having hot food in front of her yet being unable to enjoy it as she'd like, so she was in no position to make fun of Lunetta for being so coddled. Nope.

It did, however, set her heart aflutter. Other people's romance was a thrilling thing to observe.

"Anyway, we're headin' outta town tomorrow," Vyce said. "What're you two gonna do? Hell, do you even have any sort of goal in mind?"

Sophie looked up at Vyce's question, only to see Livio shaking his head. "No, not in particular. For now, we're thinking of journeying to the country to the east."

"The east?" Vyce asked, skillfully raising one eyebrow.

"Do you know of the spicy red soup there?"

"Oh? Oh, yeah—it's pretty good."

Sophie's eyes opened wide.

Livio gasped beside her. "Have you had it before?"

"I've got a servant from the east back in my castle. Every now and then, she treats me to cooking from her homeland."

"She *treats* you? It's more like you just barge in whenever you hear that Shaoyun's in the kitchens..." Lunetta grumbled.

"She knows I'm coming and makes enough for me too, so it can technically be considered 'treating,'" Vyce replied, raising an eyebrow with a sour look on his face.

Sophie was surprised—he'd eaten the soup that Sophie had always wanted to try. But that wasn't what she was surprised by. Well, she *was* surprised by that too, but that wasn't all.

To think, not only did Vyce appoint those from foreign countries to his service, to think he was so familiar with them too! It was often said that once the Usurper King set his eyes on someone with skill, he wouldn't let them escape his grasp. Indeed, King Varroyce was famous for paying no heed to his servants' class or blood. But even then, to think that he'd been enjoying the soup himself while Sophie was still hazily dreaming of the foreign dish!

"Well? So you're gonna go there to get some soup?"

"Do hold back your laughter, please," Sophie replied. She found herself embarrassed by just how oppressively small the world she'd lived her whole life in had been, but the wrinkle across Vyce's forehead deepened.

"And why the hell would I laugh at you?" Vyce asked. "It'd be easy enough to invite you to have it at my castle, but that's not what you're after, now is it? When it comes to finding a reason to travel, the sillier it is, the better. You gotta enjoy it so much that if someone laughs at you, you just laugh right back at 'em."

Vyce looked quite dashing, smiling as he spoke.

Noticing Sophie had been rendered speechless, Lunetta offered up a nod in agreement.

"After all, the reason His Majesty came to this country in the first place was to have a Deadripper steak."

"That's right," Vyce confirmed. "And I'm looking forward to it too."

"Huh?"

Sophie blinked in surprise, only for Vyce to lift his mug and add nonchalantly, "All *that* was just a stop on the way."

"On the way...?"

*I get it now...* Sophie thought, sinking into her memory.

At the time, Sophie had still called herself "Sophelia."

Whenever guests from afar were invited to celebrations and evening parties, it was typical to host them in a specially prepared room within the castle for several weeks—especially for important figures such as the king of the neighboring country. There, the guests could take their time resting from the toll of their journey. They would be entertained and taken care of until they attended the evening party. It went without saying that they were invited to take their time after the party as well, before they were finally seen off with great care.

And yet, despite this, the king in front of her now had only stayed in the castle the night before that evening's party. Sophie had been terribly uneasy, wondering if there'd been some blunder on their part, or if he'd harbored suspicions toward their kingdom, but now she understood. The evening party and their nations' diplomatic

relations? They'd all just been something to attend to "on the way." He'd only been interested in what lay beyond the castle walls and nothing more.

After the evening party had ended, the fact that he was here now meant that he must've left rather quickly—not that Sophie would know since she hadn't been in the castle at that point.

"We took our time strolling along the well-traveled main roads on the way down," Vyce explained. "We weren't able to stop at Litzd. That's why we had to go on our own. Couldn't make Lunetta's ladies-in-waiting and such come along for a journey like that."

Litzd was a small town next to the one they were currently in. There were many thriving towns located along the large main roads, but with all of the forests on this side, there were plenty of smaller towns here—in decline though they were. Litzd was one such town.

"Oh wow! I made it a point not to ask if there was any particular reason, but the two of you are traveling around just to have some monster meat?" Livio asked. "Just as deranged as ever, I see."

"Can it," Vyce retorted.

Vyce himself knew full well that wasn't the sort of thing a king did. Livio had worded his remark terribly, but Vyce hadn't grown angry at all, instead simply giving his hand a light wave in denial.

"My kingdom's not so weak that anything'll happen to it if I'm gone for a bit. And besides, do you think there's anyone out there who could take out Lunetta and me?"

"Yeah, probably not."

"You're damn right there's not," Vyce said, lifting his ale before placing his mug on the table without a sound. He was positively unkingly from head to toe, yet he showed refinement in the oddest ways.

Sophie turned to Lunetta. "Are you curious about that meat too? You seem like a light eater, so that's rather surprising."

Lunetta shook her head. "I figured there might be some interesting herbs to explore there."

Sophie nodded. It was a fitting response for a magic user.

"Which is why you two oughta come with us."

"Huh?"

Surprised by Vyce's unexpected remark, Sophie and Livio voiced their confusion in unison.

"If you're headin' east, then stop by my kingdom first. Travelin' by ship's real nice too."

Vyce's kingdom was home to a massive port. It was a fine port, visited by not only merchant ships but passenger liners as well.

It sounded like a wonderful suggestion at first, but at the same time, Vyce's words weren't likely to have sprung from simple, unadulterated kindness either.

"What're you after?"

Livio had thought the same thing Sophie had. He seemed to study Vyce as he spoke, only for the man to give a satisfied sneer.

"I wanna see Oznil Warrion boilin' in his boots."

"You just want to harass my father? How low can you go?" Livio grumbled.

"If'n all goes well, I wanna hire the two of you to work at the castle," Vyce said.

"So you were just trying to rope us into working for you." Livio looked entirely unamused, only for Vyce to reply with a dry laugh.

"Just think of it as a part-time gig defending the kingdom and bein' a lady-in-waiting."

"Do you remember the conversation we literally just had?" Livio asked back. "Tell me who I'd be protecting again?"

"Hey now, don't put it like that," Vyce said, before reaching for Lunetta's roll. He took the remaining half of the roll atop Lunetta's plate and brought it directly to her mouth. Lunetta groaned in dismay, only for Vyce to furrow his brow unhappily. "Finish it."

"How about Lunetta's magic as compensation, huh?"

*Ah, I see now.* Their pay for defending the king and attending to his fiancée would be a magic bag. That was more than enough of a reward.

"Talk about low!" Livio remarked, making a sour face. But it *wasn't* a bad offer.

His personality was likely to clash with the king's—or perhaps their personalities would mesh entirely too well. Either way, Sophie found herself just the tiniest bit frustrated that Vyce hadn't done

them the favor of forgetting the topic. Being rolled about like a marble in the palm of an adult's hand wasn't fun in the slightest. *Sorry for being a child!*

Sophie couldn't help but laugh at how much she still lacked in experience.

# Chapter Two: The Bear in the Forest

The following day—

As promised, Lunetta had cast her magic on their bag, which now swallowed up everything—from the tent Livio had procured to the blankets he'd brought from home. So much fit inside that it was enough to make Sophie uneasy instead.

"Wait, it can still fit more?" Sophie asked.

"We could probably fit Matcha in this thing!" Livio laughed.

Realizing he was actually in danger of being swallowed up as well, Matcha hurriedly raised his head and gave an unhappy whinny before jabbing Livio with his muzzle. If a bag could swallow up a whole horse, it was a veritable monster.

Incidentally, thanks to said monstrous bag, Matcha's load had grown considerably lighter, but even then, Sophie was still unable to ride on horseback. And it was only natural that Vyce, who now joined them for their journey, had brought along a horse of his own.

So just what became of Sophie, you ask? The hero who came to her rescue in her hour of need was—quite surprisingly—Lunetta.

It all started when Sophie looked at the bag and remarked, "This is amazing! How does it work?"

Wholly and singly focused, Lunetta launched into an unstoppable explanation. As she spoke, Sophie chimed in and followed up with additional questions—only to prompt another relentless explanation.

Vyce shook his head in dismay. "C'mon, that's enough outta you for now, little lady."

Sophie, of course, couldn't just *ignore* Lunetta. More than that, however, it was simply fun just getting to hear what she had to say, so Sophie pitted herself against Vyce in a way Lunetta wouldn't notice.

Even Lunetta herself, however, stopped talking when she saw all the townspeople had come out en masse to see them off.

"The heroes who vanquished the monsters are about to depart!" the townspeople shouted.

Lunetta gave an airy wave—it was perfectly fitting behavior for the fiancée of a king...even if the long dress she wore was so black it looked like she was heading off to a funeral.

The very moment they exited town, however—

"Now, where was I..." Lunetta said, resuming her explanation. Even after Vyce lifted her and placed her atop his horse, she didn't stop talking, and even when Vyce rode behind her on the horse, she still didn't stop.

Vyce's own trustworthy steed made a show of grimacing—despite being a horse—as Lunetta prattled on and on. It was clear as day that the horse was less than thrilled. Even when Vyce tugged at the reins, the horse didn't move a muscle in response.

"Simply put, if we first hypothesize that magical energy exists in all things in the world and then think to manipulate it, then I believe there is nothing outside the realm of possibility," Lunetta continued. "I believe the reason witches such as myself are more capable of controlling magical force than magicians is because of a difference in how we perceive things. For example, it's not a matter of recognizing 'space' as some nebulous, vague concept, but rather, understanding that it comprises magical force."

"It's no use..." Vyce groaned. "There's no shutting her up. I'll just make her walk."

Even after Vyce dropped her small frame to the ground, she didn't stop.

Lunetta's eyes continued to shine, brimming with energy. That was the very moment that the king decided to throw in the towel.

With Lunetta now on the ground beside her once more, Sophie couldn't help but give a bitter laugh. She was stricken with admiration at the fiery passion with which Lunetta spoke—and the shocking lack of awareness for those around her she displayed with it. Perhaps the fact that she poured every ounce of her energy into magic was precisely the reason she was able to wield such

tremendous spells with ease.

"Tire her out and she'll hush," Vyce said.

That didn't stop her from being treated like an inconsolable, wailing baby by her fiancé, though.

But, it was a lucky turn of events for Sophie since she couldn't ride horseback. *Thanks for all that nonstop chatter, Lunetta!* Or something like that. Still, just as Vyce had said, things couldn't continue like this forever. At some point, Lunetta and Vyce would be riding on their horse. When that happened, Sophie, too, would be forced to ride horseback herself. Saying she'd be "forced to" was a bit of an insult to Matcha, but considering Sophie was unable to ride a horse, it was a matter of life or death. There was nothing logical about sheer terror, after all.

Nodding along to what Lunetta was saying, Sophie glanced over at Livio. Noticing her looking at him, he gave an uncomfortable-looking smile as he furrowed his brow. They couldn't go on hiding the fact that Sophie couldn't ride a horse forever. Still, the two of them had completely forgotten about that detail and taken the bag after it had been enchanted with one hell of a spell. A bind didn't even begin to describe it.

Sophie had never just gone with the flow without any prior planning, so internally, she was sweating buckets. *Step right up and see this mysterious waterfall with trails of water from all sorts of places—indeed, before you lies Cold Sweat Falls!* Or something like that. *Ha ha ha.* But it wasn't funny. It wasn't funny at all.

Between worrying about just what on earth she was going to do and taking breaks as they went, Sophie had spent nearly half a day enjoying her "girl talk" with Lunetta. Even when Livio started preparing for lunch, Lunetta didn't stop, leaving Vyce to clutch his head in disbelief. "You've gotta be kiddin' me..."

But there was nothing to be done. In every corner of the world, from the dawn of time, girls had always loved to talk.

Such had been a part of Sophie's duties once. Compared to the elegant, "humorous" anecdotes exchanged at tea parties, what Lunetta spoke of lacked both glamor and titillating details. It was, after all, a technical discussion on magic. What Lunetta, who

referred to herself as “a witch, not a magician,” and Sophie—a novice in magic—spoke about was neither the design of their dresses nor rumors circulating within the castle. They spoke of “the magic wielded by witches and magicians.” It didn’t have an ounce of fluff or shine. But for Sophie, it was truly and thoroughly enjoyable.

The girls’ stimulating conversation was brought to an end, however, when Lunetta blinked and said, “Huh?”

“Your Majesty... Look how many white trees there are,” she said.

“You’re just now noticing?!”

“That’s proof we’re close to Litzd,” Livio said, pausing from stirring the pot a moment to explain. “These trees, with their pure-white trunks and leaves, are known as Litzd Trees—the town of Litzd draws its name from them.”

The sun was shining brilliantly, enveloping the surroundings in a pleasant warmth. There was no indication that it might snow, and yet, the forest was covered with white trees that wouldn’t have looked out of place in a snowy landscape. Naturally, however, the ground at their feet was covered with bright green grass and brown earth, making for a rather unusual sight.

Staring at the mysterious trees, Lunetta lifted a finger to point at something.

“Your Majesty—over there.”

“Ah, something’s there,” Vyce replied.

“Sure is,” Livio added.

“Huh?” Sophie asked.

Vyce and Livio gave Lunetta an unbothered reply. Trying to figure out what they were talking about, Sophie followed Lunetta’s finger. Squinting, she could see something fidgeting between the white trees.

Sophie gasped.

It was pure-white and big—no, *huge*! It was way too huge! Startled and wondering if they’d come across yet another overgrown monster, Sophie looked over at Livio.

“Oh wow,” Livio said, his blueberry eyes sparkling as they opened wide. “Sir Vyce, that one’s quite large. It’s probably one of the largest I’ve ever come across.”

"Ya don't think you could slice it up?"

"I could," Livio answered, "but it'd taste much better eating it at a proper restaurant."

"Yeah, and it looks like it hasn't noticed us either. No point in fightin' when we don't have to. I was just getting hungry too," Vyce said, stroking his goatee as Livio handed him a bowl filled with soup. Watching the exchange, Sophie very nearly made a terrible fool of herself. Livio had removed his gloves to prepare the meal. His bare hands were long, slender, and beautiful, looking positively titillating even just holding the bowl—but that didn't matter.

With its side to them, the monster let out a mighty war cry of a roar—it did indeed seem as if the creature hadn't noticed them.

*But seriously, that's a* monster*, you know? The thing's big enough to look down on the treetops here. And you're just going to glance over at it?* And *have a meal? Wait, did you actually want to* eat *that monster?*

In sheer disbelief at Livio and Vyce's outrageous behavior, Sophie looked to her side to lock eyes with Lunetta, who'd risen to her feet at some point.

"Sophie?" Lunetta started.

"Huh?"

After spending a night together, Sophie and Lunetta had grown comfortable addressing each other casually by name. In her own words, Lunetta had the habit of speaking formally, and Sophie—given their respective positions and the fact that she'd only just met her—couldn't shake the habit of speaking in a more formal register. While their conversations had been oddly stilted, Sophie was fond of having Lunetta address her informally.

With that in mind, it wasn't the fact that she'd been called by name that had startled her—it was the fact that Lunetta had taken her hand.

*H-Hold up! Wh-What are you planning on doing, Lunetta?* Lunetta's pitch-black eyes were (probably) shining. Any way she sliced it, Sophie had a bad feeling about the whole situation.

"It's injured," Lunetta said.

"What?" Rising to her feet, Sophie looked at the massive white

bear again. Indeed, one of its massive legs—the size of ten or so sizable tree trunks—was stained red.

"There's no way anyone could be dumb enough to take on a beast that size. Think it got into it with one of its pals?" Vyce said.

"Now that I look at it a bit more, it doesn't quite look like a Deadripper... Wonder if it was fighting over territory?" Livionis added.

The men were as unfazed and unconcerned as ever. Sophie didn't know if their reaction stemmed from confidence that they could thwart any problem before it emerged or the knowledge that they'd be just fine with Lunetta around. Without any way to fight herself, however, Sophie was on pins and needles worrying about just where Lunetta's surprisingly strong grip on her right hand would lead her.

"We should heal it," Lunetta suggested.

*Seeeeeee?! That's why I said I had a bad feeling about this! You might be a prodigy of a witch, but do you even hear yourself?!* Sophie decided to force her lips into a smile for the time being.

"You're...going to heal it, Lunetta?"

"No, you are."

Sophie had voiced the question just to be sure, only for Lunetta to shake her head. The way her black hair swayed across her face was cute enough, but what she was saying wasn't cute at all.

Healing an injured monster they'd stumbled across? It sounded like something the heroine of some story would do, and had there been a girl fond of romance novels watching the scene unfold, she might even have been moved by the turn of events. But Sophie knew all too well that Lunetta's suggestion wasn't out of pity for "poor little Mr. Bear." It wasn't anything cute like that at all.

"I'm sure you can use healing magic as well, Sophie. Give it a shot," Lunetta said. Her suggestion was the most terrifying motivator of all, the same force driving mad scientists—pure, unadulterated *curiosity*.

But people like Lunetta were also the very type to advance quickly and push the wheel of progress forward. And that was why Sophie wanted to change.

There was just no way a smidge of hard work on her part would

be enough for her to help out in an unmatched party of warriors who'd spent years honing their abilities. It was a travesty even to imagine taking up space beside them.

But Sophie hated the idea of herself simply trembling in fear and hiding in Livio's shadow.

"Y-You're going to show me how, right?"

"That's right." Lunetta gave an affirming nod, putting Sophie's mind just the slightest bit at ease. "I'm not good at teaching people, though," she added.

There was to be no putting her mind at ease around Lunetta.

"Lady Sophie."

Turning around to the source of the soft voice addressing her, Sophie found Livio looking back at her with a worried but straightforward gaze.

"You'll be fine," he reassured her with a nod. His face seemed to say, *While I'd love to join in, if this is what you want, then I don't want to get in the way.*

"There's not a thing to worry about, Lady Sophie," Livio continued. "I promise that I won't allow you to suffer so much as a scratch." A blue light engulfed Livio as a massive sword appeared in his grip.

Sophie smiled back. Yes, she would be okay then, wouldn't she? So long as Livio said there was nothing to worry about, then she wasn't scared of a thing.

Sophie turned to face the massive monster. Releasing her hand, Lunetta called her name. "Sophie, are you ready? First, cast a defensive spell across the area—without any incantation. You'll likely be just fine without a stave as well."

"Okay..." Sophie replied.

Incanting was an important action when using magic. Magical energy resided in the words themselves, boosting the magic's base efficacy. More than that, however, incantations made magical energy easier to control. With that in mind, there were no mages who skipped out on incantation. If it was better to do it than not, then everyone would do it. Given the fact that it took time, the caster couldn't switch to another spell midway through, and because they

were rendered defenseless during the incantation, it wasn't entirely without its faults. Even then, it was more important to be able to use magic reliably, so in the end, everyone wound up using incantations.

Still, every now and then, there were individuals who were exceptions. Sophie had been assigned a preposterous task by one such exceptional individual as if it were the most natural thing in the world, but even then, she simply nodded.

As far as Sophie was concerned, if she were going to beg someone to teach her, then the least she could do was give it a shot first. It was a matter of understanding the other person's intent and thought patterns to start. Questions could come after that. And making suggestions was even farther down the road from that. That was how Sophie had lived her fifteen years of life. She'd never wished to voice her opposition quite this much, though. *"Objection!" Or something like that. It's supposed to be a joke. Not that anyone's laughing.*

Sophie focused her magical energy within herself.

"Don't finish the defensive spell," Lunetta instructed. "Focus your magical energy, search for it, pull it in...and hold it there. That's right. Now, take a good look at the magical energy of the monster before you—and the underlying magical force that constitutes it. You see the magical force there, don't you? Broken off. Damaged. Torn."

Relying on Lunetta's calm, steady voice, Sophie poured all her energy into concentrating.

It felt as if all of her blood vessels had opened wide as her blood flowed within her like a muddy current. And yet, even then, her mind was pristinely silent. Even her normally lax, happy-go-lucky brain was pushing itself to its limits.

Sophie sensed something—something that had been left tattered and twisted.

"Good—you found it," Lunetta went on. "Now, observe how it must've been originally. What's different from all the rest?"

There, beside the tattered and damaged part that seemed like it might tear off completely, was something else, desperately trying to fasten it down. They'd been together originally. *That's right. These two—they were together.* They had joined to form that massive force

—that body. It was shiny, round, and warm somehow—*divine* even. It was the magical force that made up the massive creature.

"Time to finish the job," Lunetta said. "Put it back the way it was."

The part that seemed like it might tear off was, in turn, a physical wound. If she returned that part to normal, then the wound would heal as well. Sophie herself knew what Lunetta was hinting at. But the problem was that she didn't know the most crucial part: how to actually do it.

"B-But how...?" Sophie stammered.

"Any way you'd like," Lunetta replied.

*You've gotta be kidding!* Sophie could've sworn her second-generation happy-go-lucky brain, despite its desperate efforts, had just toppled over onto the floor in shock.

"Magic is all about imagination, Sophie. It's how you perceive things," Lunetta went on. "If it were you, and you had something so damaged and tattered—on the verge of tearing free—what would you do to stitch it back together?"

*Stitch it?*

Was she talking about mending clothes or such? *That's a tall order.* After all, Sophie hated embroidery. Her time embroidering had been a painful affair where she desperately tried to stitch the complicated designs her teacher had demanded. Sophie's skill with a needle had been enough to provide her teacher with an avant-garde handkerchief to cover her mouth with when her needlework had left her looking dumbfounded and nauseated. Sophie never found out what had nearly come out of her teacher's mouth, but it would've taken her countless times longer than the average person to produce something her teacher could nod at without looking queasy.

After all that, there was just no way Sophie could associate the word "stitch" with healing or mending or recovery or anything of the sort. All sorts of nonsense seemed like it might get tossed into the mix, leading Sophie to desperately try and redirect her thoughts.

*It's something hurt. Tattered. Nearly torn off. It can't stand up. It can't go anywhere. It's...*

*It's me.*

Sophie smiled.

*Seriously? That's easy. Piece of cake.*
Sophie closed her eyes.



It was that night. That night Sophelia had realized she didn't need to endure any of it, she'd tried to stand up on her own just as she always had. In truth, she hadn't had the slightest idea of where to go, but she'd wanted to go somewhere. And so she'd risen to her feet.

Her body had felt heavy, and she'd been terrified that, after throwing it all away, she now held nothing of value, but even then, she'd risen to her feet alone.

After all, she'd just thought that was normal.

After all, that was just how the world worked.

But that wasn't right, was it? She never needed to assume that being alone was normal. If there was something she wanted, then she could just reach out and grab it.

*See? That's a song I hear. A kind, gentle song.*

It was light. It was joy. It was a blessing from above. It was—Yes, that's right! She could see the shades of love!

Sophie's magical energy stirred within her.

It reached a fever pitch, leaping, dancing, and flying out! Sophie took the tattered magical force before her and enveloped it in a tight embrace.

The specks of light that she embraced seemed to melt into the shining white light. *You were lonely, weren't you? And scared too, right? It's okay—here, this is for you.*

Sophie nodded at the white sparkles.

*It's okay, really. I already have more than enough.*

She had a heart that held affection for another—a heart that knew it would be held affectionately in turn.

It was the light of the very night Sophie had been born anew.

Smiling, she felt the magical energy leave her body. As it did, the white light grew even stronger. The large, crushed part that she'd thought might rip was gone, now restored to its original form. Relieved that the beast's wound had been healed, Sophie opened her eyes.

She'd had both hands extended, but they now felt heavy. Sluggishly dropping them, Sophie saw Lunetta's hair and eyes had gone from red back to their original black. She'd likely cast a

defensive spell across their surroundings just in case something were to happen—and perhaps the tiniest part of that was also because she hadn't wanted to get in Sophie's way. But the spell was ready to swell and rise to their defense should anything happen. The intricacies of Lunetta's spell were a feat far beyond the average individual—a fact Sophie could practically feel within her own bones.

"It's hard enough to heal an injury, but to think you were able to wield your magic so precisely... You really are amazing, Lunetta..." Sophie said with a sigh, wiping the sweat from her brow.

Lunetta shook her head. "Healing others is difficult since your magical energy can bounce back at you. Especially for *this one.* You did a good job, Sophie."

"It's just because you're an excellent teacher, Lunetta."

She'd praised her student's efforts, so that made her a fine teacher. She was a bit too over the top—even unreasonable, but the feeling of achievement Sophie now enjoyed was unlike any other.

Sophie looked at the creature's massive leg—covered in pure-white fur without a trace of the wound or the bloody mess that had been there before—and smiled. Just how long had it been since she'd felt so good?

*I'm so happy right now!* Sophie thought, chuckling to herself, only to find a warm hand fall across her shoulder.

"Good work."

There, looking down on Sophie, was the most stunning smile in all the world. Sophie grew even happier realizing that she could do anything so long as she had Livio there to smile at her like that.

"Thank you very much!" Sophie said, beaming back with all she had, only for Livio to groan in surprise.

*Oh?* Sophie thought, tilting her head to the side.

"No, pay me no mind..." Livio said, stowing away his blade—an action that meant that it was safe now. Sophie tried to look up at the creature's massive white frame, only to lose her balance. Sure enough, Livio noticed and supported her shoulder.

"Let's sit down."

"Okay..."

With Livio lending her a hand, Sophie sat down. Lunetta offered

Sophie her handkerchief, which she accepted with thanks. *Wow, even her handkerchief's black.*

Sophie wiped the sweat away with a sigh and looked up at the creature's enormous form.

*"Hail thee,"* a voice rang out. It was low, sober, and calm yet refined. It was an indescribably beautiful voice.

"Huh?"

"What?" Livio said, looking at Sophie as she spoke up in surprise. "Lady Sophie?"

"Did you hear that?" she asked.

"Hear what...?" Livio replied.

Livio cradled Sophie in his arms as he bent down to look at her. *Close! That beautiful face of his is really, really close!*

Still unable to get used to said face, Sophie's happy-go-lucky brain gave a "heave-ho!" and forced itself to its feet. *Look, you just stay put right there!*

Alarmed by the mysterious voice, Sophie looked over at Lunetta, kneeling beside her.

Lunetta gave a firm nod. "I can't hear it either, but the voice likely belongs to *him*." Lunetta looked up at the beast's massive frame, so far that it seemed like her neck might snap.

*"The witch discerneth well."* The voice laughed, sounding entertained. It seemed to echo a bit, as if the air itself were trembling and buzzing.

*"I would thank thee. What is thy name?"*

Sophie thought for a moment after the creature asked her name; she'd do best not to carelessly give it out. Whether it was a human or something not so human, concealing one's personal information was always the wisest choice.

"I do not know what exactly you are," Sophie replied. "Forgive me, but I cannot give my name to one such as you." Even Sophie realized that the voice was likely no monster. The magical force she felt had shone a warm, brilliant white. There was something even godlike about it—it had to belong to some sort of higher creature. Lunetta had realized this as well.

It was all the more reason she couldn't afford to simply give out

her name. Names were one and the same as souls—closer to their owner than anyone or any*thing* ever could be, and the very element that established one's own existence. Knowing full well that she couldn't afford to surrender her name to a powerful being, Sophie looked up, only for the voice to laugh again.

*"It seems thou art no fool."*

Whatever it was, it was terribly rude.

*"Then thou mayest grant a name unto me. Thy magical energy—so warm and pure it doth border on embarrassing—hath pleased me. I shall deem thee my master."*

"E-Excuse me...?" Sophie stuttered. *"Master"?* Her mouth opened wide in confusion. And she felt like she'd just been insulted a bit too.

Narrowing her round, black eyes, Lunetta turned to Sophie. "What did it say?"

"It says it wants to make me its...master."

"Splendid," Lunetta replied. "What shall we name it? Furball?"

*Wait, is it okay to just go along with this? More importantly, did you just throw away your taste in naming?* The fact that Lunetta's expression hadn't budged an inch only made it even more terrifying.

"Well, um..."

"Are you sure that's safe, Lady Lunetta?" Livio asked, sounding worried.

Lunetta nodded in reply. "Unlike earlier, the magical energy now flowing through it is exceedingly beautiful and pure. Perhaps you might even call it 'divine.' While I can't say, since I've never encountered one before, I believe it to be what many might call a spirit or a god."

Hearing Lunetta's remark, the voice gave a pleasant laugh, suddenly enveloped in an almost explosive burst of light. Sophie reflexively closed her eyes. The very next moment—

—there, standing on its four legs in front of Sophie, was a white bear with blue eyes. The bear was covered in soft, inviting white fur. The creature no longer towered over them as it had, but it was still large enough to make Matcha look puny in comparison. The creature gave off another burst of light.

Sophie gasped.

The creature had now transformed into a pure-white monkey. The monkey had flowing, beautiful fur and sharp blue eyes imbued with intellect.

Her eyes wide with shock, Sophie watched as the creature glowed again and transformed into a large, brilliantly white hare. It was no cuddly little bunny rabbit with bright-red eyes—it was a proper hare with blue eyes.

*"Verily, it is as the witch sayeth. I sit in the realm of the gods,"* the creature spoke. *"I am tied to the god of origin and wield light at my will. What say thou? Am I not charming in this form?"*

The beast spoke in a rich but somber voice with a self-satisfied laugh—all in the form of an adorable rabbit. Sophie couldn't help but let her jaw drop. *What did that rabbit just say? A god. He said he's a god! Wait, so gods do exist? Well, yeah, I guess they probably do. I mean, he said it himself. Lunetta said the same thing. Hold on—can people be masters to gods? Uh, well...guess they can be. That's what the god himself said! Would that be upsetting the natural order?* Is *that the natural order?*

"I like you better as a bear," Sophie said.

*"Hrmph,"* the creature replied.

Sophie was hopelessly confused, but what she'd said was absolutely trifling. Sophie had surprised herself. "That's not what I meant to say. Ummm..."

The shining white god returned to its bear form with a burst of light and tilted its head inquisitively to the side. *It's just too cute! That big, cuddly ball of fur is tilting its head at me. That's as cute as it gets now!*

"Guess that'll work." Sophie shrugged.

"Are you sure?" Livio asked from behind with his arms wrapped around her.

Sophie nodded. *It's fine. And Lunetta said it was fine too. Besides, the bear's really cute!* After deciding to live her life freely, Sophie had opted to respect the whims of her heart. After all, every bridge that she had carefully and thoughtfully crossed in her life had always taken her somewhere cold and gray.

And the knight that had run away with her to a colorful new

world? He was at once the most stunning—and cute—man in all the world. There was no greater force in the world than "cute."

"Well, why don't we call him Milk or something?" Livio suggested.

"Uhhh..."

*If you wouldn't mind letting me think in silence about his name, I'd be ever so grateful.*

"Let's see now... Your name is..."

"Hold up."

Just as Sophie opened her mouth to speak, a low voice from behind cut her off.

Sophie turned to look behind herself, past Livio's shoulder. There was Vyce, with the usual furrow in his brow.

"I've never prayed to any god, and I don't really know about all this magic business. Ya can call me the biggest fool in the land, but makin' yourself master to some god? That's just flat-out nuts if you ask me," Vyce began.

"If my trusty witch says that's a thing that can happen, then I'll believe her," he went on, addressing the creature. "But the young lady here won't be facin' any nasty consequences if she forms a pact with you, now will she?"

It was impudent and disrespectful. What Vyce had said was boundlessly insolent, and yet Sophie found herself moved by his words. After all, while he'd said he didn't really know too much about it, he had to understand that the creature before him was a tremendous force beyond any human categorization. Yet even then, he hadn't flinched away in the slightest. He'd asked the question on Sophie's behalf.

He was just like a grown-up trying to keep a child safe.

Sophie felt something sway and stir within her as a gentle feeling caressed her heart. After all, to Sophie, it was only normal for her to stand up to adults who had more knowledge and experience than she did or to reach higher to try and stand on equal ground with them. She wasn't used to having an adult stick up for her. And that was why her heart felt so, well, fluttery.

It definitely wasn't love or the surge of some thrill, so what was it? What was making her heart flutter and fidget like this?

"Nrmph!" Sophie said, unwittingly making a terribly odd noise as she clutched her chest.

*"Such insolence! Shall I flatten him 'neath my forepaw?"*

Startled herself by the creature's own startled voice, Sophie looked up only to see the big, blue-eyed bear giving a rich, hearty chuckle.

*"Thou seemst happy now, so what is this knave to thee? Thy brother? Thy teacher taking thee upon a field trip?"*

A teacher taking her on a field trip?!

Well, that was...one way you could put it, actually. Sophie couldn't help but laugh.

After all, Vyce sat furthest in the back, stirring the pot as he kept a watchful eye over a bunch of teenage brats doing this and that. He'd stood up to a god, even though it wasn't even his problem. If something were to befall him, his kingdom would be shaken in turn, so any insightful observer would be quick to label it as a terrible lack of foresight. But after having seen the turn of events so far, Vyce was carefully tiptoeing along the line of risk.

Such was indeed fitting for a king—and even a teacher taking students on a field trip.

*"Mr. Vyyyyyce, Sophie picked up a god!"*

*"What? Can she take care of it? Hell, I might as well be teaching at an orphanage then. Unfortunately, I don't plan on having her take care of the thing from the other side, so that's going to be a 'no.'"*

"He's neither my brother nor my teacher, but he is an adult I respect," Sophie answered.

"You talking about me...?"

Sure enough, seeing Sophie chuckle, the bear gave a pleasant laugh. *"Is that so now?"*

*"Thou hast saved me,"* the bear continued. *"I seek only to lend thee my aid as thanks. Eternity is a boring thing to live through; the life of a human child is naught but the blink of an eye to me."*

"So...in other words, you're just killing time?"

*"Thou couldst say that."* The bear laughed again. Sophie spun around to her teacher—no, Vyce—behind her.

"He says he'll kill some time and help us out as thanks for saving

him."

"So long as that's no lie," Vyce replied. "Do whatever you want."

Sophie looked up again as the bear nodded. *"To us, vows art both tether and tie. Thou hast my word—my vow I shall not break."*

The bear was saying he'd accompany them on their journey as thanks for their help. Any adult would be entirely correct to doubt the veracity of such a happy coincidence in the first place. Had it been "Sophelia" before she'd made her escape from the castle, she almost certainly wouldn't have approved.

But Sophie had already given up on tossing her thoughts over and over in her head. She'd had her fill of just watching everything from a distance. She'd believed Lunetta and the light she saw.

Sophie stared into the creature's blue eyes.

"Why don't we call you...Azuello?"

*"Well now..."*

"'Blue one' in the ancient tongue of the mages," Lunetta said.

"That's right," Sophie replied with a smile. To be honest, Sophie probably wasn't that much of a fan of the color blue. Perhaps it was a bit of an overstatement to call the color "traumatic" to her?

After all, her ex-fiancé's eyes had been blue.

As far as Sophie herself was concerned, the prince's eyes could've been blue or sewage brown for all she cared, but since he had been her fiancé, it had been expected that she would wear blue in public—blue earrings and blue necklaces and the like. And had the prince worn, in turn, an accessory or brooch the color of Sophelia's eyes or hair? Not quite. It was positively infuriating, but that was just how it had been. Sophelia'd had neither the resolution nor the standing to oppose him.

Thanks to that, Sophie's free-spirited fiancé had found himself with an obedient and proper lady. It had gone so far beyond being uncomfortable that it had actually become a source of amusement for her. How those rumors must've positively *blossomed* after that! Far from just flowers, the rumors could've practically grown into fruit or such. *Hmm? So, then the seeds would drop to the ground, a tree would grow there, and then it'd flower, huh? Now that I think about it, rumors are like the circle of life! Whoa. How grand.*

And none of that was funny in the slightest.

Nonetheless, blue had been the symbol of Sophelia in her wretched and pitiful station.

"I've probably always been infuriated by the color blue," Sophie explained. She'd always wanted to run away from that color. In truth, Sophelia had always wanted to throw all of it away—her blue earrings, necklaces, hairpins, and bracelets.

*"Truly?"* the bear uttered in a low voice, freezing up in shock.

"Which is why I want to learn to like blue," Sophie laughed. "I've just started a new life for myself now, you see. Could I ask for your help?"

The blue of the bear's eyes was immensely strong and kind—as beautiful as the distant sky. That color was entirely unlike the hateful blue that Sophie knew—the blue that scowled and sneered down at others from far up on high. And yet, it was also different from the terrifying hue of blue, as unreadable as the still surface of water.

The color now greeting her was the blue from which all shades of blue in this world had been born...or something like that. The bear's beautiful blue eyes narrowed in a relaxed droop.

*"I wish to know thy name, master."*

"Sophie. Just Sophie."

*"Just Sophie, hmm?"* The bear gave another gentle laugh. The next moment, the bear—Azuello—gave a burst of light as Sophie's chest lit up with a warm, white glow, as if a small star had taken shelter within her. The gentle force that seemed to envelop her body grew smaller and smaller before vanishing entirely.

Even then, Sophie could feel the strong light residing within her chest—within her soul. She couldn't quite explain it, but she felt invincible, as if she were brimming with power.

"Well then, 'Just Sophie,'" Azuello began, now speaking aloud, "from this moment onward, thou shalt take pride in thyself as the master of the blue one."

"Ah!"

Azuello laughed as Lunetta and Livio clutched their chests. Sophie turned around to see Vyce was making an unpleasant expression as well.

"'Tis a favor from me," Azuello added.

"It feels warm somehow," Sophie said.

"It would be far too heavy a burden to be unable to converse with your companions. I have granted my divine protection unto them."

Azuello stood up on two legs with his chest puffed up in pride. "I am a thoughtful god, am I not?"

He was huge. Seeing a massive bear standing up at full height was a powerful sight indeed. But at the same time, there was something perplexingly charming about it as well. *All that fur and fluff sure is cute!*

"This will elevate the level of any protective spell," Lunetta said, then turned to Vyce. "Your Majesty, would you mind punching me with all you've got?"

"Hell no," Vyce bit back.

"In that case... Livio, would you mind punching His Majesty with all *you've* got?"

"No way!" Livio replied.

"Even though I'd cast a defensive spell on you?" Lunetta said, looking wholly and completely befuddled. It seemed she was itching to try out the magic so badly she could hardly stand it.

While Sophie could understand the feeling, telling Vyce to punch a small girl or telling Livio to clock a king while he was on the job protecting him was, well...absurd. The fact that she had spoken so calmly with that unchanging expression of hers only made the dissonance that much worse.

"Uhh, if you come with so many amazing benefits, then I think Lunetta might be able to make better use of your power than me..." Sophie started. "Besides, she was the one who taught me the magic so I could heal your wound in the first place..."

While it was a little bit late to be saying such now, Sophie looked up at the wall of fluff standing tall before her, only for Azuello to quietly drop down to all fours. He'd moved carefully enough for his size, so the ground didn't shake beneath him. Instead, the impact summoned a soft, gentle breeze, making a charming, billowy sound. *What? No way—where'd that sound come from?*

"It was *thy* magic that pleased me, master," Azuello replied. "And moreover, I hold no fondness for witches. They think nothing of our godhood, the whole lot of them."

"That's quite all right with me," Lunetta replied. "I was never fond of gods myself."

Watching the two of them exchange biting remarks, Sophie could already see a deep chasm between them.

*Uh-oh, this could blow up any second!* Sophie thought, unnerved.

"Still, thy absurdly honest speech is not without its merits," Azuello said.

"Nor is your fluffiness either," Lunetta replied.

The two of them nodded at each other, handling the situation like adults.

*Wait,* are *they adults? Yeah, guess they are.* They were trying to find common ground even though they both realized they didn't mesh with the other, so that made them adults. So even if, for example, they kicked a little too much sand at each other's feet when they went in to shake hands, if they made it a point to show they'd be ready for a brawl when no one was looking, that probably qualified them as adults. Probably.

"Since things seem to have settled down a bit, what about a bite to eat, Lady Sophie?" Livio suggested.

Still, as far as Sophie was considered, the real adults in situations like this were the people who'd cheerfully smooth things over in a more pleasant direction. Seeing Livio beam from ear to ear at her, Sophie couldn't help but smile back.

"That sounds great!" Sophie said. "I was getting hungry."

"Right in the nick of time too," Vyce added. "Any longer, and my hand woulda turned into butter." Vyce gave a cynical laugh as Livio and Sophie thanked him and laughed. Lunetta, however, just tilted her head in confusion.

"People turn into butter?" she asked.

"Like hell they do!"

"But you were the one who said that, Your Majesty."

"It was a metaphor!"

Lunetta looked less than convinced. If Sophie's memory served

her correctly, Lunetta had gotten engaged to Vyce last year when she was sixteen—which meant that she was seventeen now. That would make her two years older than Sophie. When Sophelia had met Lunetta at the evening party that night, she'd come across as a reserved but proper lady. But now, seeing her at ease, Lunetta's mannerisms seemed somewhat childish.

*She's really cute like that*, Sophie thought warmly, only for a low voice to address her.

"Master."

Sophie looked up at Azuello's massive frame to see his blue eyes were glimmering. Sophie had seen that sort of glimmer before.

"What is that?" Azuello asked.

"It's mushroom and pork soup. I guess you could call it a mishmash stew of sorts," Livio answered.

"I see..." Azuello said, nodding. "I have been curious about the food ye humans consume. Give it unto me as well."

"Ummm..."

*Come to think of it, don't clerics and such abstain from eating meat? Isn't it taboo to make an offering of meat?*

"Is it okay for you to eat meat?" Sophie asked.

"And why should it not be?"

"Huh?"

He'd turned the question back on her. Why shouldn't he? But indeed, just a moment ago Azuello had been on the verge of "flattening" Vyce, so at the very least, taking lives didn't seem to be any sort of taboo for him.

"I am neither a steed nor a swine," Azuello answered. "I know nothing of ye humans' reasoning, and I care not whether creatures live or die."

So that was it.

When it came to "gods," people let their imaginations paint them as benevolent forces that sought to save all. In turn, they prayed, and pleaded, and begged for the gods to deliver them. But in the same breath, there were likely also gods who were the very definition of self-centeredness—gods who'd kick those rosy perceptions to the curb as if to say they couldn't give a damn about

any of that.

The world was indeed a vast place. It wasn't out of the question. Even Sophie, who'd been desperately trying to learn healing magic up until just a few moments ago, now found herself the master of a god. There was absolutely no telling what would happen next or whom they might encounter.

There were, after all, countless gods in the world. Most of the world's children were taught that a trifecta of gods had created the world and that other, smaller spirits tied to these three gods resided in nature. However, there were certain regions that denied that and instead had their own unique religions.

In other words, there were endless variations when it came to the particulars of deities. Rather than "different strokes for different folks," it was likely a case of "different odds for different gods."

Which was exactly why it was completely fine that there were both the welcome sort of gods who brought salvation, as well as others who asked for soup with meat in it.

"But if you have your fill, Azuello, there won't be any left for us..." If they were all to have their share of the soup, that was; just how much would it even cost to keep the massive beast well-fed?

Suspecting that the figure was starting to rival the national budget, Sophie looked up, only for Azuello to nod back. "Hrmm..."

Just then, Azuello let out his familiar burst of light.

Sophie gasped. It was just! Too! Adorable!

There, shrunk down to the size of a small kitten Sophie could've cradled in her hands, was a tiny little bear!

*He's looking up at me like he's practically begging for some soup! Am I going to give him some soup?*

*You bet I am!*

"You're a genius, Azuello!" Sophie exclaimed.

"A god, that is," Azuello replied.

As she instinctively stretched out her arms, Azuello bounced onto Sophie's lap. *His fur feels so fluffy and soft!*

"Purple one. Let me have the soup as well," Azuello said.

"I hear you." Livio laughed. "Sounds like you've got a god-sized appetite too!"

With Livio laughing and Azuello's fluff atop her knee, for a moment, Sophie felt like she might faint from sheer bliss. *This is heaven.* After all, she had a god with her—not to mention an angel.

"Now that I think upon it..." Azuello started.

Savoring the sheer ecstasy while trying her best not to let it show in her expression, Sophie cast her glance down on Azuello.

"Purple one," Azuello said, addressing Livio. "When my master was using her magic on me, the light it cast resembled the color of thine eyes."

"Huh?"

*Huh?*

"Whatever do you mean...?" Sophie asked, forcing down something welling up from within her.

Azuello lifted his fluffy head to look up at Sophie. "When you healed me, master. Verily, it was beautiful—that purple light, tinged with azure."

*Er, ummmm?*

Azuello was entirely too cute looking up at her. That was fine. Fine and dandy. Great, even. The problem, however, was that if this went on any longer, it would have been a veritable catastrophe...for Sophie's mental health, at least.

"W-Well, I couldn't see the light myself, so..."

"Indeed, thine eyes were shut firm," Azuello replied.

Right. Which was why Sophie was convinced something so embarrassing couldn't have happened. She felt her body get warmer and warmer.

"On that note," Lunetta said, "what were you imagining back there to mend the damaged magical force?"

"Well, I, uh..."

*Don't get into it! Don't get into all that!*

With Lunetta's round eyes sparkling with genuine curiosity regarding magic, Sophie felt like her face might very well erupt in flames. *Good thing I can't use fire magic, hee hee! But this is no laughing matter, Sophie!*

When Sophie had seen the pitiful, tattered magical force, it'd been— Oh, how to put it? That. She'd just thought of how *that* felt,

so...

She sounded just like an old minister on the verge of retirement who'd grown particularly forgetful. *"It's that—you know, that!"* But that wasn't it. It wasn't like she'd just up and forgotten it out of the blue. She was just hesitating to actually form the words. *Oh, but that's not it—it's not that I don't want to say it or anything like that.*

It had been her love for Livio—the same love that had saved her own heart... *Like I could ever actually come out and say something like that!*

*Wait. Hold on. Hold up.*

Sophie sank into thought. Now that she thought about it, what was it Azuello had said? What had he said after he told her to give him a name?

*"It seems thou art no fool."*

No, that wasn't it.

*"Then thou mayest grant a name unto me."*

That was it—right after that.

*"Thy magical energy—so warm and pure it doth border on embarrassing—hath pleased me."*

"W-Was that what he meant...?"

He'd said it bordered on embarrassing. But now Sophie was the embarrassed one. It was just too embarrassing.

*Huh? Just what're you getting at?* Did that mean that every time Sophie used healing magic she'd be proclaiming how over the moon she was for Livio? *What? Well, just what does that mean then?* In the worst-case scenario, no, make that the most *apocalyptically terrible* scenario—Sophie loathed to even imagine it, and she hoped that there'd be even less of a chance of such a thing ever happening—that, gods forbid, Livio were to ever be injured, would healing him be like shouting out just how head over heels she was for him? She might as well be saying, "I've been going around telling everyone just how crazy I am about you!"

*I don't even wanna think about it...!*

"Er, ummm... Lunetta?" Sophie stammered.

"Yes?"

She hadn't caught on—probably not, at least. *Do me a favor and*

don't *catch on.*

She could sense puzzlement in both Lunetta's eyes, as black as magic gems, and Livio's own gaze, piercing into her cheek, so Sophie stayed calm... At least that's what she told herself. *Stay calm, Sophie...*

"Is it possible to change what you imagine when you use magic?" Sophie asked.

Lunetta looked back at Sophie, confused. "I believe it is possible, but given how strongly the memory of your first success remains in your mind, I think it would be quite difficult to change. That's why the idiosyncrasies of one's magic are so difficult to uproot."

"O-Oh, I see..."

It made sense. People tended to cling to their first impressions of their first time doing something. A prime example of such? One's first love. Even if one's first love were a string of embarrassing blunders made in the highest of spirits— On second thought, perhaps that was exactly why the memory stuck around.

No matter how hard she might try, Sophie had little confidence that the events today wouldn't come bounding back into her mind every time she used healing magic. Everything that had happened had just left too much of an impact on her.

"Livio...don't ever get injured, okay?"

"Hmm? Uh...okay."

*Don't look. Don't look at me. Please.*

Sophie couldn't bring herself to look at Livio. But she found herself equally unable to look at Lunetta's expressionless face that somehow seemed to ask, *Why? What's wrong?* And since Azuello was right there with her in the *Why? What's wrong?* camp, Sophie couldn't look at him either. In other words, she couldn't look left, right, or even down. Staring straight ahead and feeling like she could cry, she came face-to-face with—*ugh*—Vyce giving her a mean-spirited sneer.

*He knows.*

*He knows everything—every last bit of it.* The look on Vyce's face made it clear that he knew what Sophie had been thinking and what was running through her mind right now.

*Ugh...* He already knew full well that Sophie adored Livio, so even she knew it was useless to try and hide it now, but that wasn't the point. That wasn't the point at all.

For those among you who haven't the slightest idea what all this is about, take the time to recall your own first love—so precious but bittersweet, so absurdly embarrassing it made you wish you could just curl up in your blankets and squirm about. If someone had asked you, "Oh, do you like them?" would you have been able to belt out an affirmative "Yes, I do!" in response? *That* was what this was.

It goes without saying that love isn't the only situation that brings with it the embarrassment of having one's feelings exposed. For those of you who might be asking "And just what other situations are there?"—imagine if you'd written a torrent of poems capturing the storm of your fluttering heart and you accidentally dropped it somewhere, or if you'd mistakenly given someone the journal you recorded your dreams in when you were trying to lend them a book. The very thought of it makes you yearn for the warm embrace of your blankets, does it not? If you still have no conception of such feelings, then bide your time with anticipation—the day will come that you will yearn to burrow into your blankets!

Indeed, just as Sophie wished to burrow this very instant!

Incidentally, Sophie had never written a poem and could not recall ever filling a journal to the brim with her dreams. That was just a joke she'd picked up at the tea parties she attended. But now, she truly yearned for her blankets. She wanted to bury herself in them. She wanted to curl up in a ball, like a little larva sleeping inside the ground.

Oh! It was Vyce—he'd opened his mouth.

"Nothin' wrong with that, now is there?" Vyce started. "It's the little lady's first time, so 'course she's confused. Now let's hurry up and eat. I'm starvin' here."

*Oh, Vyce, you saint!* Sophie made a vow in the confines of her heart: In the future, when Vyce was writhing in agony over his love for Lunetta, Sophie would be there with a blanket in hand.

Hmm? And what about her life and her freedom? Those belonged

to Sophie, so she wouldn't be giving him those.

"*And?*"

Vyce spoke up just as Sophie felt her heart and body alike grow warm from Livio's homemade soup, every bit as delicious today as it had been the last time.

"And *what*, pray tell?" Azuello asked, clutching a mug of soup and a spoon in his itty-bitty paws.

"And just how the hell does a god like you wind up hurt like that?"

"Ahh... Verily it is an unnerving tale," Azuello explained with a nod. The bear looked entirely too adorable for such a serious topic. The cute form he'd taken on crushed any pretense of gravity as he spoke, but given that that same form was the result of the god conforming to Sophie's wishes, she was in no position to object.

"I had taken on the shape of one of the monsters common to this land," Azuello began, "but the moment that vexing mage laid eyes upon me, he assailed me. If he had attacked me to consume me or to use me as sustenance, then I would scarce blame him—such is the law of all living creatures."

Azuello gulped down the rest of his soup before giving a satisfied sigh—a cute sight if Sophie had even seen one. "And yet..." he went on, "knowing full well that I was no monster, the craven sought to *capture* me."

Sophie gasped.

"That wretched scoundrel tried to subjugate me 'neath his own magical energy. I lost myself in anger—ne'er had I seen such insolence!" Azuello's words were steeped in rage, practically searing the air around them.

Sophie and the others knew all too well about the "creep or criminal" who'd likely been going around capturing monsters.

"Do you know what the bastard looked like?" Vyce asked, expression gravely serious.

Azuello tilted his head to the side as if to search his memory, placing his small paw on his chin—or at least where that would approximately be on a bear's muzzle—in thought.

Azuello gave a nod and hopped down from Sophie's lap.

"Both his hair and eyes were golden in color."

A crash rang through the air.

Startled, Sophie looked beside her to see that Lunetta's bowl had fallen from her hands.

"Lunetta!"

Sophie rushed to put a hand on Lunetta's now-wet dress. Thankfully, it seemed her soup had cooled down—her dress was cool to the touch. It seemed there was no need to worry about any burns. Relieved, Sophie heard Lunetta draw a short breath beside her.

No matter how excited she was, Lunetta always remained expressionless, but now she was frozen in place. Her brow was furrowed in concern, and her lips were trembling. Lunetta's small face was the picture of unease.

"Lunetta...?" Sophie called her name, only for her to blink as if she'd been startled before bringing a hand to her trembling lips.

"I-I'm sorry, I..."

"It's okay, Lunetta. It's okay," Sophie cooed. "It'd be unfortunate if you were burned. Why don't you go to the river for a bit?" Sophie smiled reassuringly. The tension left Lunetta's scrunched-up brow, her eyebrows returning to their familiar droop.

Lunetta nodded. "Yes...you're right. Thank you. I'll be, uh, back in a bit."

Sophie looked up at Lunetta as she shakily rose to her feet. She wished she could go with the girl. Sophie just knew she couldn't leave Lunetta on her own—the girl would just sink even further into despair. But it had only been a day or so since Sophie had met Lunetta. How would Sophie feel if she were in the same situation? Would she be able to share her feelings that easily? Would she be able to open up her stricken heart for others to see?

The answer would have been no.

Sophie had lived her whole life with others at a distance. She didn't *know* what to do in situations like this. Sophie bit her lip, feeling powerless and frustrated.

"Kataf," Vyce said, calling his trusted steed. "Go with her."

Vyce's horse was bright red, as if its coat were on fire. The horse

gave a slow nod and quietly followed after Lunetta. *Is it just normal for impressive people to have horses that understand exactly what they're saying?*

Vyce watched his horse's long tail sway into the distance before clicking his tongue unhappily.

Sophie looked back at him, only to see the wrinkles on his brow had done a magnificent job of multiplying. Vyce ran his fingers through his long hair, looking angry and fed up all at once.

"Godsdammit..." Vyce said, clicking his tongue again.

In response, Azuello drew in his little arms. He was probably trying to cross them—not that he was actually able to, though. It was cute—way too cute.

"I recall that the mages of Magyck all possessed golden hair and golden eyes," Azuello said. "Is that still the case? And doth the witch have some tie to them?"

Sophie clenched her fists atop her knees.

Lunetta's eyes and hair were both a beautiful black. They were a reflective, glossy black, but when Lunetta used magic, they shone red. Sophie herself loved seeing those colors that seemed to capture the eyes of all who saw them.

But it was true.

The witch of black and red was the princess of a nation marked by golden hair and golden eyes.

Their kingdom had hardly had any relations with the nation, so Sophie had never met a member of the royal family. Even then, tales of the kingdom's beautiful princess—with her golden hair and eyes—were well-known. Those who'd seen Lunetta at the evening party had spoken of just how elegant and beautiful her older sister was—despite never being willing to say such to Lunetta directly. *Bleh*.

Sophie looked up at Vyce, with a truly unsettling feeling about Lunetta's birth now brewing within her.

Vyce snorted. "She ain't just tied to 'em. She's the second princess."

"I see..." Azuello replied. "'Twas some hundred years ago that I last spoke to humans from that kingdom. They were arrogant and brazen—they thought themselves the greatest in all the land. Is that

still the case even now?"

"Well, I'm not in any position to talk. I ain't some shining example of humanity myself," Vyce said, and Sophie heard a snapping sound.

Wondering what the sound had been, Sophie looked at Vyce's long fingers and froze. Vyce had crushed the porcelain teacup he had been holding. Tea was dripping down from the black gloves that he wore.

"I can't stand those bastards," Vyce said. His voice was cold and low, steeped in what was almost certainly rage.

Sophie practically heard a blustery wind tear through her heart at Vyce's icy tone.

His anger was palpable and tense, so much so that Sophie could hardly breathe—only for a nonchalant voice to interrupt.

"Oh wow..." Livio started, taking his time and then some. "Aren't your hands burning?"

"I got gloves on, don't I?"

"If you say so!" Livio said, tossing Vyce a cloth, which he caught, sighing. "Don't worry. I'm not planning on asking."

"And I ain't planning on blabbin' even if you did!" Vyce bit back.

"Is that so?" Livio asked. The conversation felt relaxed now, stripped of its pressure.

Sophie gave a sigh of relief, only to find a hand gripping her own from beside her. The hand was big and warm, rugged and firm on the underside.

Sophie glanced up at Livio, greeted by a kind, beaming smile. *Whaaa? Jeez, I like him!* Sophie felt like her heart was being *squeeeeeezed* so tightly it might very well burst.

*M-My heart!* While Sophie was quietly in the middle of an internal uproar, in front of her, Azuello stood on his hind legs and looked up at Vyce as he wiped his hand.

On that note, Vyce's hand seemed to be just fine, despite the fact that he'd crushed the teacup, and he didn't show any signs of taking off his gloves. *Wow.*

"The picture thou doth imagine is likely the same as my own."

"Feels good knowing we've got a god on our side," Vyce replied with a sarcastic laugh, looking terribly displeased.

Whatever that "picture" or whatnot was, it was probably something far less than pleasant. Sophie remembered the look on Lunetta's face—a look she'd never wanted to see—and the rose-colored interior of her brain to grow cold all at once.

If she could, she hoped to see many different expressions and looks from Lunetta. She wanted to see her face colored with the shades of all sorts of different emotions. But that look on her face—*that* wasn't what Sophie wanted to see. She wanted to see Lunetta beam with a grin from ear to ear or watch her blush beside Vyce. She didn't want to see her sad or in pain. *And just which one of you put that look on her face, huh? Come on out!*

"To think Lunetta would make that sort of face, it's..." Sophie whispered.

"Yeah," Vyce said, lifting his head. Sure enough, his own face was marked by the same old familiar wrinkle running across his brow. "Only thing is, it's unusual for her expression to show how she's feeling. Prolly a good thing she at least learned to make a face like that." He gave a breathy laugh. Even being generous, he looked terrifying. It didn't matter what Vyce did—he always managed to seem coarse.

So just what was it then? Why did the tone of his voice and the look on his face seem kind somehow? Vyce was the type to look out for others or get angry on their behalf, so Sophie was glad to know that he was right there by Lunetta's side. And what about Sophie herself? Just what could she do for Lunetta? Sophie thought of the woman's small frame with her back turned away, and her chest tightened with pain.

She looked at the ground, only to hear Livio's bright voice stroke her ears.

"Then we'll just look on the bright side."

Livio squeezed Sophie's hand. He was kind. *That's right—he's been kind ever since I met him. This whole time he's been so kind and bright, and he's always been there when I've needed him.* Perhaps that was why Sophie herself wanted to pass on that kindness—to be kind to Lunetta. It came as a bit of a surprise to discover this within herself.

*Almost like I'm just a normal person*, Sophie thought, looking up at Livio's profile, as perfectly shaped as a statue's.

"So now we know that our unknown miscreant is presumably a magician from Magyck who's picking fights with gods. Both Azuello and you, Sir Vyce, have an idea of what he might be planning as well. In other words, we're better off now than when we had no idea who we were up against."

Just like the broadsword he wielded, Livio cleaved through the unpleasant air that had settled upon the group in one clean slash.

Vyce gave a long sigh. "I guess. Settin' those monsters free back in town was probably just an experiment for him. We just happened to stumble across it. You sayin' we should count ourselves lucky?" Vyce laughed, only for Livio to nod.

"Yup. And based on what I've observed, it seems you and Lady Lunetta have some sort of unsavory tie to this, correct? If that's the case, then there's only one thing to do."

"You're right..."



Laughing, Vyce nodded back at Livio. It seemed they were both more than ready to take up arms. *I'm really not a fan of anything violent, though*, Sophie thought.

But still.

"We take him out before he can take us out," Vyce said.

"Let's put a smile back on Lunetta's face!" Despite appearances, even Sophie was ready to rumble, and she certainly couldn't have them underestimating her.

Sophie had never experienced the bloodthirstiness of seasoned warriors carving their way through a battlefield, so she'd worried Livio by revealing how clumsy she was with such. Though she hadn't set foot on a battlefield, she *had* been fiancée to the crown prince. She hadn't faced off against the gossips and the twisted adults in the castle for nothing.

*You can talk all you want in the shadows, but I am a proper lady who was taught to show no mercy to those who committed unforgivable acts. Don't confuse me for some meek little girl!* Sophie gave a defiant snort and clenched her fists resolutely in front of her.

Vyce blinked and erupted into laughter. "That's right. And keep that fire in you goin'."

Sophie tilted her head to the side, wondering if she was being made fun of, only to jolt when she found that she was still holding Livio's right hand—and she'd lifted it up as well.

Livio was scarlet, and Sophie was sure she was every bit as red herself. Vyce's shoulders shook as he laughed at the duo.

They couldn't wait much longer for Lunetta to return. So just when Sophie was about to have a cup of tea after her meal, she glanced up at Vyce, wordlessly asking for permission to go check on Lunetta.

Vyce noticed Sophie's gaze and nodded. "Yeah. Go and check on her."

Sophie stood straight up. She'd been waiting to hear that!

Sophie still didn't have the best idea of how close she was with Lunetta. It had been around three days since they'd met, so trying to learn everything about each other immediately like that would have been too much. And of course it was. Sophie had never had

anyone she could call her friend. Before she could even consider how she could go about bridging the distance between them, there was the question of whether she should even try to—and she didn't even know the answer to that. She was stumbling around looking for answers in the dark. She was fumbling through *pitch-black darkness*.

But she wanted to see Lunetta feeling better. That much was how Sophie truly and unshakably felt. She didn't care if she got any sleep. She could keep on walking. After all, she certainly couldn't ride on a horse. She didn't care how many days or hours it took—she wanted to hear Lunetta's lecture on magic. And that was exactly why she wanted to see Lunetta's eyes light up as they had before.

Desperately pushing herself onward, it wasn't long at all before Sophie found Lunetta, with her back turned. Lunetta sat curled up in a ball, her long black hair spilling out onto the ground. Beside her stood Kataf, Vyce's trusty steed. Noticing Sophie, Kataf lifted his muzzle and slowly shook his beautiful red tail.

Sophie exhaled and sat down beside Lunetta.

"Isn't His Majesty angry...?"

"At what?" Sophie asked.

"I knocked my soup over."

*What?*

Sophie tried to smile but couldn't.

Who cared if she spilled her soup? Sophie wished Lunetta wouldn't clutch her knees like that—why, it almost made it seem like someone had exploded on her over something so small in the past. Whatever dark and imposing past Lunetta had, she could just toss it in the river as food for the fish and be done with it. *Oh, but, then again, even a fish wouldn't eat something so unappetizing, huh? Or something like that.*

Sophie tried to smile again but couldn't quite manage it. "They say that the hard days...the sad days—they always stay in your memory more than the happy ones," she said—not that she knew if that was actually true.

When was it that Sophie had read such an idea in a book? Where had she found the idea that stressful, agonizing times were committed to memory as a threat to one's life and that the memory

was stored as a defense to make sure that the individual could live to see another day? With these memories, when people felt down and out, their minds would recall that terror and stress and tell their bodies to run away. *Yeah, glad you're looking out for me, but that's a bit too much. Not that I really get all that.*

"That's why you can't help that your body remembers it any more than you can help feeling down," Sophie went on. "After all...you're alive."

"It's the same for you too, Sophie...?" Lunetta asked in a helpless, feeble voice.

A smile broke over Sophie's face. Sophie had never been able to smile well, so she couldn't help but wonder how she looked to Lunetta.

That night at the evening party, they'd all been there: her stepmother and half sister, famed throughout the castle for their beauty, and even her father and the crown prince, neither of whom had even the slightest inkling of interest in Sophelia. At the time, she had put on a flimsy smile, with a layer of put-on appearances so thick it might as well have been makeup. Just how had Lunetta seen Sophelia back then?

"It is," Sophie answered. "So if you feel like running away, then you can. I ran away too."

At the time, Sophie had practically been a walking corpse. But now that she'd made her escape, for the first time, she found herself grateful for the breath she drew.

Sophelia had resigned herself to it since it was her role, desperately clinging to her position, and yet even then, Lunetta had apparently told her fiancé that Sophelia had been "kind" to her. Sophie was grateful that Lunetta had seen her in that light.

"I did too..." Lunetta said, lifting her face from where it had been planted on her knees. "I ran away too. I left because...I had His Majesty with me."

The black of Lunetta's eyes made it seem like she was looking across the water—but she wasn't looking at anything. She didn't gaze at the ray of light refracting off the water's surface, nor any of the small fish swimming around. Lunetta spoke dispassionately, her

eyes revealing nothing. Sophie's chest ached at Lunetta's voice, emotionless yet somehow still steeped in pain.

"Guess that means we're in the same boat then, huh?"

"The same boat..."

"That's right," Sophie said with a smile. She was sure she was making a terrible face. The one who was suffering, the one who was sad right now, was Lunetta, but Sophie had gone and gotten down herself now. She didn't like that about herself—she wanted to be strong like Livio. Sophie squeezed her own right hand where Lunetta couldn't see.

"I ran away from all the bad things, the hard things, and all the hurt, and now...I'm happy. What about you, Lunetta?"

"I... I'm..." Lunetta closed her eyes. Her slender eyelashes fluttered as her hair swayed in the breeze. A breath slipped out from Lunetta's small lips. "I'm enjoying it too...I think."

She slowly opened her eyes. Her black irises reflected the water before her. The witch's eyes seemed to come alive with singular focus and joy when she spoke of magic. She blinked. "There's so much I don't know, but I've been able to try out so much, and His Majesty's always there to nag me."

"That's why..." Lunetta continued, rising to her feet. Her black hair and black dress fluttered alongside her. The witch was covered in black from head to toe, her eyes just as round and gleaming and emotionless as ever.

Lunetta looked down at Sophie. "That's why we have to crush him."

*See? She's ready to rumble!*

"I like the sound of that!"

And that was just how it had to be!

Sophie smiled.

In that case, there really was just one thing for them to do.

# Chapter Three: Picnic

The white bear trudged along.

The bear's sharp claws made it look unquestionably bloodthirsty, but the beast was injured. Painfully dragging one of its legs—stained a wet red—behind it as it walked, the bear closely resembled the monsters that lived in this area.

But that was where the similarities stopped—it only resembled them. They were far from one and the same.

Any magic wielder could've sensed it: The bear possessed a mysterious flow of magical energy that wasn't present in monsters. It was a tremendous power. It was a tremendous, incorrigible power—the sort that only gods and spirits possessed.

The golden-haired man in the white robe slowly followed after the bear. There was no mistaking it—the only thing the man's golden eyes could see right now was his target.

Seething with lust for such overwhelming power, the man arrogantly believed he was more than up to the task of fully wielding it. He was consumed with a hunger for revenge, ready to settle the score.

So that was what it was. And it sure wasn't pretty. Types like that were the biggest pain and the biggest hassle. After all, words failed when it came to getting through to people like him.

The man was almost certain to speak a "language" incompatible with that of the ordinary folk. The man began to glow, brandishing his stave.

For mages, much like incantations, staves were crucial tools that elevated the level of their magic and allowed the wielder to use the power reliably. There were some individuals out there who could use magic without the aid of a stave, but unfortunately, it seemed the man wasn't one of them.

Not that that was a *bad* thing or anything. People could use

handy tools to their hearts' content. Proclaiming that it'd look cooler not to use one? Now *that* was uncool. If the results were the same, then it should just have been a matter of choosing whatever was quickest and easiest—even more so if they were going to be using magic in combat.

But if the magician had to *rely* on a stave for his spells, was this really the sort of fight he could win?

Magical force suddenly began to stir in the air.

*"O howls of the dead from the depths of the abyss, unleash thy icy breath—"*

The magician began his incantation.

He certainly wasn't a novice. He first cast a defensive spell around himself before drawing the sigil for his next spell. Magical energy—like countless tiny blades incising through flesh—filled the air.

"Adytical Blade!" the magician shouted, sending out a burst of magical energy.

The bear went flying as the shining blue ball of magical energy tore into it. The magician listened as the ground itself shook and trees snapped in two. There, after the sounds had settled, was the bear's languid frame, soaked in blood. The corners of the man's lips twisted up into a grin.

Despite bleeding from the wounds the spell had inflicted upon him and the trees snapped in two by the impact, the bear shook as he staggered to his feet.

The bear's blue eyes pierced through the man.

The man flinched but sneered nonetheless, as if he were already certain of his victory. After seeing the magic he was so proud of be so effective against the bear, he must've been overjoyed.

After all, he'd only injured the bear last time before he'd suffered a defeat. Having been attacked by a human for the first time in centuries, the bear had lost itself in rage, muddled its magical energy, and grown massive. Realizing that he stood little chance against such a tremendous force, the magician had run for his life.

But just where on earth did he get that smug confidence from?

"You're not getting away from me this time! I'll show that guy a

thing or two!” The man burst into laughter as if he could contain it no longer before beginning his next incantation.

The fact that he’d shielded himself with several layers of defensive spells revealed that the next spell he’d be casting would be a massive one that would take time to prepare in turn.

The bear was too wounded to try and make a hasty retreat now while he had the chance. The bear raised one of his forelegs only to be repelled by the magical barrier and fall to the ground again.

The man seemed to grow even more delighted at this, his mouth curling up as if he couldn’t suppress his grin as he continued his incantation.

Just then, a massive magic circle appeared before the bear.

The magic circle was gray and gave off a pale light, making the air around it shudder eerily. The bear tried to escape, but its body refused to move.

“Gwwwwaaaaargh!” Its deafening howl echoed out.

The sound was so loud that the magician couldn’t help but cover his ears. But the roar was vivid proof that his spell had gone exactly as he’d hoped.

The man couldn’t stop laughing. His frame shook as he cackled and pulled out a magic gem, clear and transparent as a glass sphere.

“Such tremendous power, right in this magic gem! The power of a god—all for me!” the man went on, preparing to finish his incantation.

“Huh?”

The next moment, the man went flying so far it was almost funny.

Having seen the knights’ training exercises, it was hardly enough to make Sophie bat an eye. Sophie clenched her fist as she watched the man go flying. Beside her, Lunetta shook her finger at him.

“Unfortunately for you, that was just an illusion,” Lunetta said. “The real beast isn’t hurt at all.”

Red light erupted and scattered from where the blood-splattered bear had been, only to reveal Azuello, the fluffy bear, twitching his ears unhappily without so much as a scratch on him.

"Didst thou honestly think I would lose to a knave such as thee?" Azuello said, huffing out his nose as he swung his foreleg.

"It was entirely thanks to you that we were able to make such a convincing imitation of his magical energy and even the flow of his magical force," Lunetta explained. "Thank you." Lunetta dipped her head to the bear in thanks.

"I-Indeed," Azuello replied, rubbing at his muzzle with his forepaw.

*Is he getting embarrassed that she thanked him?* Sophie wondered. *He's got a cute side for a god.*

After being sent flying, the man wobbled to his feet, a furious, dark fire sparking in his golden eyes.

"L-Landslayer...!"

*Landslayer.*

Landslayer—was that what he'd called her?

Wondering just what on earth the man was talking about, Sophie turned to look over at Lunetta, only for the man to come sailing back once more—this time in her direction.

Sophie leaped out of the way, but after flying off past her, the man came hurtling back toward her once again. *Welcome back, I guess?*

"And just who the hell said you could talk, huh? Well?" Vyce demanded. "Scum like you oughta know their place. Get it through your skull—we caught ya red-handed!"

Vyce walked over with a long stride. The man's arms and legs trembled as he tried to rise to his feet, only to meet the underside of Vyce's boot. He gave a weak groan.

"Can it, you!" Vyce bit back, appearing to act as if he were the most atrocious of villains. *Which one of you is supposed to be the bad guy again?*

For what it was worth, Livio was the one who'd first sent the man sailing through the air, and Vyce was the one who'd sent him flying back over from the other side. It was the nastiest game of catch Sophie had ever seen.

With Vyce's heel digging into his back, the man looked up past his leg, finding the king looking down on him with a scowl that indicated

the foulest of moods.

The man screamed. “Wh-What are you doing here?! You were supposed to be on the high roads...!”

“So *I* was the one you were after then, huh?” Vyce asked. “That makes it real simple.” Vyce ground his foot into the man’s back. The man moaned, flailing his arms and legs about from beneath his dirt-smeared white robe.

“S-Silence! A knave such as you poses no threat to our kingdom!”

“What’s that now? And why are you talkin’ about your ‘kingdom’ instead of yourself? You tellin’ me the king’s behind this?” Vyce sighed. “C’mon—gimme a break! Don’t you have anything better to do? You’ve got just way too much free time on your hands, huh?”

Vyce chuckled as he dug his boot into the white-robed man’s back. The man groaned and sputtered, only for Vyce to remind him to “shut it” over and over again. He was doing a fine job playing the part of a merciless fiend.

*Actually, on second thought, I’d expect no less from a king. He’s doing a wonderful job.*

“D-Damn it all! J-Just what the hell did I even do?!”

Lunetta spoke up. “That magic circle was for overwriting the target’s magical energy, was it not? You corrupt the target with your own magical energy and then seal them away in a magic gem. That’s how it works, isn’t it? It’s a fine spell, I must admit,” Lunetta continued, speaking unaffectedly. “Though it does have a good many drawbacks.”

The man’s eyes burned as he glared up at Lunetta. “Shut up! Just shut up! You don’t know anything!”

“But I *do* know,” Lunetta replied. “I’m a witch, after all.”

The man laughed. “A *witch*? I don’t see a witch anywhere!” He was speaking down to her spitefully, in hopes of wounding her. The way he looked at Lunetta was far removed from how one would expect someone to look upon their kingdom’s princess.

“You’re a plague!” the man went on. “You’re a blemish—a curse!” The man’s words revealed his true nature—he didn’t see Lunetta as a person or someone’s child, much less a princess.

Despite being confronted with such unsightly emotions head-on,

Lunetta's expression remained unchanged as she tilted her head.

Listening from the sidelines, Sophie was overcome with the urge to cry and shout all at once as she clenched her fists. But then again, she didn't have to worry—Vyce had done a fine job slamming his foot down into the man's back again, so it was all good.

With how Vyce's foot dug into the man's backside, it was clear he was really putting some *feeling* into it. *You show him!*

"You're probably right—*we* are a plague and a blemish and a curse. That's all fine," Lunetta said. "And what of it? What reason do you have for pulling His Majesty into this?"

"Hah!" The man snorted back at Lunetta.

*All that stomping and you've still got snark to spare? Magicians from your nation must really have some mettle, huh?* Sophie couldn't help but be impressed by how out of place his reaction was. *But it's about time for that will of yours to get broken!*

"He's the one who picked a fight with our kingdom!" the man barked back. "If it hadn't been for him, then you'd still know your place—!"

"Bweegh!" The man gave an odd scream as he went rolling across the ground. Vyce had kicked him, sending the man spinning—and those were some impressive spins!—through the air, only for Azuello to stop his spiral by flattening him beneath the weight of his foreleg. *Now that's some nice teamwork!*

"Are we leaving this vermin alive?" Azuello asked.

"We can still use him," Vyce answered.

"I see," Azuello replied with a nod. Azuello grunted and placed his two forepaws atop the man's body before dropping his muzzle on him too. *And sit! Good boy!*

"Gwaaaaagh!" The man gave an unpleasant scream, but no one was bothered by it.

If she had still been the same little Sophelia she had been just a few days ago, she likely would've batted an eye or two, but the one who stood before them now was Sophie—just a normal person who wasn't about to let the man get away with the terrible things he'd said about Lunetta.

Rather than showing concern for the man whose name she didn't

even know, Sophie was worried about whether or not Lunetta had been hurt by the man's words—that was all. Sophie glanced over at her friend.

Lunetta's expression remained unchanging as she blinked and stepped toward the man being pinned to the ground.

"How many of you are there?" she asked.

"L-Like I'd tell you!"

"Where are the rest of them?"

"I'd sooner die than tell you!"

It was no surprise that Vyce met this with an unsettling laugh. "Is that so?"

"Color me surprised!" he went on. "You still think you've got the upper hand here? You've got guts, I'll give ya that. But from where I'm standing, magic wielders seem awfully uninformed when it comes to war."

Vyce nudged the man below his boot. "You listenin'? The first man to misjudge the situation dies. They don't have to mess up to die. Doesn't matter if they're a saint or a sinner—people still die on the other end of a rifle. That's how war works. Aren't you aware?" Vyce gave a hearty laugh as if he were truly entertained, but beneath it was nothing but pure anger.

*Considering those magicians think they've got the whole world right in the palms of their hands, they really don't have a clue, do they? Not too much rolling around in their heads to weigh them down. They're unencumbered by any cares, whether they're going off on a picnic or a journey. And of course, going off to war too! It's a good thing to travel light, right?*

"What you speak of, Usurper King, isn't war."

"The hell you talkin' about?" Vyce asked.

So just where was this conversation going to lead? Not that it was any of Sophie's business.

"Well, what the hell else would you call it when you've got one country startin' a fight with another?" Vyce demanded.

"You think *our* kingdom started this...?!" the man replied. "It was *you* who acted first! Why, had it not been for you, we'd...!"

"And here I thought we were under an alliance both kingdoms

agreed to," Vyce said. "And just look—here you are pullin' this scheme in someone else's kingdom! Is that king of yours a damn fool? Or did he just go senile? Well? If you're so good at magic, then why don't y'all fix him up with it, huh?"

*Wow.* Sophie couldn't help but be impressed—by Vyce, that was.

She'd started to seriously lose track of just who was supposed to be the bad guy here. Then again, "bad" was the sort of ambiguous concept that changed depending on where you stood. It was as trifling a concept as it was unreliable. From the other kingdom's perspective, Vyce was likely the epitome of villainy.

But the man had caused a dark cloud to fall over Lunetta's porcelain-white face, insulted a king, cast terrible magic on Azuello as if it were nothing, and even captured monsters before presumably setting them loose on an unsuspecting town. That made him a villain in Sophie's book.

Perhaps Vyce and Lunetta might've been plotting something in the shadows, and perhaps this man was trying to obstruct that plot. If one were to look at only one side of things and immediately write off the opposing side as evil, then they'd be just the same as the tweeting little birds that had demanded Sophelia step down from her place as the crown prince's fiancée despite knowing nothing of the situation. For what it was worth, if Sophelia could've stepped down, she would've gladly taken the opportunity. She hadn't been able to, however—which was exactly why she'd run away.

Come to think of it, would those little birds be using their bright, shining red beaks to peck away at Sophelia's half sister who'd presumably taken her place as the crown prince's fiancée? Sophie considered it for a moment and shook her head. Her half sister had been popular in the social sphere, so she probably didn't have to worry about anything like that. Even without Sophelia, everyone was sure to just go on living happily ever after. Without Sophelia around, everything would work out *juuuuust* fine.

Sophie couldn't help but feel like she'd missed out not running away sooner, but if she'd run away entirely on her own, she was sure she'd have wound up leading a life of misery in the end.

Even if it looked like she'd been wrapped up in some sort of nasty

business, the reason that Sophie was able to trust in Vyce and Lunetta and stand around so absentmindedly was because Livio was with her.

Livio had sent the man flying with a nonchalant look on his face. There was no way he'd ever leave Sophie's side. With his broadsword stretched across his back as if to ensure he could move at any moment, Livio's gaze was glued to the man. The look on his face was piercing and serious yet simultaneously valiant and tremendously beautiful.

"Now's the only time you'll get to act so high-and-mighty...!" the man said. "I don't know why you're here, but all your men on the main road should be dead by now!"

"How kind of you to worry," Lunetta said flatly.

"Lunetta," Vyce called. The girl fumbled around in her bag before pulling out a magic gem.

"Can everyone hear me?"

*"We sure can, Lady Lunatietta!"* Booming back in reply was a crowd of men. The voices cheered and called Lunetta's name, only for a calm voice to chime in as the others subsided. *"Can you guys get any louder?"*

*"Lady Lunatietta, how's our king doing out there?"*

"He's...mad."

*"I see. Sounds like it's brewing up to be the proper shitstorm I knew it would be."*

The man was at a loss for words, staring at the magic gem in Lunetta's grip in disbelief. His eyes were wide open and bloodshot, an unsettling sight.

"That's why I told you not to misjudge the situation in a fight," Vyce said. "That god or whatever he is on the wrong end of your spell? That was all a fake. The moment you realize *you're* the one who fell into the trap is the moment it'll start makin' sense."

*"I can practically see that self-satisfied smirk on His Majesty's face after a zinger like that!"*

"You tryin' to get your ass fired, Phel?"

*"If you know of another retainer who can deal with your eccentricities, then by all means, please do, Your Majesty."*

"Blegh!" It went without saying that last groan that sounded like a croaking frog hadn't belonged to Vyce. It was the man at his feet groaning after a swift, sharp kick from Vyce's black boot. The man was on the reaping end of "you reap what you sow." Vyce wasn't throwing his anger in every direction—he was directing it all toward the sharp-tongued man. *Please, by all means, do continue!*

Merely watching from the sidelines, Sophie wasn't qualified to write the man off as evil, but she'd seen more than enough to recognize that he was an enemy to both Lunetta and Azuello. *You show him what's what! That's what the first plan was for!*

"Can't imagine him going on his merry way after lettin' a big catch like that slip through his fingers."

Vyce was the one who'd suggested that they spring a trap for the man since he had to still be in the forest. Livio had said that they'd need a decoy in that case. And it was Sophie and Lunetta who looked at Azuello.

Azuello made a sour expression as the two stared at him. "Come now," he said, lifting his fluffy little muzzle. "I am a *god*, you know!"

"And you are. But it seems we have a miscreant trying to capture a god on our hands," Sophie replied. "Would the god in question allow him to get away with such?"

"What a terrible way to put it..."

*My apologies!*

Sophie had spent her life treading through the muddy waters of the castle, so that was just how she was. *I do beg your pardon!*

"Sorry about that," Sophie said, apologizing without really meaning it.

Lunetta tilted her head to the side. "You're not so weak as to be bested by a foe you know will attack you, are you, Azuello?"

"Of course not!"

"So there's nothing to be scared of then, right?" Lunetta asked.

"Of course not!"

"So why not then?"

Azuello simply looked back at her blankly.

This side of Lunetta was almost certainly *au naturel*. She could be

one hundred percent organically rage-inducing. When it came to bringing people's anger to a rolling boil, this was actually the most effective way. While it might be possible to calm down and refuse to go along with it if you thought someone was *trying* to make you angry, when it came to individuals that just naturally had a way of infuriating you, that didn't quite work out. They were actually being serious, after all! If Azuello turned her down, she'd just say something along the lines of "Oh, so you are scared then," apologize, and start getting worried.

She was the type of person who could make your blood boil more than anything else.

They'd make your blood boil, but they didn't have any bad intentions at all, so they wouldn't have the slightest idea about what you were upset over. People like that were the toughest foes to fight. In other words, in times like this, the only option for people like Sophie and Vyce was to keep their mouths shut.

Just as expected, Azuello bristled—no, *fluffed*?—with anger. "Then let us put this fool in his place...!"

Their strategy was exceedingly simple.

Azuello would lure him out. Vyce and Livio would beat the shit out of him. The end.

Simple strategies were the best strategies—especially since they could get cracking on it even in the middle of a forest like this. The prep was a piece of cake too.

First, you'd get a god that had taken on the form of a monsteresque bear.

Next, a ridiculously powerful witch would cast a spell on said god.

Finally, you'd just get two guys strong enough to bring the whole world to its knees. Done.

How simple could it be? It was a villain-snatching strategy that anyone could use! *Well, I don't know if everyone has access to a god, a ridiculously powerful witch, and two guys strong enough to bring the whole world to its knees.*

"Are all of your men all right, Sir Vyce?" The one who'd tilted his head in doubt at such an extraordinarily simple plan was Livio. "They have deep-rooted ties to you and Lady Lunetta, do they not? Then if

the incident in town was just the test run and that villain was really after you and Lady Lunetta... Don't you think they might be attacked? Your men will be making their way along the large main roads, correct?"

"Exactly," Vyce answered. "They're the real decoy here—and I've had them ready for a time like this. I've equipped them with a magic gem that allows us to communicate."

Lunetta nodded and took out the magic gem. She spoke into it, and a calm voice replied, *"You called, my liege?"*

Vyce explained the situation at hand, and the voice simply replied, *"Got it,"* so quickly that Sophie couldn't help but wonder if he had actually understood.

*"We have the magic gem from Lady Lunatietta that allows us to sense magical energy,"* the voice from the gem explained. *"So long as we know where they're at, it's just a matter of crushing them before they can belt out a spell at us."*

Vyce nodded at the voice's confident, reassuring reply.

Lunetta turned to Sophie. "What will you two do, Sophie?"

"Huh?" Sophie asked, staring back into Lunetta's obsidian eyes.

Lunetta's long hair swayed in the breeze. "This is my problem. I have to crush them so I can get away. But this has nothing to do with you, Sophie. It'll be dangerous, so I think you should just wait ahead in the next town."

She had a point.

They'd brought the neighboring kingdom's problems over with them, so since Sophie had had something of a standing in her own kingdom, perhaps it was something they hoped she wouldn't get involved in. That was how international issues worked. Not to mention that Sophie wouldn't be of any use being around in the first place.

The healing magic she'd only just now learned was still a fresh sprout in her mind. More importantly, with a master-class witch around, Sophie's magic wouldn't be helping anyone. It wasn't like she could wield a sword, nor did she have the brains to make up for it.

That was why it would only be selfish of her to proclaim that she

wanted to go with them.

"Lady Sophie."

Unknowingly casting her gaze downward as she clenched her fists atop her knees, Sophie found a warm hand covering her own. She looked up to find those blueberry eyes she loved so much narrowed with concern. Sophie couldn't count how many times that bright smile had lifted her up.

"It doesn't cost a thing to say what you think," Livio said teasingly.

Sophie laughed. He had a point.

She knew saying how she felt would do no good—she had to know her place. But Sophie had resolved herself to throw away that disheartening habit. *Look, I'm not saying I should just blurt things out without thinking. I'm just trying to say I'm worried about you, Lunetta.* She could be permitted to at least say that much—Livio had taught her that.

"I know I'll just get in the way," Sophie began, "but if you would allow it, I'd like to go with you, Lunetta." Sophie had to catch herself from gasping in surprise.

Lunetta's round eyes opened wide. Sophie felt her heart leap at the fact she'd been able to see Lunetta's expression change so... *At least assuming that face wasn't out of sheer shock at how stupid I am, that is.*

"I don't see any problem with that."

Sophie found support where she least expected it.

The teacher—no, the *king*—who seemed so pragmatic that he was almost certain to object didn't show even the slightest reservation about having Sophie, the last thing from a combat-ready veteran, accompany them.

"She's got herself one helluva bodyguard, doesn't she?" Vyce said. "And you won't go off and do anything crazy if she's with you, Lunetta."

"I'm not going to do anything crazy..."

"So you can promise me that you'd use defensive magic if it were just you all on your own?"

Lunetta fell silent, looking away.

"*That's* what I'm talking about," Vyce said with a sigh.

Simply put, it seemed Sophie's role in all this was to be a ball and chain for Lunetta.

If she had Sophie weighing her down like a sack of bricks, Lunetta would have no choice but to think about keeping them safe, no matter what, by using defensive magic the whole time. That meant that she couldn't go and do anything desperate. It was a wonderful strategy that took advantage of Lunetta's kindness and Sophie's own blundering helplessness. *If that's what you're after, just leave it to me!*

Sophie nodded. "I'll hold her back like it's nobody's business!"

"Nobody went that far with it, y'know."

And that was what led to Sophie serving as Lunetta's dutiful lady-in-waiting and ball and chain all in one. Sophie now found herself in a castle, tied up rather splendidly.

It went without saying that Sophie wasn't into that sort of thing.

"It's been a long time."

"It has..."

But was the man with the long, golden hair, looking down at Lunetta as if she were garbage, into that sort of thing?
Well...probably not. At least that was what Sophie hoped.

"Excellent work, Tivius," the man said.

"Y-You're too kind."

"And what of the others with you?"

"O-Our targets, uh, put up more of a fight than expected, so they'll be a bit delayed..."

"I see. I shouldn't have asked so much of you."

"F-Far from it, milord!"

"I'll see to it that you are rewarded generously for your efforts," the gaudy old man with the long hair said to the robed man before him. Apparently, the old man was the king of this land.

And what land was that, you ask? Why, it was the land of Magyck.

So, to get the gist of things...

"Well then...have you come to your senses just a bit?"

"Father, I..." Lunetta started.

"I told you not to call me 'father.' Just the sound of it makes me sick."

The long-haired old man was Lunetta's father, but he himself denied it. *So then just what does that make you?*

Sophie smiled, thinking she'd be forgiven for assuming he was a dung beetle.

"Your Majesty, might I be permitted to speak?" she asked.

The king glared down at Sophie. "And who are you supposed to be?"

With the king's icy stare upon her, Sophie dropped her head low. The rope binding her stung, but what was she to do? "I am Sophie. I serve as Lady Lunatietta's lady-in-waiting in Obdrael."

That was all made-up. She did work as Lunetta's attendant, but she wasn't a citizen of Vyce's kingdom. But that wasn't for her to say here and now. Sophie dropped low enough to plant her forehead on the marble floor beneath her. The floor looked like it'd be very painful if you landed on it. Or rather, it looked expensive.

"Do you not think it improper that one such as a lady-in-waiting might so address a king?"

"Truly, it is as you say, Your Majesty," Sophie replied. "But I must relay a message from my king."

"A message...?"

The king ordered Sophie to look up. She obeyed, slowly getting to her feet.

For what it was worth, the reason that the less-than-diplomatically-minded country of Magyck existed as a nation was because its magic-focused culture outshone others by far. It was said that roughly a third of the preprocessed magic gems imbued with magical energy were produced in the kingdom. Unless a kingdom was a military powerhouse with an almighty witch (like a certain nation), they'd never even think to fight against Magyck—that was simply the sort of kingdom it was. Difficulties procuring magic gems would cause plenty of issues, and having the might of magicians used against you in battle would be just as much of an issue, which was why most nations had no ties with Magyck. All they could do

was submissively accept that merchants were obtaining and selling magic gems.

Due to this, Sophie didn't know the king's face, nor did the king know hers.

She put on a smile, grateful for the situation. "I am deeply grateful for your generous words."

"I don't need your thanks," the king bit back. "Under normal circumstances, I wouldn't even deem to look upon magically ignorant rabble such as yourself."

He was the absolute worst.

Yet Sophie smiled.

He was pure, unfiltered "chosen people" ideology at its finest. And he was a walking pile of excrement to boot. The king thought anyone who couldn't use magic was less than a person, but he ordered his own daughter not to call him father, despite her astounding magical prowess. Part of Sophie wanted to take those oh-so-blurry grand ideals of his and kick them to the curb, but that wasn't her role in all this.

Sophie looked at the golden-eyed man, taking extra care to make sure her seething hatred didn't spill out into her own brown eyes. She carefully fixed her smile in place. "The betrothal of Lady Lunatietta to His Majesty should have been a symbol of the peace between our two kingdoms."

Indeed, that was what it should have been.

As Vyce's own kingdom had continued to grow, Magyck had soon found itself surrounded by vassal states under Vyce's control. The elite in each nation had nervously watched the situation, wondering which nation might invade the other and when. However, when Vyce took the second princess of Magyck as his fiancée, the tensions had seemed to settle for a time.

In that sense as well, talk of the engagement held a significant meaning for the kingdom, but still! Still! To think that after just one year they'd pick a fight with the king of the kingdom they'd made peace with. Just how foolish could their king be?

The fact that Vyce had had to ask if they thought nothing of their kingdoms' promises to each other—that line alone probably told it

all.

The king of Magyck looked down upon anyone who was unable to use magic. He might as well have been saying, "Oh, you're going to get a new dress? I can't hear what you're saying over how much I'm laughing!" But even if you pointed out that everyone would buy new dresses if they could afford it, or that even if you don't buy a new dress, you won't go dying from it, or even that the dress isn't what *really* matters, it wouldn't get through to them. They didn't have the sort of ears they needed to hear any such objections. And if you didn't have any ears? "Oh, wow! I can't hear a thing they're saying!" Instead, the king only spoke with his royally inflated sense of self that was firmly locked in the past. It made for a terrible nuisance. He was a stain upon his own kingdom! A stain!

*Wait, what was I thinking about again...? Oh, that's right.* It was about that idiot of a king who seemed to think that pacts between nations were on the same level as children's promises to play together.

"In addition to your violent acts in other countries, you attacked His Majesty and have forcefully brought Lady Lunatietta back to her homeland as if she were a criminal..."

*Just what are you even thinking? Are you an idiot? You have to be, don't you? Don't you think it'd be a good idea to give up the throne this very moment?* At least...that was what Sophie wanted to say. But then again, if Sophelia had been the sort of iron-nerved simpleton who could say something so bold, she never would've suffered a day in her life. Telling a lie was nothing at all to her.

"This must have caused quite a problem. His Majesty does not wish to further inflame the conflict with you any more than it has already progressed. Might you please inform us of your own motivations?"

"I see..." the king replied. "So you've found out full well that those savages are no match for my kingdom then, have you?"

"His Majesty hopes to keep the casualties to the absolute minimum. If there is anything that our kingdom may do, I only ask that you tell us."

*And that's all a lie! Yup, a big, fat lie! There's no way an*

*overprotective king like Vyce would ever send his fiancée back to a hellhole like this!* Not to mention Vyce was fit as a fiddle, practically brimming with energy. He was so full of energy, in fact, that he was searching the castle up and down for any weaknesses to exploit this very moment, along with his part-time bodyguard, Livio.

In other words, it was Sophie and Lunetta's turn to be the decoys.

Livio hadn't been too happy about this idea and had suggested that they go with a different strategy. While Sophie couldn't help losing herself in rapturous awe at Livio's face, she couldn't agree with his suggestion. There was something *really* nice about the face Livio made when he was serious. And that face he'd made when he was going against Vyce? Sublime. Sophie had been unable to come up with any other strategy—her happy-go-lucky brain had been too busy dabbing a tissue at its eyes as it was swept up in a standing ovation from all sides.

What had settled things was when Azuello had said, "There is nothing to worry about so long as I conceal myself and accompany thee there. I could do so in a way that the likes of humans cannot discern my presence. Such a thing is, as thou sayest, 'a piece of cake.'" Azuello snorted, lifting his foreleg from the man—who was still bound by Lunetta's magic—before disappearing. Azuello had completely concealed himself.

"I can't feel your magical energy at all. I'd expect no less of a god," Lunetta had said, sounding impressed.

Somehow, however, Sophie had been able to tell that Azuello was right next to her. She'd tilted her head to the side in confusion. *"It is different for thee, master,"* a low voice had told her—that same voice that it seemed no one else could hear.

*"We forged a pact where I took thee as my master. Thou art an exception to my ruse."*

"That's amazing!" Sophie had replied.

"Is it not?" Azuello's voice had rung out, sounding proud. Sophie had imagined the fluffy little bear standing up, imposingly, on his two hind legs. *That's just too cute!*

"All right, that settles it then!" Vyce had decided. "Me and the

youngster'll pretend to be on the verge of death on the main road so we can scrounge through the castle. Meanwhile, the little lady'll watch over Lunetta to make sure she doesn't do anything crazy. And you, Lunetta..."

"Yes?" Lunetta had replied, looking up, her face pale.

For what it was worth, however, the man they'd taken prisoner was even paler—they'd given him a terrifying magic gem that had been set to explode should it leave his possession. They'd told him to do what they said if he wanted the gem-bomb defused. *Which one of us is the terrorist here again?*

Unable to fight back against the god and the mighty witch's magic, the man had eagerly made the preparations for a transfer spell. Transfer spells were a type of magic developed in Magyck that allowed for multiple individuals to move to a specified location. Magyck was still the only kingdom capable of using such spells. Sophie couldn't help but be terribly curious about it.

"Lunetta—do what you have to do over there," Vyce had said.

"What I have to do?"

"That's right," Vyce had said with a nod, placing a hand on Lunetta's head. Sophie's heart had begun to pound in her chest. *Is it okay for me to watch this?*

"It's okay if you want to run," Vyce had continued. "If you don't wanna do this anymore, just tell me and I'll be there in the blink of an eye."

"O-Okay..."

"But if you're going for it...give 'em the thrashin' they're due."

Lunetta had blinked. "Okay." Her mouth had tightened as she bit her lip and looked at the ground, clutching her chest. She was cute. Lunetta really was cute.

The skin beneath her eyes had been a soft red, and her black eyes had seemed to quiver just a bit. That was the look! That was the look Sophie had wanted to see! Without knowing exactly why she'd done it, Sophie had glanced up at Livio.

Livio's gaze had met Sophie's as he smiled and stooped toward her. *He's close! Really close!* Sophie had fought back the urge to let out a girlish shriek as Livio had drawn closer and closer to her like

they had been strung together. Sophie's heart had seemed like it might burst at any moment. At this rate, she might very well have had to make a grave for her happy-go-lucky heart too.

"Talk about cute."

"Y-You mean Lunetta?" Sophie had asked back.

Livio had blinked, his long eyelashes fluttering. "Pardon?" He had shaken his head. "I'm talking about how happy you look when you see Lady Lunetta happy. You're really cute."

Sophie's heart had skipped a beat.

*Cute! He said* I'm *cute?! He said I'm cute!!!*

While Sophie continued to have her fair share of doubts about Livio's sense of aesthetics, there was just no way she *couldn't* be over the moon at Livio's remark. Her pounding heart had walked a dangerous line, but her happy-go-lucky brain had still been fine and dandy, dancing around with a ringing bell in hand.

"Lady Sophie, do be careful not to do anything drastic," Livio had said. "No matter what happens—or doesn't—you can always call for me."

If Sophie could call for Livio even if nothing had happened, then there was no way they'd ever be able to split up in the first place. *I'd just wind up calling him every second!* Sophie had made up her mind to only call Livio's name in an emergency.

And that was exactly why, even there, before the king of a foreign kingdom, even bound in rope as she was, Sophie wasn't the least bit scared. She could feel Azuello's warm magical energy in her chest, and Vyce and Livio were there in the castle. Beside her was Lunetta, her face pale as she stared at the ground.

If they didn't fight here, then all those days she'd endured would've been for nothing.

"For one from a kingdom where the spread of magic has been so woefully limited, you are more decent than your birth would suggest."

"I am grateful for your words." Sophie wasn't grateful in the slightest—if anything, she felt like she might throw up. Regardless, she smiled as she dropped her head in a bow.

The king was in a fine mood after Sophie had made a roundabout

show of betraying Lunetta with her repeated, clumsy interventions. Sophie felt like her face might start twitching at what a nauseatingly rotten excuse of a father he was.

In her old life, no matter what she'd been told, Sophelia had never thought anything of it or grown exasperated. "Oh, yes, you're quite right!" she'd said, letting it all go in one ear and out the other. The whole time, she'd just kept on smiling.

And yet, the king's voice as he mocked Lunetta and Vyce, his eyes, his face—it was all so revolting Sophie could hardly stand it. It was all Sophie could do to hold back the chilling, nauseating sensation welling up inside her.

Had it not been for the reassuringly warm magical energy in her chest, she might very well have lost herself in a string of bitter remarks. *Uh-oh, gotta watch out.*

"Very well then," the king said, "in light of your actions, we shall concern ourselves with your kingdom no more. We're not savages, after all."

*You were turning off your brain to turn to military might, so that sounds like a savage to me!* At least that was Sophie's take on the matter. There was just no telling what went on in the minds of all these high-and-mighty types.

The dung beetle of a king seemed to be in high spirits. Sophie hung her head respectfully in front of the king, then lifted it once more.

"So what is it that you might ask of us?" Sophie asked.

"Do something about that room," the king replied.

"That room...?" Sophie repeated beneath her breath.

"That's right," Lunetta said, slowly lifting her head. A heavy, dark shadow hung over her jet-black eyes as she blinked. "I figured as much."

And now, here they were.

Led by the man in the white robe—Tivius, or something like that—they followed the magician down an endlessly long flight of stairs.

They'd been untied after they'd gone through the door leading to the stairs. Perhaps they thought it would only be a headache if they

fell on their descent, or perhaps they just thought there was nowhere for them to run past this point. Sophie couldn't lower her guard quite yet, but she was glad that it was easier to walk now.

The sound of several footsteps echoed heavily around them. The echoes seemed to multiply, bouncing off each other, as if they were entirely cut off from the rest of the world. It was unsettling.

It didn't help that the farther down the stairs they went, the stronger the dark magical energy in the air grew, weighing heavily upon them as if it were trying to strangle them.

"That room" the king had spoken of was likely at the bottom.

"How are you fine right now...?" Tivius asked Sophie, his hand clutched against his mouth as if he were fighting back the urge to vomit.

Sophie smiled back. "I have the protective spell that Lady Lunatietta cast on me."

That part wasn't a lie. Azuello and Lunetta had painstakingly cast a spell on her before they departed. They'd cast the spell on everyone in the group. From the sound of it, most average attacks wouldn't even make them flinch. It was, in a way, like a suit of armor.

While the pressure of the magical energy was uncomfortably heavy, it wasn't enough to halt their movement like it did Tivius. In the end, the only ones who were able to make it to the bottom of the stairs were Sophie and Lunetta.

What they found before them was a massive set of iron bars cutting the room in half. They were jet-black, cold, and heavy iron bars.

The iron bars had been bent out to form a massive hole in the middle. A number of torn magic circle charms lined the bars, forming a decoration that seemed like some macabre necklace. Everything about it seemed *off*.

It looked just like *something* had escaped from the cell.

Lunetta stepped through the bent iron bars. She looked around her surroundings before gazing upward.

Upon closer inspection, there was a small square opening, covered with more iron bars, far, far above the room's walls. Was

that meant to be some sort of window? No one in their right mind could've called it that, but Lunetta simply looked up at it—with the familiarity of habit.

"Lunetta, is this...?"

"This is..."

There, on the other side of the iron bars, was an austere bed, a desk, and a multitude of bookshelves.

*Don't say it. Tell me this isn't...* But Sophie's hopes were cut down in an instant, sliced clean through.

"This is the room I grew up in."

# Chapter Four: A Kind Soul

For a long while after she was born, Lunetta's wet nurse was the only one to call her by her name. Lunetta figured that if her wet nurse hadn't used her name, she probably would never have known it.

It wasn't until a good while later that Lunetta found out how terribly unfortunate that was, but to be quite honest, even now she didn't think of herself as all that unfortunate. And, well, while she hadn't been without her own complaints, at the time she'd just assumed that was how things were.

Vyce had told her she could get angry—that she could be sad and grieve, but as far as Lunetta was concerned? *Oh? Yes, I suppose you're right.* That was about the extent of what she felt.

After shaking off the king's grasp and going off to live in Vyce's castle, her heart would sometimes grow restless when she thought about how there was something off about where she'd been before, but that was about the sum of it. *No point dwelling on it*, she'd think, immediately shifting her thoughts toward something else.

After all, Lunetta found herself confronted with surprises every single day. Her brain was far too busy with the surprises to be fretting over all that. Lunetta was startled to discover just how many things she had to think about. Apparently, *normal people* couldn't spend all day thinking about magic and nothing else.

"Those *normal people* really are quite amazing," Lunetta had remarked unconsciously.

"Are you stupid?" Vyce had replied. Lunetta hadn't had a clue what he'd meant.

"Who are you calling stupid?" Lunetta had asked quietly, taking offense. For whatever reason, however, he'd just ended up laughing at her, leaving Lunetta with even less of a clue about what was going on.

The things Vyce said had always been difficult to understand.

Despite making a sour expression whenever Lunetta would ask him "why" or "how come," he would always give her an answer, so she was at least grateful for that.

Ever since she'd met Vyce, she'd been plenty busy learning about a slew of things she'd never known. Like how she could have her name called like it was nothing at all, or how she was supposed to eat a lot for whatever reason, or how she could change into a variety of dresses every day, or how people normally didn't wear black dresses, or how she was allowed to go where she wanted to. She was so busy that it felt like her head was spinning.

Lunetta had collapsed several times before she finally got used to it all. Each time, however, Vyce would tell her, "Don't push yourself so damn hard," while fuming at her bedside.

As king, Vyce was always on the move for this or that, but he'd spend the whole day angrily working away on his papers at her bedside. *He's a little* different*, isn't he?*

Looking back on those times now, Lunetta couldn't help but feel a little restless somehow, but she knew she was a bit different now herself.

Despite knowing that it was all too much for her to process, no matter how much she thought about it, Lunetta didn't mind those days. *Wow...this is a surprise.* Her mind was filled to the brim, but she didn't mind that the least little bit.

While she would sometimes mess up and grow fearful that she should've never left her room in the first place, she figured that was probably just what it felt like to enjoy herself.

The problem was that she'd noticed it.

*I'm having a good time right now. I'm happy right now.* When she thought about it like that, she felt a pang of guilt—like someone was watching her from behind, like an icy hand was caressing her heart. The moment her heart grew warm, it would be cupped by two cold hands reminding her that there was no way she would ever be allowed such happiness.

There was no way it would ever be permitted.

She had left the room behind to run away on her own. Such an

act would never be allowed unchallenged. As long as she lived, her heart was bound to remain in this same room.

And that was exactly why Lunetta—Lunatietta—had returned here.

"Lunetta...?"

Lunetta turned toward the trembling voice. Sophie's brown eyes were opened wide, looking back at her.

Sophie's eyes gave off a glossy sheen. They were a gentle shade of brown—like the tea that Lunetta drank in Vyce's castle, which was why Lunetta liked them.

Was this how it felt to "like" something? To be honest, Lunetta wasn't confident enough to say. She just didn't really know.

For Lunetta, how it felt to "like" something was even harder to grasp than enjoying herself or feeling happy. Someone like her, thinking about something that way? It felt like an exercise in haughty vanity. *And just who on earth do you think you are?* Lunetta would sometimes wonder.

If it didn't make you feel bad, and you wanted to see it more or you wanted more of it, then that meant you "liked" whatever it was that made you feel that way. What you liked was up to you to decide, and that was okay. It was Vyce who'd told her that.

That was why Lunetta liked the smile on Vyce's face when he told her, "You really are serious, huh? Ya don't have to go definin' something like that. Just run with it." And that was why Lunetta liked Sophie and how kind she was.

It was too late now, but Lunetta felt guilty for dragging someone as kind as Sophie here along with her. If Lunetta had thought about it just a little bit more, she would've realized...

Sophie's bright green hair was the color of leaves illuminated by sunlight. Her skin seemed to shine—completely different from Lunetta's own pale, waxy complexion. Her features didn't suit a gloomy, somber place like this. She had to be upsetting Sophie. Sophie was bound to hate her for this.

Lunetta wasn't enough of a fool to arrogantly assume that Sophie liked her, but...but even then...

"Lunetta, would it be... Would it be all right if I joined you over

there?”

“What?”

*She really does say some crazy things*, Lunetta thought, taken aback.

*What? I mean, just look around! Look at where you are.* The room had cold, stonelike floors, a battered desk, and bookshelves. That was all. It wasn’t the sort of place a normal, beautiful princess like Sophie should be. It didn’t seem suited for Sophie, and Lunetta felt guilty just having her there—it was too much for her to bear. Lunetta shook her head, hoping that Sophie would abandon the idea.

“It’s cold and filthy over here.”

“That’s why I’m asking.”

What was it? Lunetta turned her head to the side, wondering just what it was that made her feel this way.

She didn’t want Sophie to join her, but at the same time, she couldn’t help but feel happy when she saw Sophie smile at her and tell her that that was why she wanted to come over. Lunetta figured that *her kind* shouldn’t touch Sophie, but at the same time, she couldn’t bring herself to tell Sophie to stay away as she drew closer.

*Don’t hate me. Stay with me.* It was such a silly thought.

“Ah!”

Just as Lunetta had, Sophie slipped through the massive hole in the iron bars.

Lunetta clutched her chest, completely lost as to what to do.

“Hey...Lunetta?” Sophie’s voice was kind and gentle.

Lunetta slowly lifted her head, finding Sophie’s eyes narrowed into a caring gaze.

*Her eyes are just like the honey in that tea*, Lunetta thought, blinking. It was the tea that her beautiful lady-in-waiting would always invite Lunetta to have with a smile. “You certainly like honey, don’t you, Lady Lunatietta?” the lady-in-waiting had said. *I see. So I like honey, then.* Hearing the lady-in-waiting say so was what had led Lunetta to the realization.

“What’s happening here right now?” Sophie asked.

*Now. Right now. That’s right—now, the present moment.*

Lunetta was here because she'd been told to do something about the room—because the curse was spreading across the kingdom.

She had to let all of *them* see the outside world too. She had to crush it all.

That was the role Lunetta had to play now. She had to get it together.

Lunetta slung the hair that had fallen down behind her shoulder. "We...were witches from the moment we were born."

Just where should she even start to explain?

Lunetta still wasn't used to talking. Would she really be able to convey it well? Lunetta squeezed her right hand with her left.

"The Landslayer Witches. That's what we're called. That was the reason we were alive."

"Hey, Lunetta... You've been saying 'we.' Does that have anything to do with it?"

"It does..." Lunetta replied.

Sophie quietly awaited her next words.

Perhaps the spell she and Azuello had cast on Sophie was working. Lunetta was relieved to see that Sophie's smile remained unchanged, even in an oppressive place like this, a tempestuous whirlpool of magical force and lingering emotion.

"There have been many, many others like me—countless other Landslayer Witches. Only a small fraction of them had names like myself—most of them didn't even have that much. But either way, there was only ever one Landslayer Witch, so that was never an issue."

"You mean there was only one at a time?"

"Yes, that's right," Lunetta replied. "Landslayer Witches are born to the royal family without warning. So long as one Landslayer Witch lives, another won't be born. When one dies, the next is born. Only one lives at a time. The Landslayer is a witch who causes calamity, bearing black hair and black eyes."

The moment Lunatietta emerged from her mother's womb and opened her eyes was the moment she stopped being a princess.

Princesses born with black hair and black eyes had always been erased like that—generation after generation.

"Just because your hair and your eyes are a different color, that makes you a...?"

"You could say that. But you could also argue that it's more than that. It's...hard to explain..." Lunetta said, searching for words.

A child born with black hair and black eyes was indeed the sign of the birth of the Landslayer Witch—that much was true. But it wasn't just a matter of their hair or eyes being a different color. Lunetta and the others truly were different. They were born with a level of magical energy far stronger than any other—as if it had been carved into the very surface of their souls.

"Ages and ages ago, the First Witch had jet-black hair and eyes and possessed a truly terrifying magical energy."

Her name had been Sarnette. She had been famed for her beautiful figure and voice, but her name had died with her. She was the First Witch, no longer called by her true name by anyone.

"She was as terrifying a witch as she was formidably powerful. She plotted to take over the kingdom and cast a curse upon the king. They say she was executed for her crimes."

"Executed...?"

"That's right," Lunetta said, nodding. "For a whole year following this, rain fell every single day, plunging the kingdom into chaos with flooding, landslides, and famine. The people feared that it was the witch's curse at work, but then, when it had all finally subsided, the next witch was born."

Born to golden-haired and golden-eyed parents, the second witch had been born with hair and eyes of a color that would have otherwise been impossible. Right away, a *special* room was given to the witch.

"She, too, cursed the kingdom and was executed in turn," Lunetta explained. "And sure enough, records say the rain didn't stop for a whole year until the next witch was born."

As the pattern was repeated again and again, the people began to realize—they realized that they would be cursed when the witch died. And so, they had to keep her alive for as long as they could.

Whether a day longer or a year, they had to keep her alive, out of the way in a place where she could be seen, but no one would see

her.

"Whether she died of illness, at the hands of others, or even by her own hand, the results were all the same," Lunetta explained. "After many generations, the king developed a rigorous sealing spell that slowly dulled the impact of the death curse, making the span until the next witch was born even longer."

Lunetta paused. "And yet, even then, the witches continued to be born."

Lunetta wondered sometimes what it felt like—what it must've felt like to give birth to the Landslayer Witch.

Just what would a mother think when it became apparent that her child, the child that had been growing inside her—whose name she'd already chosen, whose birth she was counting down the days until—was a demon that would live on in infamy? When the mother saw her child—so unlike herself and born with a color that smothered all hope—what must have gone through her mind?

They said Lunetta's own mother had let her guard down. It had been several years without the birth of a witch, and Lunetta's older sister had been a lovely little girl, the spitting image of her mother.

Her mother had thought of her name and hand made a pair of socks for her child. And then, after only seven months in the womb, Lunetta had been born.

The moment "Lunatietta" had perished to become the Landslayer Witch, her mother had apparently decided to end her own life. Still, she'd kept Lunetta alive, and Lunetta remained so to this day.

She'd seen her mother once and only once, but she'd been a beautiful woman—quite the opposite of Lunetta. Well, she'd *probably* been beautiful. At the time, the only people Lunetta had known had been herself and her wet nurse, so she hadn't really known the definition of "beautiful." Still, her mother had shone, so she figured that probably meant she was beautiful.

After all, most of the things that people called pretty—like gemstones or the morning sun—were shining and dazzling. Lunetta just figured that was what it was. If she asked Vyce, she was sure he'd just furrow his brow and say, "Ya can't just define something like that!" For whatever reason, Lunetta suddenly wished she could

see Vyce. *How odd.*

Lunetta ran her hand over the spines of the battered old books crammed into the bookshelf. They were the memoirs that countless other witches had left behind. The books were the embodiment of the witches who had taught Lunetta magic.

"To ensure that the kingdom could enjoy peace...we had to live here and die in such a way that the curse wouldn't activate."

Lunetta paused for a moment. "For years and years, countless witches searched for a way to die quietly. But none of them succeeded. This room has been covered in seal after seal, but all those witches perished here, and each time they did, the kingdom was rocked to its foundation."

Had this not been a kingdom of only magic wielders, the witches' deaths likely *would have* slain the kingdom. Just as the witches had passed their research down from generation to generation, so too had the people of the nation passed down their kingdom.

Lunetta stuck her pointer finger into the bookshelf and pulled out a book.

It was the memoir of one of the first hundred witches.

The witch's writing was messy and a bit difficult to read—it seemed she'd never been taught how to write properly. Despite that, the witch had conceived of a mountain of fascinating spells. The book's pages were filled with her scribbles from top to bottom, making it a true challenge to read. Though it was hard to read, Lunetta liked that the witch's memoirs left her wanting to read more. Lunetta called her "the Scribble Witch."

"We're terrifying witches that have nearly slain our land time and time again. That's why we're called the Landslayer Witches."

"That's not right."

Lunetta looked up and turned around, only to find Sophie's face bright red as she furrowed her brow.

"A-Are you not feeling well...?"

"That's not right..." Sophie replied. "That's not it, Lunetta!"

"Wh-What?"

*What's wrong? Did I do something wrong? No, this has to be because I told her such an off-putting tale. What should I do?*

Lunetta racked her brain for answers, but all of the seasoned witches who'd taught her everything she knew about magic remained silent on the bookshelf behind her.

Of course they had nothing to say. It wasn't an order or a punishment—Sophie was the first person to enter the room of her own volition. Even if all the hundreds of Landslayer Witches came together, they'd still be no match for the beautiful princess standing there.

"That's not it at all, Lunetta!" Sophie said, as something glittery stole down her cheek.

*Wait, is that a tear? Yes, that's a tear. Ugh... I made her cry. I went and made her cry. What do I do?* Lunetta was at a loss, completely and utterly confused.

That first night—that night Lunetta had gotten swept up in things and gone off to an evening party in another kingdom, finding herself in an environment she couldn't comprehend at all. She had been the target of unsavory whispers and stares.

That much was nothing for Lunetta, and since Vyce had laughed at her side and said, "Looks like you're a real celebrity," she had thought nothing more about it.

But even in the middle of all that, Sophie, clad in shining jewels and a stunning dress, had made a sweeping bow before her. "It is an honor to meet you," Sophie had said in a gentle voice, smiling at her. "Is there anything amiss?"

Despite how out of place Lunetta had been, Sophie hadn't laughed at her—in fact, she had seemed genuinely concerned, going out of her way to speak to her. She had been perfect and kind—the very model of a beautiful princess.

And now, that same Sophie stood before her—crying!

Flustered, Lunetta extended her hand despite still holding on to the book.

"That's not right!" Sophie said, grabbing Lunetta's hand.

*What's 'not right'? What is it? What do I do? Maybe she's cold? Should I throw a blanket on her? Then again, this little scrap of a blanket has been sitting here ever since I left, so it's probably moldy and dirty.* Lunetta had always cast a purification spell on the blanket,

but no one would do something like that at a time like this. *So should I cast a spell on her to warm her up then? I'm stumped. I don't have a clue what to do!*

Lunetta could feel a wrinkle splitting her brow. *Your Majesty.* Lunetta tried calling out for him in her mind, but there was no response. Of course there wasn't.

"I don't feel unwell or anything," Sophie said. "You've done nothing wrong. You—no, *none* of you—have done anything wrong at all...!"

"What?" Lunetta blinked.

"Any of you could've run away from this room at any time, right?" Sophie replied. "You could've even had your revenge too. But you didn't, did you? It wasn't that you didn't have a way to escape—it was that you *chose* not to." Sophie bit her lip as another tear stole down her cheek. "All of you just kept searching for a way to die, a way to keep the next witch from being born, right? Because you had your responsibilities as members of the royal family..."

"Huh?" *She's amazing*, Lunetta thought, blinking. Sophie was amazing. And so was Vyce.

Lunetta had never been able to put it into words the right way.

So why? Why was someone she hadn't even known until just a few days ago, who hailed from a kingdom she knew about, able to understand what Lunetta had been trying to say all this time?

No matter how hard they tried, Lunetta and the others had never been able to get that across—that none of the witches who had lived here were resentful about anything, how they hadn't cursed anyone at all. They couldn't get a soul to understand.

And yet...

*See, everybody? Isn't Sophie amazing?* Lunetta grew happy, squeezing the book in her hand.

"Even then, we had been the kingdom's princesses, after all!"

# Chapter Five: Projecting Your Voice

*Don't smile.*

Sophie bit her lip as she watched Lunetta give a smile that looked happy and proud at once.

She'd wanted to see Lunetta smile. That much wasn't a lie.

But it wasn't that she needed to smile or that it'd be a problem if she didn't. No matter what expression she wore, it didn't change the fact that Lunetta was still the kind, magic-loving witch that she always had been.

But Sophie did think Lunetta would be cute if she smiled. *I'd love to see her smile*, Sophie thought. *I'd love it if I got to see her just beaming beside Vyce.* That was how Sophie honestly felt.

But now, watching the smile that was breaking over Lunetta's face, Sophie's chest was stricken with pain. Sophie could hardly breathe as the tears spilled down her cheeks. *That's not it at all.*

"Lunetta...!"

It was cold and icy and scary here. And there she was clutching a battered old book. The last thing Sophie wanted was to see Lunetta smile in a sad place like this—to smile about how they "had been" the kingdom's princesses.

After all, they hadn't resented or cursed a single soul—instead, they'd lived their whole lives thinking only of the day they would die. And they "had been" princesses? How could it ever be acceptable that someone who spent their whole life wishing for the good fortune of others over their own wasn't fit to be a princess?

What was truly terrifying was the fact that Lunetta didn't question that at all—the fact that she didn't think it odd in the slightest that she called this *place* a "room" and lived here to think only of dying.

She thought that was natural.

Because she was the Landslayer Witch.

Because she was a princess.

Because that was her role to play.

The words caught in Sophie's throat.

She was just like Sophie.

Even if others had laughed at her and she had nothing to show for it, she hadn't thought it odd. She'd assumed it was because she was worthless—that it would be impudent of her to desire the same things as any other person. For so, so long, that was exactly what Sophie had thought.

Was it because it had always been that way, ever since she'd been born?

It was. After all, it was only after she'd seen the outside world that she'd realized how nonsensical it was. If you don't know what's normal, you'll never know what's strange.

So just why had she been able to resign herself to the fact that nothing could be done about it, even after realizing how strange it was? Was it because saying something about it wouldn't have done her any good? Because she didn't have any evidence that she could actually trust herself?

*No, that's not it.* Sophie squeezed her hand as she gripped Lunetta's slender white fingers. That was part of it, but that wasn't it. The base of it all had been different. The answer sleeping far deeper wasn't any of that...

It was simply because it was easier that way.

Unlike others, she was worthless, so of course she'd be different than them. It was only natural for her to work countless times harder than others. *Don't think they like you. Don't hope they'll like you. Creatures like you aren't worthy of having any preferences of their own—and don't you dare forget it.*

If she went on telling herself that...it was easier that way.

That was her role. Thinking about it that way, it almost seemed like she was allowed to be alive. She could breathe that way. She didn't have to resent anyone that way.

*I get it now*, Sophie thought as another tear ran down her face. *This must be how Livio felt.*

The knight had always worried about Sophie, beaming at her with that gentle smile of his. He'd done everything in his power so that Sophie could be *normal* in this new life. She was certain that it was because even though Sophie had given up on herself...Livio hadn't.

Was he doing it out of sympathy for her?

If there was anyone out there who could say "Maybe so?" with a straight face, then Sophie would challenge them to take a good look at that meltingly beautiful smile of Livio's. With a smile like that looking back at her, Sophie wasn't petty—or ignorant—enough to say "Oh, he's just being nice!"

*Take a good look!* What she was talking about was closer to a violent sort of kindness—a force that she could only describe as love.

So then just what was this feeling that Sophie was carrying for Lunetta?

Well now. Sophie saw herself in Lunetta; what she felt toward Lunetta was simply self-pity, coarse and unsightly. It was far removed from kindness—a tiny little island so far away it would take years of adventuring and journeying on land and on sea to reach. It was a pitiful little island, the sort strapped for any decent source of food or water. It was the sort of island no one would look twice at, lacking any bounty or distinction to boast of.

But, at the very least, Sophie hoped the island might be a place where weary wings might find rest.

"No matter what anyone might say," Sophie said, "you were all princesses, and you all continued to fight for your kingdom's sake."

Perhaps Sophie was just telling herself that.

*"No matter what anyone might say, I was the next crown princess and I lived for my kingdom..."* or something like that.

*Ha ha, just how pathetic can I be?* It seemed Sophie had transformed into a conceited fool somewhere along the way without even realizing it. *I've really gone and done it now, haven't I? This feels great. That's right*—I *feel great.*

After all, she'd been able to declare that all of it was "wrong"—for Lunetta's sake. *I'd rather die before just sitting back and saying, "That's just how things are!"*

So if Sophie had to accept herself in order to say such a thing to

Lunetta, then she was more than happy to make a laughingstock out of herself for being a conceited fool.

"You don't have to worry about anyone else," Sophie said. "You can stand tall and say it! You can be confident and tell them all that you're this kingdom's princess—and that's why you're going to throw it away!"

Lunetta blinked. "Throw it away?"

"That's right," Sophie replied. "You got tired of it and ran away—what's wrong with that? After all, you tried your best."

"I tried...my best." Lunetta repeated.

"You did!" Sophie nearly shouted. "You *all* did—you all tried way harder than you ever had to and then some! And that's exactly why it's okay if you run away! It's okay if you rest! It's okay if you throw it all away!"

Sophie could almost laugh. It was the pot calling the kettle black.

Sophie didn't know the first thing about Lunetta or any of the generations of witches that had died here. All she'd done was listen and wail on like she actually understood it all.

But even then, Sophie could feel the shifting of Lunetta's heart as if she were holding it in her own hands. She didn't want to say something as irresponsible as "I know how you feel," but she *did* understand. She understood how her heart worked, and she just knew that every time Lunetta thought of herself, it was always followed by a reminder of how lowly she was—and that was why it made Sophie so angry. Lunetta was a wonderful girl, and Sophie wanted Lunetta herself to realize that.

"Sophie...you're just like His Majesty," Lunetta spoke softly, as if she were sighing.

Was that a laugh? Sophie couldn't tell. She didn't know, but she did feel like the tense air surrounding them had eased up. Sophie smiled.

"It's an honor."

"I lied... You're cuter than he is," Lunetta said back.

"Maybe!"

*No, you're the cute one!* Sophie wiped away her tears and let go of Lunetta's hand.

Lunetta's slender, beautiful fingers wrapped around the book she still held. The tome was frayed, its edges torn. Lunetta seemed to take great care as she gently held the book and closed her eyes.

Volume after volume of the books were crammed along the bookshelves covering the wall. The books must've been Lunetta's teachers. Sophie imagined Lunetta sitting down at the small desk with her back turned.

Far, far above the desk was a square hole incontestably out of reach, covered with iron bars. There, bathing in the light and wind that entered the opening that couldn't be called a window, Lunetta had spent her days with these books—with a multitude of witches. She'd learned magic from these witches. That was why Lunetta was a witch.

"Sophie..."

"Yes?"

Lunetta opened her eyes and looked up at Sophie, her jet-black eyes clear and unclouded. "Because I broke the barrier and ran away, now the witches' lingering emotions have run wild and are spilling out of this room," Lunetta explained. "Since it's too much to bear for those who aren't immune to it, you wouldn't be wrong to call it a curse."

That made sense. So that was why the magician who'd accompanied them down the steps had begun to feel unwell midway and why Lunetta had been able to lead her down here.

"That's why I have to let them all out," Lunetta said.

"Yeah," Sophie replied. "Let's all go out together."

"Go out?"

"Yes, we're going out."

"We're going out, huh?" Lunetta said, turning around to stare at the books lining the wall as she gently ran her hand over the spines, packed so closely together there wasn't any space between them at all.

"Will you...give me a hand, Sophie?"

"Me?"

Lunetta nodded, grabbing Sophie's hand.

"I'm sure you'll be the one giving me a hand, though!" Sophie

laughed.

"I want you to cast your healing magic on the books," Lunetta replied, nodding again.

"Wh-What...?"

*My healing magic? Oh,* that *one. You know—that. The one that's the very embodiment of spring dancing in the throes of love—yeah, that one.*

"Are you sure that's okay...?"

"Of course," Lunetta replied, looking puzzled. "Is that a no...?"

"No, it's not!"

It wasn't a no—it wasn't a no in the slightest. It wasn't a no, but still! Sophie hadn't yet come to terms with her own healing magic, so she couldn't help but hesitate to use it. Still, was there anyone who could say no in a situation like this? If there was, then they sure weren't human. *Time to drop the shyness, Sophie!*

"I'll give it my best shot!"

"I'm counting on you."

Sophie nodded and Lunetta nodded back.

Lunetta then dropped her gaze to the floor as her black hair and eyes began to glow red. Sophie exhaled and closed her eyes.

Paying attention to the flow of Lunetta's magic, Sophie observed the magical energy of the bookshelf before her. Mysteriously enough, the heavy, stifling air that had been there before had settled down. If Sophie had to say one way or another, it was almost as if they were swaying anxiously, as if the books were watching them. It was hard to describe—they were almost like lost children.

*Oh, that's right. You want to go outside. All of you really just wanted to go outside this whole time. Of course you did. But you told yourselves you weren't allowed to—instead you were just chained here out of your own responsibility and resolve. But see? It's going to be okay.* Sophie smiled, her eyes still closed.

"It's going to be okay," Lunetta said. "I'll make sure that I'm the last witch."

*Right? And just look—Lunetta is the greatest witch, after all.*

Just as Sophie had the greatest knight with her, the other witches had the greatest witch on their side.

"Let's go," Lunetta said.

As if her voice had been a signal, the ground beneath them began to rumble. There was an explosion of magical energy, accompanied by a massive sound and impact.

The wind ran wild, howling. And yet, the calm and mysterious wind that glided through Sophie's hair and stroked her cheek was gentle and warm.

Sophie cautiously opened her eyes, only for them to widen in shock at what they saw.

*Oh, and what's this now? This place got some well-deserved ventilation! This is pretty nice. And what a sight for sore eyes!* The depressing walls and furniture and bookshelves were all nowhere to be seen.

They were greeted by a blue sky that seemed to stretch out infinitely before them. Sophie felt lighter—as if a weight had been lifted off of her.

Countless sheets of paper fluttered and danced in the air. It was just like confetti!



“It’s beautiful, isn’t it, Lunetta?”

“Yes, it is.”

Lunetta held the book in her hand up to the sky, a purplish-blue light enveloping it. As if they’d been unbound all at once, the book’s pages fluttered out, dancing into the sky.

*Wonder where they’re going? Hope they can go anywhere they want, as far as they want,* Sophie thought wistfully as she stared into the distance.

Filled with writing, the pages before her turned transparent before disappearing entirely.

It was then that Sophie realized she was standing hand in hand with Lunetta in an almost comical place. It was as if a massive hole had been torn out above them.

The stairs they’d taken had seemed to stretch underground, but now that she thought about it, the ceiling in the room had seemed quite high.

*I wonder if there wasn’t a room above us?* Sophie thought, looking up. *Oh wow, the sky’s beautiful. And the weather’s great. It’s so warm. Guess that doesn’t matter. Does it? No, it doesn’t, does it?*

Sophie couldn’t help but laugh, her chest suddenly growing warm —almost as if it were on fire.

Sophie gasped.

*“Master, it cometh!”*

“Huh?” Sophie didn’t even have time to ask what was coming.

In the blink of an eye, a glowing white magic circle appeared, and a thunderous sound rang out.

It was a piercing and pale burst of light—it was lightning.

Had it struck her, Sophie wouldn’t have lived to tell the tale.

“Ah!” Sophie’s heart pounded in her chest. She exhaled, then heard Lunetta whisper, “Thank you.”

“It’s Azuello’s defensive magic,” Lunetta said. “Good thing he assimilated the spell to you to ensure it wouldn’t be visible.”

“O-Oh, I see...”

As a novice in magic, Sophie didn’t have the slightest grasp on the situation. She didn’t have any idea what was going on. Luckily, she had a reliable witch and a god to explain things for her.

*"While it was only a tiny fraction, the barriers that still remained on the room went flying off... Almost as if sheer rage had scared them away."*

Sure enough, the king was looking at them with a terrible expression on his face, his golden hair shining as the wind blew through his hair.

Sophie felt her legs go weak—the king's magical energy seemed to burn and singe her skin.

"Your Majesty...what on earth are you doing?" Sophie asked, pushing out the words.

"That's what I should be asking you!" the king snarled, glaring at Sophie as a small burst of lightning crackled around him. "Do you have any idea what the destruction of this place means...?! Do you witches intend to truly slay our land this time?!"

*"Witches"? Wow.* So, Sophie was a witch too. *What an honor.*

Sophie steadied her trembling legs and smiled. "The kingdom won't die. Lunetta's going to be the witch to save it."

"Sophie..."

Sophie smiled at Lunetta as the king's eyes opened wide. He furrowed his brow before the corners of his lips curled up in a laugh.

"Save it? That *thing*?" the king bit back. "Impossible! Just how many kings and magicians do you think have been killed by the witches' curse?! I can't let you run free with that power!"

The king scoffed. "Have you forgotten that you are part of the royal family?! If you do as you like, the whole kingdom will perish! You are to live here—and *die* here—for the good of the kingdom!"

Lunetta grunted.

Holding Lunetta's hand, Sophie could feel her stiffen. Sophie clenched her teeth. This was exactly how the bastard—how all the generations of bastards that had preceded him—had bound the princesses with black hair and black eyes. They took a single girl, a single person, and painted them as the villain.

"Lunetta!"

As she was shaking with anger, Sophie's hand suddenly slipped from Lunetta's. Lunetta's body rose into the air as if she were being clutched by an invisible hand.

"Urgh!"

Squirming in pain, Lunetta's fingers scratched at something invisible. *I'd expect no less of Lunetta's father. So he can use magic without any incantation at all. But that's no laughing matter—that sick bastard!*

"Azuello!" Sophie called.

"It's no use," the king replied. "I didn't notice until now, but you've a pet with you, don't you? Don't think you can trick me with your foolishness!"

Sneering as he was, the king looked far more of a fool. He was practically a living exhibit of foolishness. *Gather round, one and all, to see the most foolish man in all the world! This baron is top of the class when it comes to foolishness! Oh, wait—he's a king. I meant to say "royal excuse for a fool!" Everyone watch closely—see how he can just laugh as he hoists his daughter, his own flesh and blood, up into the air?* And he was supposed to be a king? Sophie didn't have the words.

Sophie was so frustrated she couldn't even cry.

"Azuello."

*"'Tis no use... The craven hath set a barrier preventing me from exiting thy body,"* Azuello explained. *"The barrier resembles my own protective magic—it will take time to dismantle. That insolent whelp...!"*

Why was Sophie so frustrated? It was rooted in the fact that she couldn't do anything at all to help Lunetta as she suffered.

All Sophie could do was cast healing magic and defensive magic—what else could she do? *I don't even know what Azuello meant, so what should I do? What do I do?*

"Let Lunetta go!"

*"Master!"*

It was an absurd plan. She was an idiot, an absolute dolt, a reckless fool. She knew that. Sophie knew that, but she couldn't keep herself from racing forward.

Despite knowing full well how foolish it was, Sophie leaped toward the king, only for her body to freeze in place.

"You're all worthless, every last one of you!"

Sophie grunted, her legs floating in the air beneath her. She couldn't even voice her displeasure at being so high up—she was being lifted, twisted up into the air, like a washcloth being wrung out. She couldn't do anything, suffering as the force squeezed her in its grip. It was frustrating and agonizing and frustrating again.

It was just so frustrating.

She'd sounded so confident telling the witches that it would all be okay, but when it came right down to it, Sophie still didn't know the first thing about the world. What it meant to think something was delicious, to be frustrated, to have fun, to love...she'd only just been taught all of that. She was just a powerless little girl.

"That's right..."

That *was* right.

She had been taught all of that. She wasn't alone. She could have wants. She could say them.

That was what Sophie had been taught.

And when it came to projecting her voice, Sophie knew just what to do. She'd spent years training. Her voice was just as valuable a weapon as anything else. After all, that was how this had all started.

*Breathe in—that's right! And now—just like that! Loud and clear!*

"Livio, help!!!"

# Chapter Six: No Defying the Draw

"Do you know your way around here?" Livio asked from behind as Vyce briskly walked ahead of him.

The transfer spell the magician had prepared (after they'd beaten him to a pulp) was connected to a room just for that purpose within the castle. Vyce and Livio had given the magicians who were waiting for the man's return on the other side a proper thrashing before they could scream or use any magic. The two were now walking through the castle wearing the robes they'd stolen.

Lunetta had cast healing and purification magic on the man to avoid arousing any suspicions. The man had tied Lunetta and Sophie up to give the appearance of a "successful capture" before they'd gone off to see the king. Right around when the man had made his second loop around Sophie's body with the rope, Livio had seemed like he might very well punch him, but Vyce had been there to stop him. Vyce was quick on his feet—it didn't really seem like this was his first time visiting the castle.

When Livio asked just that from behind him, Vyce gave a small laugh. "You could say that."

"I scouted out the place when I was invited to the first princess's birthday party," Vyce explained.

"A party?"

"Yeah—the idea was that we were tryin' to work toward peace," Vyce said. "And I was scoutin' out the castle in hopes of bringin' a competent magician back with me as proof of that peace, if I could find one. And that's when I met Lunetta."

"Wow..."

It was hard to describe, but Vyce almost seemed like a thief who would turn violent the moment he got caught red-handed. Livio stared at the king, clothed in a white robe that didn't suit him.

Impolite wasn't the half of it when it came to waltzing around

another kingdom's castle to scout it out and trying to headhunt a magician for your service. *And he wound up returning with a princess at the end of the day, right? From the sound of it, it seems like he ended up causing a quarrel at the same time. Vyce sure is a scary one, all right.*

Still, Vyce had presumably encountered something that had led him to decide that he couldn't leave Lunetta in this kingdom.

"More importantly, they're famous, they act all high-and-mighty, and they shun diplomacy to boot—just how did it ever get to peace talks with a country like that?"

"It's *because* they're all high and mighty, that's why," Vyce replied. "Seems like they weren't too happy to see me gettin' stronger and stronger. The 'peace' stuff was just a pretense to put me beneath 'em on conditions that worked for *them*."

*That's pretty damn sleazy.*

In that case, there wasn't too much more to be said. If they got stripped of everything they had, then they had it coming. *They should be grateful they're still alive!*

Livio nodded in agreement, only for Vyce to stop in place. Before them stood an overly ornate door, gilded with shining golden details. The door practically screamed, *Someone really important lives here!*

"No guards keeping watch, by the looks of it."

"They've got magic goin' all around the castle—they never figured someone would break in."

*Fair enough. So they never anticipated someone using transfer magic to come into the castle alongside one of their own...* The fact that they hadn't anticipated anyone ever breaking in was proof enough that they were indeed a high-and-mighty country far too confident in their own strength. *Thanks a ton for that!*

Without an ounce of hesitation, Livio followed after Vyce as he opened the door and entered the room. The inside was just as blindingly dazzling. The room was white all around, with needlessly gilded items and furniture—it certainly wasn't Livio's style. Having been raised by a barbarian, Livio didn't know the first thing about the fine arts or artwork. If he'd been told that such a style reflected the sublime taste of the high and noble, then all he could do was

believe them.

"What an eyesore of a room."

Vyce was both high and noble as well as a barbarian, snorting as he unceremoniously trotted through the room. Was it proof that the room's owner really did have poor taste or proof that Vyce really was a barbarian? Which one was it?

*Wait a sec!*

Livio could've sworn that he saw dirt on the white carpet Vyce had just walked over, but...then again, it was probably just his imagination. Livio rubbed the bottom of his boots on the carpet. They'd been walking through the forest, so there'd been dirt on the soles of their boots. It would be a bit much to just leave dirt in the middle of the room, so Livio was at least considerate enough to clean his shoes off near the entrance. *I'm being mean-spirited? Oh, heavens no!* If Livio had actually wanted to be mean, it'd look a whole lot different than this. If he had to say, it was just a wee bit of mischief.

"If someone's that confident in their own abilities, I figure they'd hide somethin' they don't want others getting their hands on in their own room," Vyce said.

"I see what you mean," Livio said. "So you're saying I should break into your room whenever I want to exploit your weaknesses then, right, Sir Vyce?"

"If you've got a death wish, be my guest." Vyce seemed completely unbothered by Livio's sarcastic joke. Instead, he simply gave a cynical smile that had "mature adult, ready for anything" written all over it. Livio curled up his lips unhappily.

The king had been at ease with Livio since they met; he was a grown-up with the nasty habit of mocking him as soon as he got the chance. Kings stood ahead of all others to lead their soldiers, and even if a lowly knight like Livio spoke badly of him, Vyce would just laugh back at him like he was now. *Damn, he's cool...* Livio couldn't help but hate the fact he had thought as much in the first place. *Yeah, yeah, that's right. Fine, I'm a kid, all right? Hrmph!*

"Besides, I told ya to call me Vyce when we're out and about. How long are you plannin' on keepin' up all this 'sir' nonsense, huh?"

Vyce furrowed his brow as he noisily rummaged through the room's desk and shelves. *Just saying he 'furrowed' his brow hardly describes it—he's always grimacing around the clock!*

"I'd prefer to address you that way," Livio said.

"And why's that?"

*Because it would be impudent*—but that wasn't it. In fact, it was a completely different reason. Livio wasn't the sort of good little boy that respected royalty unconditionally, and, well...he didn't hate Vyce, but it wasn't like he had so much faith in the man that he felt compelled to address him with "sir." It went without saying that Livio wasn't scared of him either. Vyce himself had told Livio to address him that way, so it wasn't like he'd be punished if he actually did. Vyce wasn't the type to be so easily offended.

"You and your old man aren't the kind to get so fussy over etiquette, are you?"

"How rude."

Well, it *was* rude...but he was right.

The reason House Warrion had flourished wasn't because they were strong when it came to political affairs—it was because they were simply strong in the physical sense.

They were strong. That alone permitted them to do whatever they liked. Livio's father, Oznil Warrion, the barbaric head of the Warrions, seemed somehow to be a quiet knight...but that wasn't quite true. It'd be more accurate to say that he was just keeping his mouth shut because it'd be a headache to speak up. When it came right down to it, he probably didn't have any real loyalty to the royal family—at least that was what Livionis Warrion thought about it. All they were doing was behaving in order to protect their house, their family, and the kingdom...and because it didn't inconvenience them to do so. Livio figured that that was how most of the men of House Warrion were.

Back when there'd been a huge outbreak of massive monsters along their kingdoms' borders, the Warrions had found themselves fighting alongside the foreign king, only for Vyce to remark, "I wish I had you all for my own kingdom."

The only one who'd been flustered was the Captain of the

Knights, however. Any normal knight would've likely thought their loyalty was being mocked, but House Warrion was, after all, House Warrion. Livio had only thought the king to be an odd type, and his father had merely said, "Please do refrain from such jesting" as he watched the captain panic, like it was someone else's problem.

That was why, well...the reason Livio called him "Sir Vyce" wasn't because he was a serious-minded golden child or anything like that.

"It's just..."

"Well?"

"I...still can't even address Lady Sophie as I'd like..." Livio admitted. "So to address you by name without any title first, well...that's hardly right, is it?"

Vyce fell silent.

*Agh— Ouch. Ow, ow, ow.* Vyce's stare hurt.

It felt like Vyce's stare was stabbing into his face. Was he sure it actually wasn't? Maybe his face was actually covered in holes right now. Livio couldn't help but cover his cheeks with his hand.

"You're..." Vyce's voice seemed to shake.

"What is it then?!" Livio demanded. "If you're gonna laugh at me, then laugh away! I know what a pitiful excuse for a man I am!"

"No, that's not—"

If Vyce were going to make fun of him or laugh at him, Livio certainly hoped he'd just get it over with. *Just go for it! That's right! Just do it!* Feeling like a fish on the butcher's block, or perhaps the last surviving soldier on the battlefield, Livio looked at Vyce's expression. He heard the statue of something or other that Vyce had been holding crack apart against the floor, but that didn't matter now. There were plenty more where that one came from.

"Yer a cute little guy, aren'tcha?"

Livio gasped. He would've felt far better if Vyce had made fun of him.

Vyce's eyebrows were furrowed together, and his shoulders were shaking with laughter—it was the same way a grown-up looked at a small child. *Could there be a more unbearable insult?!*

Livio was the most embarrassed he'd been since that time his mother had shown his grandparents her treasured portrait of Livio.

Had it been just a normal portrait, she would've just been a caring mother who loved her family, end of story. *But! Not so fast!* Fittingly for the calm and collected, daring and brave, and (only slightly) unhinged House Warrion, the portrait that his mother treasured so dearly was one she'd had made after putting Livionis in a dress when he was only a small child. If he were being exceedingly generous, she was welcome to treasure it all she wanted, but was it really too much to ask that she not go parading it about?

"It looks like I've got a little daughter who matches her mommy, doesn't it?"

Indeed, just as she'd declared so happily, with the artist drawing extra long hair onto Livionis, he and his mother might as well have been mirror reflections of each other. The portrait made him look so much like a little girl that one would have never imagined he was a small, sword-wielding barbarian.

While his grandparents could be forgiven for laughing when they saw the picture, they'd had to add insult to injury and shower him with compliments on how he looked! "Oh, just look at how cute he is!" Livionis could've died from sheer embarrassment. And that half-hearted look his younger brother had given him as he'd patted Livionis on the back! The nerve!

"Well, just what was it for *you* then, Sir Vyce?" Livio asked as Vyce turned away to head toward another door within the room. He was desperate to get in a jab of his own however he could.

"What?"

Vyce opened the door, revealing a spacious room with a large bed. It appeared to be someone's sleeping quarters.

"About Lady Lunetta," Livio replied. "What enticed you about her that made you want to take her as your fiancée?"

"The hell?" Cleanly tearing apart a pillowcase, the tyrant turned around with a furrowed brow. "She's fourteen years younger than me."

*Whaaaaaaaa?!*

"What?"

"And what the hell do you mean by 'what,' huh?!" Vyce snapped back. "What would you do if you were with somebody fourteen years

younger?!”

“I have Lady Sophie, so that’s no concern.”

“That’s not what I mean!”

*Maybe he has a point.* Livio decided to try thinking about it. Livio himself was sixteen, so if someone were fourteen years younger than he was, that would make them... *Oh. They’d be two years old, huh?*

“That’d...make me a creep and a half!” Livio answered.

“*That’s* what I’m talkin’ about.”

“What?” Livio asked. “But Lunetta’s not two—she’s seventeen! She could marry at that age!”

“Take a good look at me,” Vyce said, “and tell me what comes to mind.”

*What comes to mind?*

Livio stuck his head out from the wardrobe he’d been rifling through, only to find a scene of madness: Vyce flipping over the mattress before tearing it in half.

It looked less like he was looking for treasure and more like he was looking for the next kill to savor. *Make eye contact and you’re as good as dead. You’re going to get caught one way or another. He actually likes it when they try to run away.* That was what came to mind.

“A walking weapon...”

“I should snap you in half like a twig.”

*That’s exactly what I’m talking about*, Livio thought before deciding to keep that to himself.

*But I suppose I get it. Hmm...* Feeling as if he’d somehow grasped what Vyce had been trying to say, Livio returned to the wardrobe.

“It’d make you feel ashamed of yourself?” Livio asked.

“That’s about the long and short of it,” Vyce answered. “The whole reason I took her as my fiancée was because it was perfect for cutting ties with this kingdom and for having her nearby so I could keep her safe.”

He was surprisingly...caring?

Vyce was the sort to take thorough care of whatever animal or

person he picked up to the very end. Even Vyce's faithful steed had apparently been rescued by him when it had been attacked by monsters. The colt hadn't had a home to go back to, but now it was a fine steed by any measure, strong and clever, with a beautiful, bright-red coat. The way his horse had grown spoke volumes about Vyce's own personality.

"She still doesn't really know anything about the outside world," Vyce explained. "Makin' her marry some old man? That's too much. She should find somebody she likes and be happy like everybody else—like you two."

From the looks of it, the old man didn't seem to have the slightest inkling that that "somebody" she liked could be him. He was merely taking care of Lunetta, dedicated to caring for her since he'd taken her in, just like that poor little colt. He probably didn't see Lunetta in *that* sort of light at all.

Fair enough. If there were some old creep who looked at girls fourteen years his junior in *that* sort of way without any regard for who they were, it'd be just a bit horrific. So did that make it okay, so long as he was extra picky over *which* seventeen-year-old he courted? That wasn't quite the case either. If he were the type to declare, "I love black-haired, black-eyed girls that are fourteen years younger than me!" that'd just make him a pervert. If the day ever came when a man fourteen years older than Sophie said something like that to her, then Livio would have no choice but to cover her eyes for a moment—he couldn't let her see him making mincemeat out of the old man. But still!

If he said it was because it was her—because it was *Lunetta*...

The king had a strong sense of duty with a warm heart to match, so if he were to say it was because it was Lunetta...then how could anyone criticize that? At least that was the conclusion Livio had reached.

"But she means the world to you...right?"

"Well, I do think it's cute how her expressions have started to change."

*Seriously?!* Livio tossed out a shining cape decked out with gold embroidery. He'd had enough. He was tired of it—absolutely fed up.

*People of the world—listen and listen well! He just called her "cute." This old man called her "cute" the same way he called* me "*cute"!*

Livio didn't have a clue about how any of Lunetta's expressions differed, nor would he have ever been so tirelessly devoted to a girl he didn't even like. Even then, the way Vyce called Lunetta "cute" lacked any of the fiery passion Livio held for Sophie.

There was just no way Livio could see eye to eye with him.

*Actually, I don't wanna see eye to eye with this guy!* he thought.

After all, Livio didn't know all the details, but it seemed like Lunetta hadn't been treated very well in this kingdom. Vyce had just come along to sweep her away from a whole world of enemies, taking her as his fiancée so she wouldn't have to go back. He let her off the hook for anything and everything because that was just how she was. *Hell, he even swapped his bread with hers after he let it cool off!*

*Seriously? Of course that's gonna make her like you!*

For Livio's part, from the moment he'd fallen in love at thirteen years old, it had all been a sprint that continued to this day.

Compared to Lunetta's backstory, Livio's own encounter with Sophie had been one bit short of a two-bit novel. There was hardly enough story there for Livio to even call it a "backstory." If he told someone how they'd met, he was almost certain they'd just say, "Oh? That's all?"

*"That's all?" And what the hell do you mean by that?! C'mere, you!*

"You can't just play around with young hearts like that, old man!"

"The hell are you talking about?"

The fact that Vyce didn't even know he was doing that made it even worse. Or perhaps the fact that he was able to act like that without any awareness of what he was doing was why people flocked to him. Was this that "charisma" thing or whatever? "Charismatic" was probably just another word for "smooth-talking swindler."

*Good thing I was able to take Sophie away before a guy like that found her*, Livio thought as he stretched out an embroidered shirt. *Looks pretty expensive. Uh-oh... That was a rip I just heard. Eh,*

*who cares?*

"Hmm?"

Past the flashy shirt in his hands, he could feel something.

*I've actually discovered something fashionable in his wardrobe!* It went without saying that wasn't the case at all. What he'd actually felt was magical energy.

Livio tossed the clothes to the floor in a heap. *Man, all these capes and coats sure are heavy! So that's why all those rich types don't feel like moving around on their own! I'm sure their shoulders cramp up so much they get as stiff as a statue!*

"It's...a barrier—no, a seal...?"

Carved into the wall was an old magic circle.

"You know what this thing is?" Vyce asked.

"I used to be in the Knights. They put a pretty big focus on magical education too," Livio explained. "Not that I was the best at all that, though."

Livio had always been tremendously curious, so it wasn't like he couldn't use magic. He was able to store his sword in his magic gem thanks to his time learning magic.

That was also why he could use other magic gems. Livio took out the one that he'd had in the inner pocket of his jacket. It had a faint red glow to it—Lunetta had instilled it with spell-breaking magic.

Lunetta had given them the magic gem alongside a tremendously reassuring explanation: "I've imbued this gem with magic to undo sealing spells or barrier magic. There is a limit on how many times it can be used, but I believe it should work without issue on any spell you'll find in this kingdom."

Not only could Lunetta use unrivaled magic, the fact that she knew this kingdom's magic inside and out was exactly what had allowed her to make such an astounding magic gem.

"You take it," Vyce had said, handing it to Livio. When it came to magical knowledge, Vyce came up short.

Livio circulated his own magical energy to trigger the spell embedded in the magic gem.

At once, the magic gem and magic circle both began to glow. Then, the very moment the light disappeared, Livio was surprised to

discover that the entire wall had vanished with it.

The small, stone room before them was dusty and stank of mold.

It seemed like no one had stepped foot in the room for years on end. Inside was a single book.

"There's a barrier here."

"That's a whole lotta security," Vyce said. "Looks like we're on the right track." He smirked, looking entirely like a villain. They *were* right in the middle of ransacking a king's bedroom, so perhaps that wasn't entirely inaccurate. *Who would've thought being bad could be so much fun?*

Livio held up the magic gem once more, circulating his magical energy through it again.

Immediately, red light poured from the gem. As soon as the light vanished however, the magic gem cracked.

"It looks like the magic Lady Lunetta imbued the gem with has run out," Livio said. "It seems both the previous seal and this barrier were magic of a considerable level."

"Yeah, well, they have to keep it safe somehow," Vyce replied. "It'd be a real problem if some schemin' criminal came along and ran off with it."

"Indeed," Livio agreed. "It'd be even worse if the criminal were to wind up catching a glimpse of its contents."

"You said it," Vyce replied, snickering as he flipped through the pages of the book.

"The hell...?" he growled, sounding unhappy.

While the king had the habit of giving a rough response along the lines of "The hell?" when he was addressed, there was something different about this utterance. It was like a hand crawling up from the depths of the earth to clutch your ankles or having a blood-soaked blade pointed at your throat. In other words, his response now showed that he was moments away from snapping.

"Sir Vyce...?"

Having been raised by the wildest beast in the whole kingdom, this was hardly enough to make Livio flinch. But there must have been something awful written on those pages, Livio thought, furrowing his brow. Just as Livio didn't flinch at Vyce's anger, the

king wasn't the type to get worked up all that easily.

And on that note...

Whenever someone like him got angry, it was usually on someone else's behalf. In other words, there'd been something that would hurt Lunetta written in that book. Livio watched Vyce as he flipped through the pages, trying to determine if he could ask Vyce what it was. He was flipping through the pages at an incredible pace. *Wonder if he's actually reading all that?*

*On second thought, it's fine*, Livio thought, stepping out of the room. *He looks like he's concentrating, so I'll just let him be.*

It looked like Vyce had found something he could use, so Livio decided to leave the room so he could keep watch and make sure no one stumbled in. *A little late to be keeping watch, admittedly.*

From what Lunetta had said, the magicians were all apparently rushing about trying to deal with the "curse," so they didn't have anything to worry about. Even if someone did find them, it was just a matter of knocking their lights out.

Apparently, the "curse" was seeping out bit by bit from a certain room at the moment. Thanks to Lunetta's magic and a god's divine protection, Livio and Vyce were just fine, but the white-robed magicians they'd passed along the way had certainly looked unwell. *Do take care now!*

Livio hid his face in the recesses of his hood, only for Vyce to emerge from the room.

"Whoa."

"What?"

"You're in one helluva mood, aren't you?"

"Yeah, guess I am."

*You "guess"?!*

That sort of anger would be enough to make anyone besides Livio nearly wet themselves. It wasn't anger—it was practically murderous rage. *You can get this angry, and you still say you don't have any romantic feelings for her? Fine, just blow up then, you heart-stealing swindler!*

"Get a move on," Vyce said.

"To that room, you mean?"

"That's right," Vyce answered. "The king and Lunetta probably have two different things in mind when it comes to breaking the curse. When the barrier gets broken, you can count on the king shoutin' up a storm in that room."

Vyce made no attempt to conceal the anger in his footsteps as he stormed down the hallway with Livio following him.

Just then—

"Livio, help!!!"

The moment Livio heard her voice, he was already running.

Which direction had her voice come from? *It wasn't far. It was the opposite side—and lower down.* Livio brandished his sword as he ran. *Faster! Run faster! You've got to run faster!*

The only ones who could catch Livio when he actually tried to run were his father, his father's own steed, and Matcha. He was confident in his speed. The fact that he'd hung his hood well past his face to conceal his black hair was the last thing on Livio's mind.

Instead, he simply ordered his body to run fast.

Grateful for the keen, animalistic senses that his instructor at the Knight Academy had praised him for, Livio ran in the direction of the voice, only to realize there was a gaping opening at the end of the hallway showing a blue sky poking through on the other side.

That was it.

There was no time for Livio to have any second thoughts. Without so much as an ounce of hesitation, Livio leaped down, finding Sophie writhing in the air.

Lunetta was close by as well, floating in the air the same way.

*What's happening?! I don't know.*

But Livio could see the undulations of magical energy. There was a man with long golden hair and a crude grin on his face. He had to be a magician—he had to be the criminal who was doing this. Looking closely, Livio could see that the golden-haired man was connected to the two of them with magical energy.

That made it simple then.

*That's a relief! If it had been some complex spell, I would've had to actually think about it!*

"I'm gonna cleave it in half!"

If they were connected, then it was just a matter of cutting them free. That had to be the solution, right? More importantly, as far as Livio was concerned, it was unforgivable for anyone other than himself to be connected to Sophie.

Brandishing his blade in the air, he brought it down with all his might.



Livio felt some resistance against his blade, so he doubled down on his sword as he swung it downward. He felt his blade cut through with a snap, as if he'd lopped off something massive. The man wailed as Sophie's body grew limp.

Catching her while she was still in the air, Livio tore a broad arc above him with his sword as he landed.

Once again, Livio felt an unsettling snap run through his blade. That same moment, the man went flying off into the distance. Livio breathed a sigh of relief, thinking that he wouldn't need to make a follow-up attack for the time being.

Just when Livio stretched out his hand to say that Lunetta was going to fall, Vyce leaped down from above, landing on the ground before catching Lunetta.

He was one helluva swindler, all right! *Nice catch!*

Sophie coughed. Livio plunged his sword into the ground and inspected Sophie's face.

Livio leaned her against his knees, pushing the hair that had fallen across her face behind her ear. Sophie was caught in a tear-muddled coughing fit, her hands shaking, either from fear or lack of oxygen. Whatever it was, there was no mistaking the fact that she had to have been terrified.

Livio had vowed to keep her safe no matter what—but now look! Livio bit his lip, ashamed of what a poor job he'd done, only for Sophie to give him a pained but happy smile.

"You really will rescue me every time, won't you?"

Livio gasped.

*Oh... Oh man... How... How is she this amazing...?*

*Those noble types really do know how to win over someone's heart! She doesn't even realize it, but she's made a quivering puddle out of me! I'm a mess! But I don't mind that a bit. It just makes me like her more and more and more! Because that's something I can be proud of too, you know?*

"For you," Livio said, "I'll do anything and everything, no matter what it takes."

Livio had spent three whole years waiting for this very day.

Livio had run through those days in hopes of being the knight

who could be the first one to come running—in hopes of hearing Sophie say just that.

That first time he'd held her small frame in his arms, he'd wanted to hear Sophelia say how she truly felt from her own sweet lips. But now, finally! Livio had finally been able to hear her say it.

*Oh man, this is the best worst day ever!*

"Thank you," Livio said, "for calling for me."

Sophie's sweet caramel eyes narrowed happily. Livio wanted to gulp down those caramel eyes.

He brought his lips down to hers.

# Chapter Seven: A Hundred Different Shades of Love

*Whaaaaaaaat?*
*What?*
*Huh?*
*Whaaaaaaaaa?*
Sophie's mind went blank.
*Wait, no—bright red? If you mixed those, it'd make pink. That's a spring color. How auspicious!*
The colors that met Sophie's eyes up close, however, were just like daybreak.
Those long eyelashes of his fluttered up, revealing Sophie's dumbfounded expression in his blueberry eyes.
*A pure-white robe? Is he some sort of angel?* At least, that was how well Sophie thought it matched the absurdly beautiful man before her. Livio ran his fingers across Sophie's hair and stood up.
"Stay right there, okay? Don't move."
"Yerp!"
*Whoops, tripped over my tongue there.*
*He looked so cool throwing off that white robe into the wind like that!*
But none of those thoughts that ran through Sophie's mind mattered.
*"Don't move"? Bwa ha ha! Don't you worry 'bout that! And just who do you think I am? Like I could move right now? You think I could actually move?*
Sophie clasped her mouth with her hands. She'd been reborn as an entirely new, trembling sort of creature. How was she even supposed to move her body again? She couldn't even remember how to do it. How did humans walk again?

Sophie couldn't peel her gaze away from Livio's handsome profile.

His long eyelashes cast a shadow on his face, and that sharp stare as he glared at his foes was so beautiful it sent a chill down her spine.

That beautiful man's...lips...had come down...on Sophie's own.

Sophie gasped, speechless.

*N-N-No, hold up! It was just for a second! I was hurting and I was coughing, and—maybe it was just a misunderstanding? Maybe I was just delirious? Or dreaming? You know, something hallucinatory like that!*

It was Livio, after all.

He was cooler and prettier than anyone Sophie had ever met. *He's crazy cute when he snickers with his face bright red from blushing! He's the most beautiful creature in the whole world!*

That same Livio had come to Sophie's rescue.

"Help." She'd only said a single word. But it was a single word Sophie had never been able to say to anyone.

There'd been no point in saying it, and even if she had, she hadn't thought anyone would actually help her. It had always been far more constructive for her to do something about the situation on her own. It didn't feel good having your hand swatted away when you reached out for help.

But Livio had held Sophie's hand the whole time. He'd taught her that it was okay for her to speak.

So, when she screamed for Livio to help at the top of her lungs, Livio had done just that as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

Livio's arms embraced Sophie, his fingers pushing her hair to the side—they were both so gentle. When Sophie considered how Livio really, truly cared for her, she couldn't help but be overcome with joy.

She'd wanted such care for so, so long. It was something so simple and commonplace, and yet she'd always been denied it. But now that she finally had it, there was no containing the happiness that she felt.

*"Thank you for calling me."* That was what he'd actually said.

To think that Livio would be this overjoyed that Sophie would lean on him and yearn for him! His eyes had filled with a sweet, joyful light as his pale cheeks flushed pink—all the while looking like he might cry! That was how he'd said it, so of course...

*I really, really like him.* Of course that was what she'd thought.

*I just like Livio so much!* Sophie had felt like she'd filled a whole jar right up to the brim with sparkling blueberry jam. He was so adorable, and Sophie had been just so delighted and proud that she couldn't hold back a smile. She'd wished those eyes would stare at her forever. Feeling a sense of joy that seemed to gently permeate all the way to her fingertips, Sophie had let her guard down and—

Then, at that very moment...

*He's really close.*

*Those eyelashes of his sure are long.*

Just as the thought had occurred to her, she'd felt his lips on hers. There was no mistaking it—it had been a kiss.

Sophie's heart felt like it might explode in her chest.

"Sophie, are you okay?" Lunetta ran over to Sophie as she hid her burning hot face in her hands.

She wasn't okay in the slightest, tiniest, least little wee bit, but she lifted her head anyway. *Think about the situation here!*

*No, really, could you* please *think about the time and place, Sir Livio?* Sophie thought, but there was no way she could say such a thing out loud.

"I-I'm...f-fine..." she finally stuttered.

"Your face is really red. You must've been in a lot of pain..." Lunetta said.

The pain from being squeezed like a rag was long gone—her face was red for an entirely different reason. Sophie vigorously shook her head.

Livio would've had his back turned to Lunetta, so she wouldn't have seen the reason Sophie's face was so red. Unable to bear it even a moment longer, Sophie's happy-go-lucky brain dropped its bell.

"What about you, Lunetta?" Sophie asked. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Lunetta answered. "I'm used to it, after all."

Hearing a mighty smack, Sophie turned her head to see crumbling debris and a pair of leather boots not far from it.

*Behold, for he shall bring destruction to the world and everything in it!* Or at least that was what the deep furrow in Vyce's brow seemed to be saying. He was in the worst mood imaginable. *Now* that's *scary.* Sophie unconsciously clenched Lunetta's hand.

"Lunetta," Vyce said. "A defensive wall."

"Understood."

Trying to avoid getting in Lunetta's way, Sophie gently released Lunetta's hand as the witch's hair began to give off a red light.

Vyce cast the white robe he'd been wearing to the ground as the king of Magyck, who'd been knocked onto his back, slowly wobbled to his feet.

"Damn you, you barbaric lowborn...!" the king growled. "Using magic like that... It's sacrilege, you filthy fiend!"

"What the hell are you talking about?" Livio asked, turning around with a dubious expression on his face. Sophie's shoulders perked up as Lunetta tilted her head to the side.

"You're circulating your own magical energy through your sword, right, Livio?" Lunetta asked. "I think that's why you were able to cut off the flow of the king's magical energy. Magical energy is normally only used to control magic, so it's quite an unusual technique—or, rather, no magician or witch would even think to do so. It's a rather high-level technique, in my opinion."

"Huh?" Livio blinked in surprise. He wasn't blinking because Lunetta had complimented him on his "high-level technique." Instead, he had a stumped look on his face that seemed to say, *Wait, really?* "Was I actually doing something like that...?" Livio asked.

"You...didn't know...?"

"So yer tellin' me the secret to House Warrion's exceptional combat abilities," Vyce said, "is that you manipulate magical energy while fightin', huh?"

"I'm really not good at magic, and I didn't have any idea I was doing something like that..." Livio replied. "Wonder if father knows?"

"The fact he never bothered to tell you," Vyce replied, "probably

means it's been generation after generation without thinkin' much about it at all."

"Seriously?" Livio said. "Man, we really are a family of idiots..."

Livio brandished his sword while Vyce cracked his neck as they continued their outrageous conversation. While their voices were light enough, one look at their backs was enough to see they were still carrying anger. Their entire air was something to behold.

"Well?" Vyce asked, turning his attention to the king. "Aren't you gonna tell me how it feels tyin' up your own daughter who freezes at the sight of ya? C'mon, tell me all about it. Common folk like me just don't get it, you know?"

"That's right," Livio added. "And I'm a barbaric lowlife myself, so it'd be really great if you could tell me just how on earth you can bully two frail young ladies like that. As thanks for the lesson, I'll be more than happy to teach you what it feels like to rue the day you were born—with a *hands-on* demonstration, of course!"

Livio's laughter was entirely too cute. The sound was so far removed from what he was saying it was actually terrifying. Livio was putting his entirely nonchalant rage on full display, but Sophie had to admit she liked that side of him too.

"You fools!" the king barked.

A burst of lightning erupted with a deafening howl. Behind it, a thunderous roar echoed out as several pillars of lightning struck the ground.

"L-Livio...?" Sophie called his name to alert him to the danger at hand, but her voice had lifted into a questioning tone.

"Wow..." Lunetta said flatly beside Sophie.

The reason for her reaction? Almost as if he were stepping through a dazzling waltz, Livio was *dodging* the bolts of lightning. *What? No way. Is it even possible to dodge magic? Oh, but then again... I guess if the spell went in a straight line or something... Or perhaps if they were doing an incantation...* If it were something that could be predicted, Sophie could understand that as well. It was vital for magicians to consider all that and unleash their magic in ways that couldn't be avoided.

In that sense, the king's lightning spell—dropping multiple bolts

of lightning from above at the same time—should have been effective. Indeed, *normally* it wouldn't have been possible to dodge.

"H-How on earth are you avoiding my magic...?!"

"Intuition."

The king's face grew pale. Sophie almost felt just the tiniest bit sorry for him. *Intuition? There was no intuition about it.*

"No matter! There'll be no dodging this one!"

The king made a massive ball of fire that seemed to stretch to the size of the whole room. The burning red flame let out a roar as it plummeted toward them. Sophie was inside the defensive wall that Lunetta had made, so she was certain she'd be just fine.

But what if Livio were burned by a flame like that? Dodging a fireball of that size wouldn't be easy.

Sophie nearly dashed forward instinctively, but in the blink of an eye...

*No— No way.*

The ball of fire disappeared as Livio swung his blade, and the wall behind the king cracked in half and crumbled. *That's terrifying! Wait, what? Is something coming out of his sword? Is there some sort of invisible magic pouring out?*

"You picked a fight with the wrong guy, pal."

Just then—

Vyce appeared behind the king and sent him flying with a kick. The blow probably broke several of the king's bones—it had made a heavy sort of sound like that. With the king mowed down on the ground, broken rubble poured down upon him as if to deliver the finishing blow.

The king screamed in agony, only for Vyce to click his tongue unhappily.

Vyce took slow, deliberate steps over to the king before plucking him from the rubble. He lifted up the groaning king like a filthy blanket before throwing him off to the side with a thud.

There wasn't a hint of mercy in Vyce's actions.

"Apologize," Vyce demanded, "as a father and as a king. For Lunatietta and all the witches who died here, get down on your knees and grovel with your head on the ground."

"Your Majesty..." Dropping the defensive wall she had up, Lunetta called out for Vyce. Her voice sounded pained and uneasy. Sophie clenched her own skirt.

Even if the king did apologize, Lunetta wouldn't get her sixteen years back, nor would the witches get their lives back. There was no way one little apology from that tattered, filthy excuse of an old man would wipe it all away.

But maybe—just maybe—what lay ahead for Lunetta might change.

Lunetta had cowered before him, so frozen in fear that she couldn't take even a single step. Even if it were just a little bit, maybe an apology could change something in Lunetta's heart.

And yet...

"You think *I'll* apologize?! That *thing* isn't my daughter! As king, I have a responsibility to my kingdom to manage this plague! An apology is the *last* thing you'll get from me!"

"Is that so?"

*Yup, figures. If he were smart enough to just apologize, he wouldn't do something as idiotic as pick a fight with Vyce.*

Vyce seemed to know that just as well. Unbothered by the king's response, he pulled a single book from his bag.

"And what do you think this is?" he asked.

"What...?" Looking up at Vyce, the king's face stiffened. With an energy that made it seem like he hadn't just been in a crumpled heap on the ground, the king leaped to his feet and reached for the book...

...only for Livio to send him flying up with a merciless kick. *His legs really are long!*

As if to finish the job, Livio thrust his sword downward—right between the king's legs.

"Don't even think about moving," Livio said. "I might just go for it."

*Go for what?* Sophie wondered. She wasn't stupid enough to actually voice such a question at a time like this, though. But Sophie couldn't help but think how cool his voice sounded when he was speaking at a lower tone like that. Sophie might not have been

stupid, but her brain was prancing around on cloud nine. *Whoops!*

"Wh-Why...?" the king asked. "You craven, how did you...?!"

"I've got one hell of a talented princess with me, after all," Vyce replied.

"Mrmph."

That last "Mrmph" had come from beside Sophie. Glancing off to her side, Sophie saw Lunetta blinking over and over. *Wait, hold up—is she embarrassed? Talk about cute!* Sophie's chest tightened in admiration.

"Lunetta..." Vyce said.

"Yes?" Lunetta looked sheepishly cute as she replied to Vyce, who still had his back to her.

"You might be better off not knowing about this," he warned. "What do you wanna do?"

Lunetta stared fixedly at Vyce's back. Her black eyes looked almost reflective as she glanced up at the sky before returning her gaze to him once more.

"Would you be able to keep it from me, Your Majesty?"

Vyce gave a small laugh at Lunetta's response. His laugh almost sounded like a sigh—gentle, with perhaps just the tiniest echo of sadness for some reason.

Turning around, Vyce sneered and gave his typical cynical laugh, all traces of sadness gone from his voice. "Good answer, kiddo."

"I'm not a kid."

Vyce turned back to face Lunetta again as the wind swayed her long black hair.

With the furrow on his forehead, his strong-willed brow, his shady, irritated gaze, and his stubbled chin, Vyce was unruly and as unkingly as he could be.

"These are the eleventh king's memoirs," Vyce said in a resounding voice as he held the book up for Lunetta.

"I see."

Sophie heard the sound of small stones shifting underfoot. The king must've stirred a bit.

"Move and you'll regret it," Livio said.

Vyce continued, "The king was researching the First Witch in

hopes of going back to the fundamental reason the witches were born. He tried to find out what sort of princess the witch was, why she cursed the kingdom, and how she executed that curse."

Vyce paused. "Oddly enough, there was little in the way of documentation relating to the First Witch and the witch after her, so it seemed he struggled considerably with this," Vyce continued. "After all his efforts, the king concocted a hypothesis based on the information he'd obtained."

Vyce's voice was low and soothing as he recounted the contents of the book. His voice lacked emotion, but that was exactly why Sophie could sense what Vyce felt as he spoke. It was something unbearable, something akin to anger. Sophie couldn't help but grow just a bit scared the longer he spoke.

Was this really something that they should let Lunetta hear? Sophie wavered, but Vyce's voice rang out clear beside her.

"The king grew terrified of his own hypothesis, so he sealed this away," Vyce said. "From the sound of it, he didn't get rid of it because he thought it might be helpful for strengthening the barrier sealing the witches away. But if you ask me, he was either too scared to get rid of it, or he just decided to push it down onto the next generation because he couldn't bear the burden of keeping it to himself."

"So just what were you plannin' on doing, hmm?" Vyce asked, turning to the king.

The king was such a pitiful sight, leaning against the wall with Livio's massive blade plunged at his feet, but even then, he snorted back his answer. "I don't have the first idea what you're talking about!"

"That right?" Vyce asked. "Then it's story time. Try yer best to have sweet dreams after this."

The king grunted back.

"Your Majesty," Lunetta said, calling Vyce. Her hands trembled as she clutched them to her chest.

Vyce narrowed his eyes and let out a small breath.

"The First Witch..."

The story he told—as the one who was sure to care more about

the witches more than anyone else right now—was one that could never inspire anything resembling a sweet dream.

It was a terribly warped, horrifying love story.

*It all started during the ninth king's rule.*

*A second child was born to the king. Around the prince's fifth birthday, the kingdom's first princess was born. She was named Sarnette.*

*Considered a child of heresy, Sarnette grew up locked away in the deep recesses of the palace. But try as they might to keep her secret, there was no stopping the rumors that emerged.*

*The people all feared the princess as "the cursed child," spreading rumors about how the queen had been unfaithful. In the end, the queen fell ill.*

"It was because the princess's hair and eyes were black, right?" Lunetta asked.

Vyce lifted his face from the book and nodded.

"And her magical energy was powerful," Lunetta continued.

"That's right," Vyce said, returning his gaze to the book.

*Sarnette grew into a beautiful young woman. And yet, her beautiful face only served as a devilish charm to accentuate her black hair and black eyes. Sarnette was able to sing as she easily crafted spells that even several of the castle's magicians couldn't hope to attain even working together. She was feared by all—and avoided.*

*Each and every time they heard a song echo from her room, the people would cast stones at her. They were terrified beyond belief, alarmed by the gravity of it all. She was a demon—the cursed child.*

*Sarnette lived a life of quiet solitude, neither laughing nor crying. That same Sarnette fell into the habit of venturing out into the forest every day. They would go days on end without hearing her singing from her room. They thought it was unsettling—that she had to be plotting something. One day, in an attempt to quell their fear, the first prince followed after her.*

*There in the forest, the prince found Sarnette—smiling affectionately at something that wasn't human.*

"Something that wasn't human?" Livio asked, as Sophie's chest

suddenly grew warm.

As she unconsciously clutched her chest and closed her eyes, a white light emerged from Sophie, only for a plushie-sized white bear to hop to the ground.

"I have finally made my way out..." Azuello said.

The white bear wiped its forehead with its short paws. *Wait, does that mean he sweats?*

"Azuello," Sophie muttered.

"That is why it hath been so hard for me to move since entering this land," Azuello said. "There are fragments of a different god in this land's air."

"What?" Vyce asked.

Azuello lifted his small, furry head up to look at him. "I am a god, after all."

"That's right," Vyce said, turning the page.

*There, joining hands with Sarnette, was a beautiful god. Sarnette's cheeks were flushed with bashful color as she smiled. Seeing the man draped in an air of divinity look lovingly upon Sarnette, the prince realized that Sarnette had fallen in love with a god.*

*The prince reported this to the king right away, claiming that Sarnette sought to deceive the god and curse the kingdom.*

"What a load of horse dung!" Livio said in a deep voice as he sent the king at his feet flying with a kick. "And just what was he getting at? There's only so far you can let your imagination leap! Just what on earth was he thinking?!"

The king who'd written the memoirs had drawn up two hypotheses...

*The first was that the prince was scared of Sarnette obtaining such power—especially because she already possessed a tremendous power unmatched by the magicians of the castle. If she were bolstered with the strength of a god, then no one would have so much as a prayer of stopping her. The king proposed that the prince had wanted to prevent such a calamity.*

*The other hypothesis was that the prince loved Sarnette himself.*

"Excuse me?" Sophie found herself speaking up before she even

realized the words had left her mouth. *Love? After treating her so terribly?* It was disgusting. Sophie had no bashful reservations about furrowing her brow in disgust. Vyce gave a small laugh.

*Just like the others around him, the prince had shunned Sarnette, believing her to be an unsettling, cursed witch.*

*And yet at the same time, the one making frequent visits to Sarnette's room and delivering her meals was the prince himself. The prince voiced his complaints about how repulsive she was or how loud she was, but even then, he went to Sarnette's side without ever missing a day. Not a soul knew the meaning of this, however.*

*Seeking to tear Sarnette away from the god, the prince warned the king with a terribly fierce expression: Sarnette was going to curse the kingdom.*

"No, but seriously, I don't have the slightest idea what he was thinking," Livio said, making no attempts to conceal his discomfort.

"The prince probably wanted to keep Sarnette within his reach," Vyce said, shrugging his shoulders.

*Letting Sarnette out of the castle was the last thing he wanted, nor did he want to allow the god to get near the castle. He wanted a compelling reason that would justify that.*

*Regardless of the truth, Sarnette was cast into a magically sealed room, just as the prince had plotted. It was a powerful seal created by the castle magicians. Unable to take even a single step from the room, the sound of her sobs echoed through the castle day and night.*

*Just as he'd done before, the prince went to Sarnette. Sarnette cried that she ached for her love, that she longed to see him, only for the prince to order her to stop her plotting and never cross him again. "I'm watching you!" he said. Apparently, he told her that every day.*

*But not everything went as the prince had hoped.*

"The god couldn't just forsake her," Azuello said with a huff. "No god would ever simply submit to a mere human's base wishes. If he loved the girl, then the point standeth twofold. Gods are deeply loving beings."

"What a fool," Azuello laughed. It was precisely as he'd said.

*Seeking Sarnette, the god continued to call her name. Whether good fortune or foul, he couldn't find Sarnette through the barrier the magicians had erected. An unsettling voice calling out for Sarnette was heard throughout the land as rain fell endlessly. Knowing nothing of the god's existence, the people grew fearful, thinking that it was Sarnette preparing to strike.*

*And yet, the king did not relinquish Sarnette to the god.*

*The prince convinced the king that when Sarnette gained power, the first to be beheaded would not be the nation but rather the royal family.*

*Was that truly what she had sought to accomplish?*

*No one knew what lay in the prince's heart. All that remained was the fact that the king, gripped with fear, took Sarnette's life before the god could find her.*

*They say that the prince was more shaken by this than anyone—almost as if he hadn't wanted to lose Sarnette.*

"And the rain continued to fall for a whole year after that, right? Does that mean the god was sending down the rain...?" Sophie asked.

"Probably," Vyce answered, turning the page.

*The rain didn't stop as the magicians spent their days dealing with sickness, disasters, and famine. Whether the god had given up or the magic had finally yielded results, by the time it had all settled down, the king had grown emaciated, leaving the prince to ascend the throne. The people all rejoiced as the curtain opened on a new age. As the nation erupted in joy, the new king took a wife.*

*The beautiful queen, with her golden hair and golden eyes, conceived right away, and a princess was born to her the following year...with black hair and black eyes.*

*The king immediately gave his daughter a room covered with a magical barrier.*

*"I won't let anyone have you this time." Those were unmistakably the words the king had spoken. Had his words trembled with fear... Had the one who'd heard them been the prime minister...or the magician called the king's right hand... Things might have ended differently...*

*...had the one who heard the king's whispers been anyone other than the queen.*

*Whenever he had a free moment, the king would go to the princess's room. And each and every time, he would make the princess sing. Each time the queen heard her daughter singing, the queen would scream maddeningly about how horrifying it was.*

*Before long, the queen could bear it no more.*

*"Sarnette's curse resides in the girl. She is cursing both the king and the nation." Those were the rumors the queen put in motion.*

*The people grew fearful.*

*Wondering if they would have to suffer once more, voices calling for the princess's death began to surface throughout the land, and the rain began to fall again.*

*The king grew fearful once more.*

*The rain didn't stop. It could mean only one thing: The god had realized that Sarnette's soul had returned to this world.*

*The god was searching for Sarnette.*

*The king was terrified: Would the persecuted princess gain power? Would the god obtain Sarnette's soul?*

*Living in a later age, the eleventh king had no way of knowing the truth. What was certain, however, was that the king was afraid of the god, that the princess had been executed for the crime of cursing her kingdom, and that it had continued to rain. These were the only records to remain.*

"Shortly after that, the tenth king drew his last breath, leaving behind the queen and his son. Haunted by nightmares, he'd apparently been unable to sleep or eat as he needed to. They said it was the curse at work, but really...who's to say?"

Vyce closed the book shut with a smack.

"You know the rest from there, Lunetta," Vyce said. "Princesses with black hair and black eyes came to be born, and each time the princess died, the kingdom would be visited by disaster. Fearing this, generation after generation of kings continued to confine their black-haired and black-eyed princesses to a heavily sealed room. They neither killed them nor permitted them to live, claiming it was the princess's duty...even after finding out how it all began."

Lunetta stared straight back into Vyce's indigo eyes. "The First Witch was killed by her own kingdom."

"That's right," Vyce answered. "And assuming the second hypothesis is correct, that'd mean it was that fool of a prince's fault for clinging to his younger sister."

There certainly *were* people like that out in the world—it was a big place, after all. No matter whom someone loved, whom they had feelings for, or even if they chose to live their whole life alone, people were free to choose. No one had any right to restrict the heart of another—indeed, even if they loved that person from the bottom of their heart.

They weren't permitted to steal away another's sentiments or to wound those same feelings.

"In other words," Vyce continued, "the princess died at the hands of her own kingdom, and the kingdom found itself targeted by a god."

"Even then, the Landslayer Witches wished only for the kingdom's peace. They never cursed a single soul," Lunetta added.

"That's right. It's more like a case of divine wrath than anything." Vyce glanced down as Azuello crossed his tiny little paws and nodded.

"Likely so," Azuello said. "If they wished for the kingdom's peace, then the witches likely added to the seals themselves, wouldst thou not agree?"

Lunetta nodded in reply, her long black hair swaying gently.

*She's so pretty, though...* Sophie's chest grew painfully tight.

"Hast thou not placed a seal upon thine own soul that continues even now?" Azuello asked. "Or perhaps I would do better to call it a barrier to ensure that thy magical energy doesn't escape."

Lunetta gave another nod. "It's a spell that the witches spent generations researching. It's not just for when we die—the effect is said to be greater if the spell is cast as early as possible."

"Verily," Azuello replied. "'Tis a great achievement, despite knowing nothing of the cause. By sealing off their magical energy before it grew to maturity, they were able to keep the god from realizing that theirs was the soul of the girl—Sarnette as thou called

her—reborn."

"And yet even then," Azuello continued, "when the spell breaketh upon each soul's expiry, 'tis likely that the fragments of the god left behind and the magical energy that escapes from her react. And in turn, the god discovereth one fact and one fact alone: He hath lost her again. Even now, I would wager he doth continue to search for thy soul."

Sophie stared at Lunetta as the witch pressed her hand to her chest. The one living here and now wasn't Sarnette.

Lunetta's black hair and black eyes were beautiful, but Sophie had never heard her sing, and she'd looked upon gods like test subjects, not with love. She was a small, cute girl that called the king of another kingdom "Your Highness" in a childlike tone.

"Lunetta, you're you," Sophie said, with an uneasy, anxious feeling in her chest that she just couldn't shake.

"You're right," Lunetta replied with a nod. "I can't have some god I don't even know stalking me, after all."

"St...?"

*Stalking...? On second thought, maybe she isn't wrong?*

"Your Majesty?" Lunetta said.

"Yeah?"

Lunetta stood up. "What is this...?"

In response, Vyce rested the book against his shoulder and tilted his head to the side.

Lunetta's hair and eyes were glowing red.

"I don't feel good," Lunetta said. "It's like I really, *really* want to use magic. I can't really explain it well, but...right here." She squeezed at her chest. "That's where it feels bad."

Even Sophie could tell that Lunetta's brow was just a bit furrowed. *Hmm?* Sophie tilted her head to the side. *Don't laugh. No, I can't laugh, but come on, Lunetta...*

"Aaargh!"

The one who erupted so unexpectedly wasn't Sophie, mind you.

Looking up, Sophie saw Vyce doubled over, laughing like a child. It was the first time Sophie had ever seen an adult laugh like that. She felt her chest tighten just a bit with excitement. *What? That's so*

*cute, though!*

"Lunetta, you're angry," Vyce said. "You're *angry* right now."

"Angry...?"

"That's right," Vyce answered. "I told you—*we* told you over and over again you could get as angry or cry as much as you wanted to, but you just looked at us like you didn't have a clue what we meant. You're *angry*, Lunetta!"

Sophie couldn't quite put her finger on why, but Vyce looked like he was having the time of his life. Seeing an adult express their joy so openly for the first time, Sophie felt her chest tightened excitedly again. *That's so cute of him!!! And he's just a really, really good person too!*

But now Sophie understood too.

It was a blessing to be able to cry or get angry or sad. After all, they were all things that you couldn't do if you didn't know what it meant to be blessed with happiness in the first place.

Lunetta found herself in the incredibly fortunate situation of being able to realize how unjust it was, how warped it all was. It was something truly worth rejoicing over.

"Your Majesty, is it okay if I get angry?"

"I don't see why not. Give 'em hell," Vyce replied with a laugh.

Hearing Vyce's familiar, cynical laugh, Lunetta blinked. *Did she smile just now?* Vyce's smile grew even wider.

Azuello grew larger with a pop. "Master, shall I assist as well?"

"Oh my," Sophie replied. "Are you sure?"

"Quite," Azuello replied with a nod. "Leave this matter unto me."

Sophie rose to her feet and brushed off the edges of her dress. She took a deep breath. *Breathe in...and out. In...and out.*

Then, Sophie saw Livio, standing behind Vyce with his foot pinning down the king. Those blueberry eyes that Sophie loved so much were sparkling. That excited glint in his eyes was probably his way of shouting, "Go for it!"

Here at the castle that had built up the curse for so, so many years that countless girls had lost control of their emotions and found themselves at their wits' ends...they were going to help the last witch get angry.

*What an honor!* Sophie thought, spreading her arms wide, casting a defensive spell.

It was one of the few types of magic that Sophie could use, but it was also a form of magic that made it easy to draw on Azuello's power.

Sophie wove the spell together—to protect the lives of the people that all of the witches had kept safe so their nation might survive.

Lunetta let out a breath beside Sophie.

Now then, all together, dear readers!

"*This. Is. Bullshiiiiiiiiiiiit!!!*"

That was the day the beautiful castle of gold and white was completely—*and wonderfully!*—obliterated.

# Chapter Eight: An Unfair Contract

Sophie tried her best.

No, she really did give it all she had.

To what, you ask? Keeping people safe.

If Lunetta got angry and unleashed a devastating spell on the castle, the whole building was bound to go flying. *On second thought, good riddance! It'd be* way *too funny to see the castle leveled to nothing more than an empty lot!*

Even then, however, it wouldn't do to hurt people along with the castle. After all, the witches who'd made their way out of this depressing castle hadn't been the type to wish for someone's death—and neither was Lunetta. They'd been noble witches who had desperately clung to life so that they might protect their kingdom as princesses.

Sophie wanted Lunetta to let out her anger on a massive scale, and a castle like that was long overdue for a demolition, but they couldn't let people die. Neither tears nor regret would be fitting.

Which was exactly why Sophie—under the instruction of Azuello—was now casting a defensive spell so that the people inside the castle wouldn't be hurt, and so the aftermath wouldn't spread beyond the castle.

On her own, Sophie had no idea how to string together the spell, nor was there any hope of her holding back a spell from an astounding witch like Lunetta. But Sophie did have a god on her side.

Despite addressing them as "the likes of humans," Azuello was deeply fascinated by humans and bore a strong sense of duty. He was a mischievous god.

Just what sort of god was the one who had fallen in love with Sarnette?

*That's right...* Sophie thought, growing a bit sad. If Livio had

departed this life while they were separated, Sophie would've been stricken with sadness, so bitter that she might not even be able to accept his death. She might very well curse people in her longing to see Livio once more.

*I'm glad Livio's so strong*, Sophie thought, opening her eyes.

Leaving the god behind had to have been painful for Sarnette as well. She had to have felt so lonely. That was why the god hadn't been able to give up on Sarnette.

*Livio can't be the only one. I have to get stronger too.*

Sophie had made up her mind that she'd make Livio happy.

Looking at the large, glowing white magic circle, Sophie burst into a grin. She was delighted to feel the magical energy slipping out of her body.

Lunetta's incantation came to a stop.

Normally, Lunetta didn't use incantations. Incantation was a method for improving the base level and stability of one's magical energy. After all, Lunetta could unleash devastating spells in the blink of an eye without any incantation at all.

There was only one reason Lunetta was using incantation now: She was serious—really, *really* serious—about unleashing her spell.

"Master, here it comes."

"All right!"

"*Brilliant Scream*!"

It was a strange sound.

An unusual wind caressed Sophie's hair and face. It was like someone was singing, or screaming, or laughing. It was shining but heavy. It was a howling tempest yet warm against her skin.

To be fair, the castle walls and furniture and all sorts of other things weren't being caressed—they were being blown away, one after another. *Ha ha ha, now there's a beautiful sight!*

The objects flying through the air collided with Sophie and Azuello's homemade defensive wall, broke, fell down to the ground, and broke once more.

But as the spell was one that automatically defended people, the rubble that came falling down upon Sophie and Lunetta fell to the ground as if it were being deflected before it could ever hit them.

The spell had turned out quite well.

Lunetta continued to pour out her magical energy as the tempest raged on, leading more magical energy to flow from Sophie's body in turn. Thanks to Azuello, however, it wasn't painful in the slightest.

"This is kind of fun, isn't it, Azuello?" she asked.

"Indeed," Azuello replied. "The witch doth quite well for herself."

Clearly, the two of them felt safe enough to enjoy a carefree conversation.

Glancing to the side, Sophie saw Vyce and Livio clutching their stomachs in laughter. They both seemed like they were having an amazing time.

At their feet, the king had turned pale. *Oh? He's the only one whose hair's all whirred up like that!*

"Azuello, is the king okay?"

"Naught to worry," Azuello replied. "However, it doth appear the witch wove her spell to only destroy only nonliving things. Mayhaps she failed to recognize him as a human? Regardless, with our defensive wall in place, he shan't die."

"Oh, I see..."

*Well in that case, there's nothing to worry about!* Sophie nodded along in agreement, as her field of vision grew wider and wider. *Oh wow—just look how pretty the sky is.*

Sophie and Lunetta hadn't seen them since they'd suddenly descended into the castle, but the castle had had a gazebo and a fountain and other various amenities—all of which were getting more and more smashed by the minute. They were colliding and crashing and crumbling.

There was something immensely refreshing about watching seemingly expensive items get positively obliterated. Sophie hadn't realized she had such a destructive urge. She was positively thrilled to discover this new side of herself.

Before she knew it, their surroundings had transformed into a mountain of stones. It was neither a figure of speech nor a poetic description—it was a simple matter of fact. It was reality.

Lunetta had done a fine job carefully smashing the ruins into nothing more than gravel. It was a testament to the artist's tastes

and techniques—or rather, it made her anger quite apparent.

The wind had stopped howling, so Sophie dropped her hands. Feeling like her legs might give way, Sophie stumbled back and found herself supported by—no, sinking into—a fluffy coat of fur.

"Thou hast done well, master."

"Thank you..."

*I just got complimented by a god!*

She'd almost never been told she'd done well, so to think a god would say such a thing to her! Burrowing into the back of the god-in-bear-form sitting on the ground like a dog, Sophie couldn't help but laugh.

"Getting angry sure does tire you out, huh?" Lunetta said, panting as she wiped away her sweat. "But I feel better now."

"That's right," Vyce said with a laugh as he walked over to Lunetta, hoisting up her small frame.

With a terribly surprised expression on her face, Lunetta looked positively adorable as Vyce took her flailing hands. "Grab on," he said as he chuckled and placed Lunetta's small hands on his shoulders.

Sophie felt something fidgety and warm in her chest, a feeling like she almost wanted to shout. Sophie clenched Azuello's fur. *So fluffy!*

"Sir Vyce," Livio started, "this is seriously going to make things complicated, so I really do think you should watch what you're doing!"

As he pulled his massive sword out of the ground, Livio's eyes seemed lifeless somehow. *Make* what *complicated?* Sophie thought, tilting her head to the side. Azuello gave a gaping yawn.

"M-My castle... All those years of history...in my castle..."

Standing in a spacious field of stones, Sophie watched the people who had been scattered around, seemingly uninjured but flustered and taken aback by what had happened.

The king sputtered after sitting in silence for a bit. His hair was disheveled, and his clothes were even more ragged than they had been before.

"It's gonna take a whole lot of money to rebuild that castle," Vyce said. "There enough gold and treasure for the job in there?"

Sneering with his typical cynical grin, Vyce looked up at Lunetta in his arms, and she puffed out her chest defiantly.



"I think it's all gravel now."

"Now that's a real pickle," Vyce replied. "They're gonna have to pan for gold, huh?"

The king drooped and plunged his hands to the ground, as if he wouldn't be getting back up again.

Seeing this, Livio put away his sword and tilted his head to the side. "Can't you fix this with magic?"

"If they just limited it to certain materials like gold or ruby, they might be able to collect them from the rubble and put them back, but unless they have an accurate memory of how it used to be, I think it'd be rather difficult to restore."

"So it's not happening."

*Nope. It's probably not.*

Sophie herself had once been in a position that had brought her in and out of a castle. While she knew that there was a list of what lay in the kingdom's treasury, and someone who managed it, if it were a matter of whether or not there was someone with a picture-perfect memory of everything there who could sketch it all out, Sophie would have to shake her head no. *If there were someone like that, we wouldn't even need a crummy old list!* While it'd be a different matter if there were some sort of illustrated, detailed list, even if there had been something like that, it was almost certainly long gone now.

"Now then, Mr. King," Vyce started. "Why don't you and I make a deal, hmm?"

Making a deal with someone like Vyce, who was bursting with energy despite this calamity, might as well have been making a deal with a demon.

The king had no hope for a positive outcome, but even then, if he didn't make a deal, he'd just be wiped out. The outcome would be terrible no matter how things turned out.

Incidentally, none of this pertained to Sophie in the slightest, so she herself was excited. Vyce cared for Lunetta and he cared for his own kingdom, so just what would this man known as the Usurper King say?

"Sir Vyce, that's one hell of a nasty look on your face," Livio said,

laughing as he took his place beside Sophie.

"Livio, Azuello's *so* fluffy!"

"Is it okay if I see for myself?"

"Thou art master's mate, after all," Azuello answered. "I shall make a special exception for thee."

"M-Ma...?"

Both of their faces flushed red.

"I-I'm not her mate yet."

"Ye...?"

"Yet"—that was what Livio had said. *Yet.* So then would that mean there was a future out there where he would say, "Yes, that's correct"?

Sophie didn't want to just get dumped one day out of the blue since that'd be a whole problem too, and as far as she was concerned, well...she did hope they could always be together. *But I can't just go saying that!*

Sophie sank more of her weight into Azuello's billowy fur. *He's so fluffy!*

"If you accept my conditions, I'll build you a castle," Vyce said. "And I'll vow not to reveal the contents of these memoirs. Oh? There's no need to thank *me*. This is all for my fiancée, see?"

Buried in floof and fluff, Sophie blinked in anticipation.

It was an unprecedented proposition and then some. Building a castle required an enormous budget, and if the true story of the First Witch made its way through the kingdom, the people's faith in the royal family was sure to plummet.

However, the latter would also be a chance to clear the witches' stained reputation. As far as Sophie was concerned, she certainly hoped they'd circulate the truth far and wide, but she was, after all, just a passerby and a part-time lady-in-waiting. Sophie sank back into her spectator seat without any objections.

"And what are your conditions...?"

"First, you'll remove Lunetta from your family line," Vyce said. "Don't ever get involved with her again. Don't you ever treat her however you feel like. Lunetta will be a citizen of my kingdom. From here on out, unless I and Lunetta permit it, you're forbidden from

exchanging words or even letters with her."

Lunetta gave a hearty nod.

"I'd like you to screw right off, please," Lunetta said.

*And just who on earth taught her to talk like that?*

"Very well..." the king answered. "So far as I am concerned, I have no need of such—"

"Answer 'yes' or 'no' only. Keep yer trap shut otherwise."

Vyce gave the king a sound kick to the face. *This guy just doesn't learn, does he? Gotta say, he sure can take some abuse, though.*

"Next," Vyce went on. "You're going to announce you're forfeiting the crown and have the first princess take the throne instead."

"Wh-Wha...?" the king stammered. "N-Never in our history has a woman ever inherited the throne!"

"Who the hell cares?" Vyce bit back. "Like your kingdom has anything to be proud of in its history in the first place! Lunetta, you can amplify someone's voice with magic, right?"

"I can share a treat with the whole kingdom." However, that was one nasty treat.

Vyce flashed the king the memoirs, which made the king groan painfully and nod.

"A-Agreed."

"Next one," Vyce went on. "The princess is still young, and she hasn't been educated as the kingdom's ruler. Starting off a new government from scratch ain't easy, after all."

Every last bit of it was all just gravel now. They were hardly in any place to govern; their officials would have to work at restoring—no, making from scratch—all sorts of different documents. *Oh wow, that sounds like hell on earth!*

"Which is why I'll provide you with exceptionally talented personnel," Vyce said. "Everyone in the castle will be under them, and the prime minister will be from my own kingdom. Want me to have them support Her Majesty the Queen?"

*Oh my, how kind! That's a full-on takeover!* Not that Sophie could say that.

"Th-That's nothing short of a takeover! You shameless barbarian, how dare you—?!"

*And that's how you get a foot in your face...*

Had he really been a decent king? His lack of anything resembling learning ability was astounding. Sophie found herself in awe at how the kingdom really had survived on nothing but magic alone.

Even though he'd nodded along to having the princess ascend the throne, he'd likely thought that could just be the setup while he still held all the power. His deduction had come up just a bit short, but the situation was what it was. He'd been physically pushed into a corner, had his castle blown away, and threatened when he was all alone. Thinking about it that way, he was actually putting up a pretty good effort. *On second thought, keep doing what you're doing!*

"I thought I told ya to keep yer trap shut for anything besides yes or no," Vyce replied. "So that's a no then, huh? Works for me. Then you can just work *real* hard and rebuild your castle all on your own. I've got a fun book club I've gotta run off to now. I sure do hope you get the funds and people ya need, though!"

After all, the king was up against one hell of a nasty opponent. It was a commendable display of courage to try and stand up to a thug with wealth and fame.

"If I accept your conditions...you'll truly rebuild the castle and keep that book a secret from the public?"

"Don't put me in the same bag as you lot," Vyce said. "Honest business is the only game I play. And more importantly," he continued, shaking the memoirs in his hand, "if you don't hurry up and nod, the queen and all yer vassals are gonna see ya and come runnin', don'tcha think? You might want to make a decision before they get here."

He was putting the "brute" in "brute force."

While Sophie had no complaints that Vyce was on Lunetta's side, she found it odd that she didn't quite know how to feel about thinking that she herself was on Vyce's side.

*What would you even call this? I feel like I'm some sort of pawn for evil...*

"I-I understand," the king said. "I shall accept all your conditions."

"You really don't know what sorta position yer in, do ya?" Vyce asked. "Don't get uppity with me. That's a 'yes.' You hear me? '*Yes*.'"

"Yes..."

"That's right, now you're learnin' to listen."

Vyce was the worst. He was acting just like a villain—or rather, a thug. Just the worst. He was a demon—the devil himself. Was this hell? *Just how can Lunetta go on nodding like that? Why are those obsidian eyes of hers sparkling so much right now?*

"She's just like the devil's bride, isn't she...?"

"Wonder why the first thing that springs to mind is 'he's a bad influence on her,' huh?"

Livio and Sophie exchanged a dry smile.

"All right, next," Vyce went on.

There was more?

"There's still more?!"

"An' what's wrong if there is?"

Sophie couldn't help but wonder why between wrong and not-wrong, she felt more like it was wrong to demand more.

After properly making sure that everyone else was dumbfounded, Vyce sneered and added, "Don't worry, this is the last one."

There was no way anyone *couldn't* worry with a smile like that pointed at them.

"Yer gonna live the rest of your life in isolation."

"Y-You mean to confine me?!" the king demanded. "I-I've never seen the likes of such a foreign barbarian!"

"You really do suck at listenin', don'tcha?" Vyce replied. "I'm not gonna treat you anything like y'all treated those witches. Yer gonna get a nice enough manor, and I'll make sure you have nice enough provisions there. But you don't get to have any contact with the outside world. You won't be allowed to take so much as a step outside. And don't even think about having any fun. Lunetta's going to cast a barrier over the whole manor. I'll make your servants the bunch of fools who were stupid enough to try to attack us outright. Seems like you got along with them just fine, didn't you? So you can all just have a swell time together inside the barrier."

*I see...so he's just getting imprisoned in a different way.*

He wouldn't die, nor would he be cast into any sort of coarse prison cell. Since his friendly servants were a part of the deal, the

difference between that and the way the witches had been treated was night and day.

But the king would never be permitted to engage with the kingdom's government again. Revenge was out of the question. The moment he tried, the contents of the memoirs would be revealed and the truth of how the nation had been cursed due to the sins of the royal family would come to light... Not to mention that those same memoirs rested in the hands of the ultimate witch who could blow away the whole castle all on her own.

"Yer over the moon, right?"

The king gave a long pause. "Y-Yes."

Even if the king was in such agony that blood started dripping from his lips, his only choice was to nod. He'd had everything stolen away from him, but even then, he wouldn't be killed. And yet, at the same time, he wouldn't be permitted to live.

The only life that awaited him was a life spent slowly awaiting death.

Even then, with the king's servants all dragged into this, it was rather questionable just how loyally they would actually serve him. Stuck inside the barrier with him and unable to leave, they'd be tasked with serving him for the rest of their lives. The question was, just how long would the king actually last?

If the contents of the memoirs were to be revealed, waiting glued upon the throne would be its own sort of hell, so in the end, the king's only choice was to nod.

"This is the first time in my whole life I've been glad I was born into House Warrion."

"I was just feeling thankful for my own life for the first time as well."

Livio and Sophie nodded at each other, both of them immensely relieved that they weren't Vyce's enemies.

"Good," Vyce said. "You got all that recorded, Lunetta?"

"I did," Lunetta answered. "It's all right here in the magic gem."

"And you there, Mr. Secretary," Vyce said. "You wrote all that down, right?"

"Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Y-Yes, indeed!"

Sophie gasped.

*Who?!*

Sophie and Livio rose to their feet, seeing a small old man standing behind the king, holding a pen and a long sheepskin parchment. *How long has he been standing there?!* A band of white-robed magicians who had come down alongside him stood to his side.

"I dragged 'em over here while our shiny young knight here had the king's attention," Vyce explained. "This is the *former* prime minister. Good thing he made it just in time for the grand finale!"

Come to think of it, Vyce hadn't been around when Livio had been dodging the king's lightning bolts and fireballs.

The now secretary (who'd been stripped of his title as prime minister in all the confusion) couldn't have been present while they were talking about the memoirs. Which meant that Vyce had waited until the very, very end, making sure the old man was there before he started talking about the contract they were making.

It wasn't just how Vyce looked that was terrifying—it was how he handled things. It didn't help that he was rather haphazard in how he did it all. The fact that he was an intelligent criminal in spite of all that made him entirely too frightening.

*Remind me to never get on his bad side*, Sophie thought, vowing to herself.

But still... *Meh*.

The new kingdom under Vyce's management was bound to be a far more wonderful country than the kingdom that had tormented those girls throughout its long and winding history.

After all, it was only when Lunetta found herself beside the Usurper King that her eyes lit up like that.

"Now, we'll just leave the rest to our esteemed secretary," Vyce said. "I'm starvin'. Let's take a break."

Seeming pleased, the Usurper King looked down on the battered and defeated—both physically and emotionally—king who seemed to be sinking into the ground itself.

Once she was sure that the conversation was over, Lunetta patted Vyce's arm. Vyce paused for a moment as if in thought before

sighing and placing her back on the ground, her black hair and skirt swaying as she stood on her own once more.

Lunetta took a translucent magic gem from her bag—the stone was nearly the size of her hand.

Lunetta began pulling out a shocking number of the gems and rolling them along the ground. Watching the gems spill out one after another from the small pouch was like watching a magic trick—though it simply was a bag with Lunetta's own handmade spell on it. Still, it was far too advanced a spell to say that it "simply was."

Lunetta closed her eyes and placed a single magic gem in the palm of her hand. Her hair and eyes gave off a warm red glow, the color spreading to the magic gem in turn.

"L-Look at the size of those and how quickly she's making them...!"

"Shhh, she'll hear you!"

*I can hear you loud and clear already!* Sophie thought. Still, Sophie could sympathize with the magicians whispering as they pointed and gawked at the sight before them.

After all, the magicians that Sophie knew all needed a great deal of time to process a single magic gem. And yet, there was Lunetta, mass-producing the things as if they were nothing. Even Sophie couldn't suppress her surprise, so it must've been even more of a shock for those who'd made magic their lives' work. It annoyed her that this "shock" would likely be taken as proof of Lunetta's heresy. It was complete and utter nonsense.

With the magic gems glowing a pale red before her, Lunetta blew on the gems...which then floated up into the air all at once.

"What was that supposed to be?" Vyce asked.

"I've put the voice-transmitting magic gems to use here," Lunetta answered. "I can use another magic gem to check on them no matter where I am."

"Well now," Vyce said, peering into the gem resting in Lunetta's palm. Hearing Vyce's reaction, Sophie and Livio approached as well.

The magic gem was a beautiful sphere, and inside it, they could see the king slumped over on the ground, magicians casting healing spells on him, and the face of the old secretary looking frazzled as

he explained the situation to those around him. After a moment, the image in the gem shifted to the rubble and the faces of those who still didn't know what was going on, covering a variety of targets.

Looking up, Sophie could see the faintly glowing magic gems bobbing as they floated in the sky.

"So you'll be able to keep an eye on them, then," Livio remarked, sounding impressed.

Lunetta nodded.

"If you try to destroy the magic gems or break any of the rules, it'll notify this gem and trigger a massive explosion," she said, her eyes jet-black as she addressed the king and the magicians. "So do be careful."

The magician who'd already been given an explosive magic gem — *Oh, what was his name again?*

"Um..." what's-his-name said, speaking up, "would you be, uh...kind enough to tell us what those rules are?" He was being quite polite; certainly he'd settled down a great deal since their previous encounter. *Maybe* he *can learn if nothing else!*

"That's a secret," Lunetta answered. "Do be sure to follow the rules, please."

Lunetta had quite the knack for learning herself. *No, not like that! Don't learn from that man beside you, or you'll never grow up to be a proper adult...! Ha, as if! Go for it! Show 'em everything you've learned!*

In her fifteen years of life, Sophie had learned there was nothing to be gained from simply enduring life. The only things born from bearing and enduring and swallowing down your own feelings were confusion and resignation. Thinking about it now, it had all been so terribly unproductive. It was positively unfair that it had felt productive in the moment since everything had seemed to be moving along without issue. *But when it comes right down to it, it whittles away your energy on so many different fronts, so it really is just unproductive at the end of the day!*

Still, if someone wanted to do whatever they wanted, whenever they wanted, that'd just make them a pampered brat, so what really mattered was the timing and the content of what they wanted to do.

Sophie and Lunetta had both lived their lives completely ignorant of what constituted proper timing and appropriate content, so they didn't have the first clue as to what the proper balance was. They could hardly be blamed.

"Wh-What about the magic gem on me? W-Will you...?"

"Hold on to that for a bit longer, please," Lunetta said. "You're the lookout, after all."

Even if Lunetta made a less than humane remark, she still wasn't to blame. Sophie certainly couldn't imagine that Lunetta or any of the other Landslayer Witches had been treated humanely, so she hoped Lunetta's sharpness could be written off as karma coming back to bite them.

Watching the magician with the explosive magic gem still in his pocket kneel before the king, Sophie whispered into Lunetta's ear. "By the way...will that thing really explode?"

"It will," Lunetta answered. "It'll *sound* like it's exploding at least."

Lunetta was *exceptionally* humane.

*So she's pulling the wool over their eyes, huh?* Even if it were to "explode" somehow, they could hardly hold a grudge since it wouldn't cause any damage. Vyce's fiancée had grown quite used to such crafty tricks.

"Even the ones floating over there?"

"That's right," Lunetta said. "But that's just between you and me."

"I wouldn't dare breathe a word of it," Sophie answered with a chuckle.

Lunetta tilted her head just a bit to the side in confusion before nodding and spinning around to look at the king and the magicians, her black eyes sinking to the ground.

Her cold, dark eyes were piercing as they shifted between anger and delight.

"There's not a moment I won't be watching," Lunetta said, and the men all nodded at once like puppets.

"It seems like it ended up with them being terrified of Lady Lunetta. Is that okay?" Livio asked.

"Their fear is keeping them from trying to eliminate her, so that's all fine and well," Vyce answered. "They've probably built a lot of

that fear up over the years."

Sophie gave a silent nod as she listened along to Livio and Vyce speaking in quiet voices behind her.

After having thoroughly demolished the nation's hogwash history and threatened them all in no uncertain terms, Lunetta spun around once more and looked back at Sophie. Her black hair and dress fluttered in the air like butterflies in the breeze.

"All finished up here?" Vyce asked.

Lunetta nodded. "Yes, I want to go home now."

"Not take a break?" Sophie asked.

Lunetta shook her head before reaching into her bag and pulling out a long stave. The stave she pulled out was for casting magic, imbued with a red magic gem that matched Lunetta perfectly.

"I learned how to make the magic circle needed for transfer magic," Lunetta explained. "To activate it, we'll need a counterpart magic circle to serve as the coordinates for the spell, but with my magic, we can substitute that for the magic gem I have in the castle's laboratory, since it's imbued with my own magical energy. With that in mind, I'd really like to go home."

Lunetta brought the staff down on the ground, only for Vyce to clutch his head.

"You're not just making an excuse to try out a spell you just learned, are you?"

"That's not it... Not completely at least. Not wholly or entirely." Lunetta looked off to the side.

She probably just wanted to try it out.

After all, Lunetta had been the one to ask Vyce to punch her just so she could try out a spell. She was probably itching to test this new one.

Sophie found herself laughing before she could catch herself, which made Lunetta look back at them.

"But I meant it when I said I want to go home."

"So ya wanna go home, huh?" Vyce ran his fingers through his bangs, only for his black hair to fall back in place. "Why not?" he finally said, giving a small laugh. Sophie couldn't put her finger on how or why, but she felt like she had something of an idea of how

Vyce felt.

This was where Lunetta had been born. But to her, this was only a place she'd wanted to escape from—a place she'd wanted to crush.

Sophie glanced up at Livio. Realizing she was looking at him, Livio gave a wide-eyed blink as his long eyelashes rose up. His eyes were beautiful, cutting through the air and reflecting the light that fell upon them. Livio slowly narrowed his gentle blueberry eyes and softly took Sophie's hand. His palm was big, and warm, and strong.

The home Sophie wanted to return to was wherever Livio's warmth was.

Sophie smiled. Perhaps true happiness wasn't being able to go wherever she liked but, rather, having somewhere she wanted to return to no matter where her travels took her—the same way Lunetta could say that she wanted to go home.

"Well, in that case, let's go home, then."

"Yeah!"

Livio laughed at the energetic reply. "We've still gotta go get Matcha and Kataf."

Indeed, the two clever and strong steeds still remained in the forest.

After all, there was just no way they could've teleported into the castle along with everyone. If they had been discovered, the horses would've been in danger, and more importantly, there was just no way they could've shrugged it off.

*What? What's a horse doing in the castle?!*

*Dunno...maybe he got lost?* It was just too much of a stretch. And how could a horse get so lost they wound up in a castle? Sophie had never heard of a horse being so severely directionally challenged.

That was why the horses were patiently awaiting their masters' return. It fell to the four of them to go collect their sturdy steeds.

Lunetta gave a hearty nod. "We'll start by using the magic circle we had the mage write as the coordinates for the spell. Then we can make our way back to the forest. We'll then draw another magic circle to go home to the castle."

“Oh, I should draw another magic circle here so we can come back as needed, shouldn’t I?” Lunetta said, already beginning to scrape out a magic circle in the ground with the stave. Her hair, eyes, and even the stave were glowing.

*I see—so you put magical energy into it as you draw them, huh?* Sophie thought, watching Lunetta swiftly carve out the magic circle.

“Yeah,” Vyce said, giving a brief reply. “We’re gonna have to bring people here from our castle.”

“Hey, Lunetta,” Sophie started, “would the magic circle still activate even if I drew the other one?”

Sophie slowly lifted her hand up, and Lunetta blinked back in surprise.

“Do you know how?”

“I do.”

Livio glanced down at Sophie with a surprised look on his face. Sophie tilted her head to the side.

“But you just saw a little bit, right?” he asked.

“I was observing the whole time, though,” Sophie answered.

“Whoa, that’s some memory you’ve got there, Lady Sophie,” Livio said.

“No one’s ever told me that before...”

“Yup, now I’m angry,” Livio answered. “It’s been a minute since the last time I got angry on your behalf.”

*Huh?*

Sophie looked up at Livio as he dabbed at his eyes. Lunetta called her name and motioned her over. Sophie gently let go of Livio’s hand and ran toward her.

“This is for you,” the witch offered.

“Huh?”

From her bag, Lunetta pulled out a second stave. It was beautiful, with a patterned handle and a sparkling magic gem the color of topaz. The light from the sun reflected off the gem as the stave poured out golden light onto the ground.

“I found a good magic gem so I made this stave for it, but it didn’t work very well with me. But I think it will be a perfect fit for your magical energy, Sophie.”

"Well now."

Sophie turned around to the source of the low voice, finding Azuello looking intrigued and pointing a bulky forepaw at the stave.

"'Tis a good stave indeed," Azuello said. "Verily, it seemeth well suited to thy magic. Take it, master."

"What?"

*Hold up!* It was easy enough for a god who was used to offerings, but there was just no way Sophie could accept something so nice. If a god and the ultimate witch said it was a "good stave" with a "good magic gem," then there was no telling how much it might be worth. Fearing that the stave could be right up there with the enchanted bag that cost a whole nation's budget, Sophie rushed to decline the offer.

"That's just too much!" Sophie said. "It's far too fine for a novice like me!"

Lunetta looked puzzled. "Hmm? You're already well past novice status, Sophie. You're past the intermediate level and just short of advanced—somewhere around there."

"That's not the problem!" Sophie objected.

"Then just what is the problem, master?" Azuello asked.

*"What's the problem?" Wait, am* I *the one being weird here?*

Thinking that that couldn't possibly be the case, Sophie spun around looking for help, only to see Vyce waving his hand as if it couldn't matter any less. *And what's with that lazy look on your face?!*

"Go ahead 'n' take it," Vyce said. "Lunetta hardly uses staves. It's a waste to have treasure like that just sittin' around."

"That's right," Lunetta added. "And there wasn't a soul in the castle who was fit to wield it."

*Seriously?* Sophie's eyebrows sank as she stared at the stave being held out to her. *Even then, I can't just go taking it like it's no big deal...*

"Sophie, this spell takes a considerable amount of magical energy," Lunetta explained. "You won't be able to help without a stave."

"It would be my honor to accept this stave...!"

Just like Lunetta, Sophie couldn't win against her own curiosity.

With that out of the way, Sophie and Lunetta set about drawing the magic circles. Lunetta finished hers quickly, so she took the extra time to study Sophie's to make sure it was working properly, ensuring there were no mistakes and that magical energy was flowing where it needed to, all the while giving her advice on putting it all together. From the sound of it, her suggestions were meant to simplify the spell or to improve its efficacy. Desperately trying to commit it all to memory, Sophie scribbled away as she completed her work.

As if they were intrigued by what they were seeing of Professor Lunetta's Enchantingly Fun Magic Circle Classroom, a few magicians were glancing at them as they worked. It was just the least bit unpleasant. *Can't they just strut right up to see for themselves or ask questions? Nah, they probably can't.*

They were the same ones who'd been treating Lunetta as the Landslayer Witch until mere moments ago, as if the black-haired and black-eyed witch were a curse. It'd be just a bit much for them to suddenly pop up and say, "Howdy! Would ya mind showin' us that magic circle too?" Yeah...just a teeny bit much. Not that there was anything wrong with having that sort of straightforwardness or mindset, though. Sophie hoped they'd open their eyes just a bit more.

"Magic circles require an immense amount of magical energy, so normally, a magic gem made solely for that purpose is necessary, but this magic circle can save a great deal of magical energy. And with Azuello with us, we have nothing to fear," Lunetta explained with a nod.

Sophie wiped the sweat from her brow.

"Nice work!" Livio said with a smile. It was the smile of an angel, and the radiance of it sank deeply into Sophie's tired frame.

"Now then, let's use Sophie's magic circle to travel to the forest," Lunetta said. "I added a protective spell on my own magic circle to ensure no unwanted alterations are made to it."

Lunetta made sure to say the latter half in an especially loud

voice. It was a welcome warning for them: *Trying to erase the magic circle won't do you any good.* Magic circles normally lost potency after they'd been used once, but if the magic circle was meddled with before it could be used, it would be much more difficult to return. She'd taken precautions against just that.

Still, with the castle now just a vacant strip of land, they were unlikely to try anything so foolish—probably not, at least.

"Sophie, place the stave right here, and spread out your magical energy as if you were casting a defensive spell," Lunetta said, guiding Sophie. "There—just like that. Next, remember what the forest looked like. What were the trees like? The flowers? What about the air?"

Sophie closed her eyes as she followed Lunetta's guidance, drawing up the scene in her mind.

In that forest...there'd been white trees.

They were pure-white trees, as if they'd been covered in snow. There'd been small flowers densely covering the ground where they stood. The air had been clear enough for them to encounter a god.

"Where was the magic circle?" Lunetta continued. "What were the horses like?"

The man had drawn the magic circle where Lunetta had charred the grass with her fire magic. Sophie had a distinct memory about what sort of magic circle it was.

Waiting nearby were the jet-black Matcha and the bright-red Kataf.

"I cast a protective spell over it, but I'll leave the magic circle to you two," Lunetta had said, bowing her head at the horses.

With their gorgeous manes blowing in the wind, the two steeds had nodded, as if to say, *Yup, leave it to us.*

*I wonder if they were attacked by any monsters? Then again, even if they did run into monsters, they'd just give them a swift kick into next week, no doubt about it.* They were strong, smart, and beautiful horses.

*I really want to see them again*, Sophie thought as the corners of her lips curled up.

"Sophie, pay attention to Azuello's and my magical energy, and

bring yours together with ours," Lunetta went on. "That's right. Next, imagine that feeling that divides what's inside and what's outside. Something blocked. There—now connect them."

All the blood in Sophie's body felt like it was boiling.

It bubbled up inside her as her hands shook and sweat fell from her brow. Sophie laughed before she realized what she was doing. She herself didn't know what was so funny, but it was as if something terrifying were bursting up from within her, but she was holding it back and squeezing it out with the utmost care. It was just like that night when she'd lost herself before Livio's overwhelming beauty and kindness.

*Aah, ha ha! What is this? It's like it's not even my body!*

"Now, the incantation."

"*Directrill*!"

Sophie felt like she could hear a loud noise ring out next to her ears.

"Sophie!"

Snapping back to consciousness, she saw Livio's flustered face was very close. She exhaled as a breath stole past her lips.

Sophie realized that she'd apparently stopped breathing, then finally noticed that she was in Livio's arms.

"Livio...?"

"I'm so glad you're all right," Livio replied. "You collapsed as soon as the transfer was finished."

"What?"

Now *that* was a shocker!

Was it the fact that Sophie had collapsed? No. That *had* been surprising, but that wasn't all. What was really surprising was the fact that Livio had squeezed her in a tight embrace. *Y-You're not doing my heart any favors here!*

"Don't startle me like that...!"

*That's my line, thank you very much!* Sophie thought. Naturally, she couldn't voice a word of it.

Sophie slowly raised her hand and patted Livio on the back. *Wow, I didn't realize my hand could feel this heavy. Come to think of it, I've been using nothing but new magic, huh?* Sophie thought,

reflecting on her actions.

"I'm really sorry."

She'd promised to get stronger to make Livio happy, and now this. Her face fell in despair, only for Vyce to laugh.

"Stop with that apologizin' habit of yours, little miss," Vyce said. "You'll just wind up making less of yerself and the other person. We made it through just fine, so that means it's all okay. Just laugh it off."

"You did an excellent job," Lunetta said, nodding.

"Verily," Azuello said, applauding—with his massive, fluffy forepaws. *That's way too cute!* Sophie smiled.

"Thanks for worrying about me, Livio," Sophie said. "And for supporting me too."

"C'mon now... If you smile at me like that, I'll let you get away with anything!"

*"C'mon now," he says—how cute is that?* Livio's smile seemed to practically float away from his body as he laughed, whisking all of Sophie's exhaustion away with it.

Sophie had worked hard to try her hand at a new spell and succeeded, and if she got to see Livio's smile—his lethally beautiful smile that made her want to cry tears of gratitude for the whole world over—then to Sophie, this was paradise.

"Yowch."

And with Matcha there to give Livio a sharp nuzzle jab, it *was* heaven...even if there was a veritable mountain formed out of monster corpses behind the two horses. Those were just frivolous little details.

Everyone was fine, and that was all that mattered!

# Chapter Nine: The First

When the red light vanished, it was as if they were in the middle of some secret base.

Surrounding them were a collection of vials, medicinal herbs, books, quills, sheepskin parchment completely covered with magic circles and scribbles, and an array of colorful magic gems. It was all so chaotically crammed together, yet it seemed oddly cohesive. It was as if it were an illustration of a witch's room that one might find in a book.

"Whoa...!" The word stole past Sophie's lips before she even realized it, only to hear a beautiful laugh echoing out near her core.

"You certainly seem thrilled, Lady Sophie."

It went without saying that the owner of that voice was Livio, who was giving her a radiant smile as he firmly pressed himself against Sophie to support her since she couldn't walk on her own. His sturdy arms and frame were just as stunning as they'd been on that first night—and that dazzling face of his too.

What had changed, however, was the fact that one of Livio's hands had made its way to Sophie's waist.

Indeed, since wobbling to her feet after transporting the group with Lunetta's magic, Livio's hand had, without a doubt, made its way to Sophie's waist.

*Hmm?* Sophie thought. *Hrrrm.* Her happy-go-lucky brain had brandished its bell, ready to ring it at a moment's notice. *Is it my time to shine?*

*"At ease, soldier!" Or something like that!* Sophie thought. *Ha ha.*

Sophie was actually in the best of moods.

That night she and Livio had escaped the castle...Livio's hand had been on her shoulder. With Sophie crouched over, Livionis had hesitated to even extend his hand to her in true knightly fashion. While Sophelia had liked that about Livionis, she was simultaneously

delighted and embarrassed that the "proper" level of distance between them had disappeared. Sophie couldn't help the warmth that now surged through her chest.

Sophie looked up at Livio, only for him to narrow his eyes back at her.

"I mean, it's just like a secret base!" Sophie said.

"You've got a point."

Laughing, Livio squeezed in even closer, towering three heads taller than her. Because of his astounding size, when he clung to her as if he were trying to nuzzle the top of her head with his cheek, Sophie felt her chest squeeze tight. *He's so cute...it hurts.*

"Ah, so it *was* too much after all."

Sophie followed the quiet voice with her gaze to find Lunetta sitting on the ground.

Lunetta was looking at a magic gem that had shattered like glass, peering at it under the light.

"The magical energy..." Lunetta said. "I should've known it'd be empty."

"What were you makin' with that thing?" Vyce asked.

Lunetta flung away the shard. "It's not like I was trying to make anything. Phel gave me a large magic gem and I wanted to see how much magical energy it could store, so I'd just been filling it up, that's all."

"What were the results?" Sophie asked.

Lunetta tilted her head to the side. "Who knows? I poured a substantial amount of magical energy into it, but it seemed like there was still room to me, so I was still in the middle of the experiment." Lunetta paused, considering. "Still, I at least found out that, in the absence of a magic circle to serve as the spell's coordinates, a massive amount of magical energy is needed to help direct the spell, just as I expected. Furthermore, the transportation itself requires vast amounts of magical energy. In other words, the experiment's provided us with valuable insight: If one can prepare a densely filled magic gem and a tremendous amount of magical energy, then no magic circle is needed to serve as the spell's coordinates. It seems the situation at hand would dictate which method would be the most

effective."

*Well now*, Sophie thought, smiling.

Lunetta hadn't *just* wanted to come back home. Even after finding herself in a terrible situation and forced to grapple with her unsavory past, Lunetta's eyes still shone. It was written plain as day on her face: There were all sorts of things she wanted to test.

Sophie found herself feeling jealous of *that side* of Lunetta. She wasn't being sarcastic, nor was she trying to get in Lunetta's good graces—that was just how she felt.

For a long time, Sophie had envisioned herself as a fine fiancée to the crown prince, a fine crown princess, and a fine queen in turn. She had lived only for those roles. Feelings and personal sentiment hadn't been permitted. Perfection had been required of her, and in turn, Sophie had required that same perfection of herself.

If, for example, it had been Vyce she'd been paired with, things might've been different.

*"Perfection?"* She could practically hear the king snorting already. *Just take a look at how much Lunetta's grown. It's amazing—it really is.*

But it had been the prince that Sophie was paired with, and Sophie's parents had been what they were. In a different environment, the roles expected of her would have differed as well. In short, Sophie had never had any time for her own interests.

Training her voice, secretly practicing magic, reading the books that the queen had given her...they were all breaks from her duties and education.

That was why Sophie found the world of magic that Lunetta taught her about so fun. But when it came to getting so absorbed that all the other things stopped mattering, that wasn't quite the case for her. Sophie's interest in magic was just a curiosity for her, through and through. She'd just picked up a little bit from nibbling away at the edges of magical tomes here and there, that was all.

*Must be nice*, Sophie thought, watching Lunetta as she stared at the fragment.

*"Must be nice"?*

Was that really what she'd thought? Could she actually be jealous

of someone?

Sophie had gone through her life with half-closed eyes, convinced that that was just how the world worked, so jealousy was a new emotion for her—not that it felt particularly good.

*Whew... But still, to think people are out there living their lives with all these different, complex emotions and I just didn't know about it...* Sophie couldn't help but be just a bit impressed. *Wow, this "living" business is kind of a pain, huh...? Just kidding! Laugh it off, laugh it off!* If she didn't laugh it off, she felt like she might very well wind up depressed.

*Just how much of a boring excuse for a person am I?*

Even joking, Sophie didn't want to think about it—how that might've been why things hadn't gone well with the prince. She'd made up her mind to stop putting herself down like that.

"Lady Sophie?"

*No way! Did he just catch on to what I was thinking? No, he couldn't have. Calm down, Sophie—calm down.*

Sophie was confident she hadn't revealed any of her thoughts in her expression. "What is it?" she asked, tilting her head to the side as she looked up at Livio. She'd just completed a secret ritual to send the question right back to him.

Livio furrowed his brow just a bit, but then he smiled back at her right away. "Oh, it's nothing." His violet eyes were shining, but they housed a light Sophie couldn't let her guard down around. It was as if they were saying, *I'll let you "fool" me this time, but don't think I'll forget it.*

While Sophie had her reservations about straightforwardly declaring that she was jealous of Lunetta's ability to be passionate about something, Livio wasn't the type of man to mock her for that, and Sophie wanted to get his advice on the matter as well.

*We'll talk about it sometime*, Sophie thought, mentally bowing her head in gratitude to Livio for going along with it. *Sorry about that. I really like you!*

"Lunetta, save it for later." Just as always, the one stopping Lunetta as she'd started muttering to herself was Vyce.

"I'm starving!" he added, his brow furrowed as he opened the

door.

Looking closely, Sophie could see a defensive spell had been cast on the elaborately designed door. *Lunetta must do all sorts of experiments in here.* Half of her wanted to know all the details, while the other half would have rather not. Little Sophie found herself in a rather complicated state of mind.

Vyce swung the door open wide. "Well if that ain't perfect timing!" he gleefully remarked. "Jeykos, get a meal ready. And get ready to host guests," Vyce ordered. "When you've finished giving all the instructions, come to my room."

"Wh... What?"

The man whom he'd called Jeykos was a small-framed but serious-seeming man who looked to be in his fifties. Behind glasses that featured a sturdy chain, Jeykos's kind eyes blinked as he stared straight at Vyce.

"Is this some sort of vision...of His Majesty?"

"Do I look like a vision to you? Of course it's me!"

Come to think of it, Vyce should've been off enjoying a couple's journey with Lunetta right now. Lunetta's magical arsenal hadn't included a magic circle that enabled transportation in a single bound, nor had she had any plans to use such. To someone who must've been anticipating his master's return much later, a shock was all this could've been.

"Hmm?"

It didn't help that it wasn't just a strange man and woman emerging from the laboratory of his master's fiancée—there were horses popping out of the room all of a sudden too... He was bound to take a leap or two back in shock.

If Sophie had been walking around the castle and suddenly encountered someone who shouldn't have been there *and* there'd been horses popping up too... It would just be too much... Sophie might have very well collapsed from the shock of it all, had it been her.

"Th-That's Lady Lotus!!!" the man stuttered.

That was why Sophie couldn't help but feel apologetic. "I do hope you've been well..." Sophie replied, giving a polite curtsy as she

greeted the man.

The old man had the face of a kind father, but he was rather sharp—he was the nation's prime minister.

Put another way, he was the brains of the kingdom of Obdrael who would manage the castle in Vyce's place while the king fought on the front lines of a battlefield. Naturally, he was acquainted with Sophie given that she'd been the fiancée of the neighboring kingdom's crown prince.

"Oh, how to explain...?" Sophie started, searching for a good excuse.

"Can it," Vyce said, running his hand through his hair. "This girl here's Sophie. The boy over there's Livio. She's completely different from whoever you think she is. She's a part-time lady-in-waiting and guard—and she's Lunetta's friend. Got it?"

"Fr-Fr—"

Sophie and Lunetta looked at each other.

*Friend?*

Having a friend was *that* thing, right? That thing where you could have a meaningless conversation with someone with a cup of tea in hand and talk about the books you loved or the boys you liked. That thing that was pale pink, and soft, and fluffy, and seemed like it might smell like flowers.

While Sophie had her share of self-proclaimed "friends," she'd never had a conversation with most of them, and as a result, they demeaned Sophelia when she wasn't around in hopes of stealing her spot by the prince's side. They'd all been like that. Sophie had never met a girl like the ones in those romance novels—the type who'd cry and laugh and worry alongside you. That was what had led Sophie to believe that that sort of friend was yet another fantasy her imagination had drawn up.

Lunetta had gotten excited when she talked with Sophie about the magical tomes she loved reading, and she had listened to her when Sophie told her about the boy she liked. When they were together, she seemed to shine and burst with excitement. If it had a scent, she thought it might smell like ink on the pages of a book. They'd cried and laughed together, which was why...

"S-Sophie..."

Sophie blinked, startled at the flat voice addressing her. She felt her throbbing chest squeeze tight.

*Is it okay to say it? No?* Lunetta's eyes seemed to ask, looking as uncertain as a lost child's. Sophie smiled, knowing that she was sure to be making the same face herself.

*Is it really okay for me to be this happy?*

*Mmm... Guess it's fine! It's gotta be fine!*

After all, the very moment she'd taken the hand of that angelically beautiful masterpiece of the gods, Sophie had bid an eternal farewell to the life she'd lived until then.

Hesitating out of consideration would get her nowhere. *I'm going to do my best to reach out and grab what I want with my own hands!*

Sophie turned back to Jeykos. "I'm L-Lernetta's friend, Sophie! I-It's a pledger to meet you!"

She'd tripped over her own tongue.

If it had just been once, she could've passed it off and made a face as if she hadn't said anything out of the ordinary at all. If her voice had been a bit quieter, she could've gotten by simply by putting on a look that seemed to ask, *What's wrong?*

But Sophie had royally, officially, and politely tripped over her own tongue in a loud voice.

*I gave speeches before thousands and never tripped up then!* Sophie thought, wondering if her overly hot face might explode on her.

There, there. We'll just leave that one behind. Sophie felt as if she'd just made a blunder she'd likely never be able to forget for the rest of her days, but *you* can just forget about that bit.

It was amazing.

*That was amazing...* Sophie thought as she sank into a massive chair. The chair was covered in white cloth with pale pink flowers stitched onto its surface. Not only did it look adorable and luxurious at the same time, but it was soft and felt amazing to sit in. If she

had been the same Sophelia who'd never used a backrest, it would have surely been a heavenly comfort unlike any she'd ever experienced. But now that Sophie knew the wonders of backrests, she was unstoppable. She wasn't moving so much as an inch from the spot.

Sighing to herself, Sophie was alone in the room.

After taking on the form of a cat to avoid startling those in the castle, Azuello had found his heart snatched away by the cookies offered to the group, and Azuello the cat had snatched the maid's heart in turn. Noticing that Azuello seemed terribly curious about the castle's kitchen, the maid was now escorting him around for a tour. He was sure to be living it up surrounded by a mountain of cookies right about now.

Vyce had disappeared alongside Livio with a monster over his shoulder.

*A monster?* Yes, that was right—a monster.

Sophie had no idea what had happened, if some monster had seen Matcha and Kataf and said, "There're horses! Get 'em!" before launching their onslaught. Nonetheless, the two steeds had turned the tables on the monsters that had encroached on them, creating a mountain of monster corpses.

It was the very moment Sophie had questioned the definition of a horse.

*I mean, just think about it—if their owners are exceptional, there's just no way the horses would be able to keep up just being average!* It was the fruit of their labors. If they worked hard, would they be able to understand the words humans spoke and become monster-slaying steeds? *Let's not get into the question of what constitutes "working hard" for a horse.* After all, Sophie had decided that she'd doubt her own common sense instead. When did she decide that, you ask? When she left the castle behind her, probably.

The mere fact that she'd had a handsome man—practically a walking string of miracles—take her hand to run away from that place was already more than she could've ever expected. So to suddenly proclaim "there's no way horses could ever defeat monsters!" would be a waste of breath. Sophie would accept things

as they were and as she was. What was wrong with that? That was how Sophie wanted to try living.

Among the pile of defeated monsters Matcha and Kataf had created, there was a Deadripper.

*A Deadripper? What was that again?* It was why Vyce had been traveling.

He'd attended an evening party in the neighboring kingdom with his sights set on a type of monster meat that one could only have in a certain town. He'd avoided the main roads to instead embark on a journey alone with his fiancée—the sort of thing one could never imagine from the king of a nation. Whether they knew about that or not, Kataf, the king's beloved steed, and Matcha, who'd been keeping watch alongside him, had felled a Deadripper.

After seeing the large white bear that was as tall as Sophie herself, what had been Sophie's first impression?

"It looks just like Azuello..."

Perhaps it wasn't quite accurate to say the monster looked like Azuello—after all, Azuello had only been imitating the beast. But still, in her mind, Sophie equated white bears with Azuello.

With that association in her head, there was no way Sophie could stand to watch the monster be cut up or see the meat from the creature.

Livio must've been considerate enough to pick up on that. While Livio could deal with the beast himself without issue, he had instead proposed to Vyce that they have a pro butcher the monster since the meat tasted better that way. *That's what I like about him! Just watch!*

Vyce was Vyce, and he neither turned Livio down nor asked why. Instead, he simply laughed. "Works for me!"

The king had read Sophie like a book!

With that in mind, Vyce and Livio had set out, carrying the monster that had been teleported there on their shoulders. From the sound of it, they were going to call on the help of the owner of a restaurant that served monster cuisine.

Even after Lunetta entered the castle baths with Sophie, she had continued to think, muttering under her breath all the way. Since

using transfer magic for the first time, it seemed Lunetta's mind hadn't stopped working. Lunetta had gone on and on, talking about things that Sophie had no hope of comprehending.

It seemed Lunetta's maids and ladies-in-waiting were used to such things. They had waited for just the right moment to pop in and say, "Yes, certainly," before scrubbing Lunetta squeaky clean. After guiding Sophie to the room that had been prepared for her, they had given her a polite bow and urged her to relax until dinner.

Sophie had bowed back, looking over at Lunetta.

"What about you, Lunetta?"

"I still have plenty of energy, so I'm going to go see His Majesty. If we're going to send people to Magyck, I think the sooner we can send them, the better."

While Lunetta had threatened them and then some, Sophie certainly had her doubts as to whether or not that arrogant king and his magicians could really behave. Vyce had called Jeykos, the prime minister, to his quarters, so they'd likely begun evaluating whom to dispatch right away.

Sophie had nodded. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

Lunetta had already used the magic several times and had just returned to the castle. "Are you sure you're okay?" Sophie had asked.

"I'm quite confident in the reserves of magical energy I possess," Lunetta had replied. "But you must be tired, Sophie."

Lunetta had cast her head down as she looked up at Sophie. A bit taken aback, Sophie had nodded. Lunetta also knew full well that Sophie was a novice at magic. There was no point in lying about it. It *did* sting a bit, though.

"You've had your bath, so you can just take it easy."

"Got it," Sophie had replied, doing as she was told. Lunetta had given a satisfied nod back.

*That's right—the bath!* The bath had been amazing.

Remembering her time in the castle baths, Sophie let out a relaxed sigh.

The castle's baths had been, in a word, *amazing*.

The room Sophie had grown up in could've fit in threefold in the

massive bathing area, equipped with lion statues that had hot water pouring from their mouths. The baths were luxurious enough to boast a fountain shooting out hot water. Not only that, but the waters were sprinkled with pleasantly scented flower petals. *They called it a "princess perk," but I don't really know what that means!*

The baths were so extravagant they practically seemed to boast of the nation's wealth and power. But Lunetta wasn't the only one who'd been scrubbed squeaky clean.

The castle's maids and ladies-in-waiting had washed Sophie's body and her hair before giving her a massage with scented oil, leaving her skin soft, silky, and supple. The feel of her own skin was so nice she'd caught herself touching it without even realizing it.

"Your hair's such a beautiful color! It looks like silk woven with peridot!"

"And your skin's so healthy and radiant! Putting makeup on it almost seems like it'd be a waste!"

"But just look at how adorable she is! Our mission is to help make her even more adorable and even more stunning, isn't it?"

"That's exactly right! I'm sure Madam Lyedia's latest dress would look phenomenal on her! Allow me to suggest some makeup that would work *perfectly* with it!"

And that was how Sophie had found herself polished up to a sparkling gleam by the oh-so kind and oh-so dedicated maids and ladies-in-waiting.

*Wow... That was just amazing.*

It had been positively blissful—so nice and warm that she'd come close to making the blunder of going out like a light right in front of them.

Sophie had found herself so dressed up she was positively gleaming, dolled up and radiantly warm. It was enough to make her want to ask every person she met if it was really okay for her to be this happy.

Incidentally, Madam Lyedia was the most popular designer in the whole kingdom, from the sound of it. Sophie felt hesitant at the mere thought of wearing such an expensive dress, but the maids and ladies had insisted. "You'll get on Lord Vyce's bad side if you

don't!" they'd said without a hint of ill will, halfway forcing Sophie into the gorgeous dress.

They were frightfully efficient—they'd sent for the dress while Sophie had still been in the bath.

The dress was a soft, light blue, neither too large nor too small. It didn't have any garish ribbons that would clash with Sophie's plain face, nor were any needlessly showy jewels embedded in it. The design was enough to make Sophie's chest throb with heartfelt delight. *It's so cute!*

She'd been given a room and an elegant yet adorable dress, woven with care in both senses of the word. Now, surrounded by such gentle things, Sophie closed her eyes.

She was pleasantly tired, a wave of drowsiness falling over her.

Before she'd closed her eyes, at the far edges of her vision, Sophie could see through her window that the sun had already set and the stars were glittering in the sky.

The delicious sandwich she'd had with those fresh vegetables and the cookies that Azuello had fallen in love with were nearly gone from her stomach. *I'm starting to get hungry*, Sophie thought, opening her eyes. A different country meant different foods.

Having awakened to a newfound interest in food, Sophie's stomach rumbled. *The body always tells it like it is!*

It was then that Sophie heard a knock on the door.

She'd been in a daze, wondering if she'd ever lounged about so idly before, only to startle and rise to her feet at the sudden sound.

"Yes, come in!" Sophie answered.

The door opened just a bit. Sophie froze.

His hair was as black as the night, pushed to the side. His skin was snow-white, so pale you might be forgiven for thinking he'd never stepped outside. His long eyelashes seemed to rend the sky in two, framing the glimmering amethyst of his eyes. His lips were so flush with color Sophie almost wanted to ask if he'd put on lipstick. He cut a flattering figure, his long limbs filling out the white suit jacket and matching pants that accentuated his national-treasure-worthy face. Tying it all together was the black shirt he wore underneath, almost as if to remind all who saw it that he wasn't

some celestial being. With his jacket adorned with a pale green gem the color of her hair, Sophie felt just a bit immoral, as if she'd pinned an angel from on high down to the earth.

In other words, Sophie was mere moments away from losing consciousness at the sight of Livio, who was just as polished and cleaned up as she was.

*What? He's way too cool! Too handsome! Too amazing!*

Locking eyes with Sophie, Livio closed the door as if in shock, his cheeks flushing with color.



"Lady Sophie, you're more beautiful than ever."

*That's my line!* was what Sophie wanted to say back. He was practically the physical manifestation of the word "beautiful"! The word "beautiful" itself might very well declare, "The mantle of the word 'beautiful' is far too heavy for me to bear. I shall pass it on to him instead!"

And if you had someone like that compliment you, is there any possible way at all you couldn't be happy? Not a chance.

*What? I like him. This is perfect.*

What Sophie hoped to be perfectly clear about was that even she herself wasn't so simpleminded that a mere empty compliment from a handsome man would be enough to send her over the moon. But she was sure Livio's compliment was sincere, and she was crazy for him. She knew that, and that was exactly why her happy-go-lucky brain was rolling around and bouncing up inside her head. *Ring-a-ling-ling!* It was running around outside her head now. *Get back here, you!*

"You've gotten even cooler yourself, Livio," Sophie said, rising to her feet as she smiled at him in his dashing outfit.

"Urgh!" Livio clutched his chest and looked at the ceiling. "Just what're you planning on doing with me when you're looking this cute...?!"

He'd lost his mind. The only person the whole world over who'd ever say such a thing was Livio and Livio alone.

*Good thing he's got such weird taste in girls*, Sophie thought, grabbing Livio's hand. She stared up at him as he stood over her and she tilted her head to the side.

"Lunetta's ladies-in-waiting left a tea set ready so I could have tea whenever I'd like," Sophie explained. "Why don't you have a seat?"

"Is this going to be the day I die?"

"Don't say scary stuff like that!"

"You're so cute...!" Livio closed his eyes, shaking.

*That's why I've been telling you* you're *the cute one!*

Having Livio take a seat on the opposite side of Sophie, she grabbed the kettle. Thanks to a special magic gem that Lunetta had

devised and planted in the bottom of the kettle, the water inside was still warm. She poured the water into the teapot they'd already filled with tea leaves and let it steep.

Just when the leaves had started to spread out, Sophie's eyes narrowed happily as the pleasant fragrance of the tea tickled at her nose.

*Now then*, Sophie thought, *do I say it or do I not?*

To say it meant self-annihilation for Sophie. She herself was embarrassed. But even then, whether she did it or not, she just knew she'd be happy.

Resolving herself, Sophie looked up. "May I ask you something?"

"O-Of course!"

Looking up, Sophie found herself locking eyes straight on with Livio.

*Huh, was he looking at me the whole time...? Yup, he probably was.*

For her part, Sophie wanted to stare at Livio herself. *Now that's not fair!* Sophie thought, dropping her gaze as she poured tea into the cups.

"Hey, Livio...?"

"What is it?"

*"What is it?" That's what he says?!*

*Look at you just trying to play dumb with that beautiful mug of yours! You know you're cool enough to get away with it too!* Sophie thought, internally tumbling around with her happy-go-lucky brain as she quietly placed the cup in front of Livio, which he took.

She noticed he wasn't wearing gloves—his fingers were long and slender yet rugged and masculine. He gently wrapped his fingers around the handle of the cup and brought it to his lips in one smooth motion.

He truly was the masterpiece of the gods of all creation.

*Wow...* Casting an enraptured gaze at Livio, Sophie brought herself to say it.

"Won't you just call me Sophie?"

The handsome knight, the very one that Sophie could look at for the rest of her days and never grow weary, choked—unmistakably so

—on his words.

"I-I'd just gotten so flustered back there, I..."

With his eyes watering from his coughing fit, Livio looked up at Sophie, and her heart nearly leaped out of her chest.

*He's just so cuuuuuuuute! He takes first place in the cute contest! How adorable can he be? Those teary blueberry eyes and those bright red cheeks! He's so tall I have to look up at him, so what's he doing staring up at me with puppy-dog eyes like that? How does he do that each and every time?*

It didn't make any sense at all to Sophie, but then again, Livio was so handsome it didn't make any sense either.

"You can make a face like that, but you won't fool me," she lied through her teeth.

*Does how he addresses me even matter?* Sophie thought. *Besides, he's cute. So long as I get to see that adorable mug of his, I don't have a thing in the world to worry about. If that's the case, then it's all well and good. Besides, he's cute. I don't want to force him to call me a certain name or anything. Besides, he's cute. Right?*

It was, however, just the tiniest bit sad—that was all.

Sophie had discovered how ticklishly nice it could feel to be addressed with such familiarity. She was just being selfish and greedy. It was enough for her to feel surprised at herself for feeling just a bit sad about it all. *Hey there, new me!* The fact that she got a little shy around strangers was just part of her charm. While Sophie wasn't the biggest fan of that part of herself, she didn't think she hated that side of herself either. *Oh, I'm sure we'll get along just fine in time!*

Sophie laughed and smiled at Livio, whose shoulders slumped.

"I'm only joking," Sophie said. "Please, don't push yourself." She didn't want to put him in a bind.

Then again, seeing that cute face of his, maybe—just maybe—Sophie *did* want to put Livio in a bind. A door that she had sealed shut at some point was starting to rattle within her. *Okay, don't you even think of coming out!*

Sophie lifted her teacup, looking completely innocent.

Enjoying the scent of the black tea, Sophie took her time to savor

its flavor and the fragrance filling her mouth. Eventually Livio whispered, “Please don’t look so sad like that.”

“Huh?”

“I’m not trying to make you sad...”

Had she been making such a face?

She wasn’t sad, and as far as she was concerned, she’d just smiled like usual. Sophie tilted her head to the side in surprise as Livio messily ran his hand through his bangs. *Oh, and you had it styled so nicely too!*

“Lady Sophie, you’ve always been my first love, forever out of reach,” Livio said. “I always looked up to you—wanted to be near you. I was desperate to *be* like you.”

Livio paused. “You’re special to me.”

With Livio looking at her and furrowing his brow in concern as he answered her, just what else could Sophie even hope to say...?

With his messy hair looking unspeakably sexy and a face that broke the hearts of men and women alike, could he really be unable to call Sophie by her name? Apparently so. *It’s fine—whatever works!* If Sophie had it in her to say no to that face of his, then she never would’ve taken his hand that day.

Drunk on the sweet wine of seeing Livio’s face flush with his feelings for her, Sophie’s brain and heart alike cheered up in blissful satisfaction. *This is why I’m here.*

“Livio—”

“So would you please give me some time?”

“Huh?”

*It’s fine—sorry for saying something weird like that.* Sophie thought to tell Livio that, but she could only blink as he gave his desperate response.

“Whatever you might wish for, no matter what it might be, I want to make it come true. I want to be the sort of man who can bring you joy.” Livio paused. “So...would you please wait just a little while longer?”

*Whew. Well now...* There was just one way Sophie could answer that.

With those eyes of his staring at her—eyes like a twinkle of light

in the bittersweet, trembling night sky—and Livio saying all that, was there anyone out there who could just say, "Forget about it! I can't wait," or something like that? Of course there wasn't!

Sophie gave Livio a heartfelt smile. *You can do whatever you please.*

"I'll be glad to wait...and looking forward to it all the while."

"Lady Sophie..."

*Even though you held me* there—*you know "there."* But if she were to say that? Even Sophie had... Well, it wasn't like the thought *hadn't* crossed her mind.

She couldn't bring herself to say it, not to mention how embarrassing it was. Besides, it'd seem like she was criticizing him for it.

What was more, knowing Livio, he might very well say, "I'm so terribly sorry for acting so improperly. I'll be more cautious moving forward." It seemed likely he'd stop touching her altogether after that. That wasn't what she wanted. That would be the absolute worst possible turn of events for Sophie.

In that case, staying silent was in Sophie's best interests. *It's okay.* Compared to the days she'd had to swallow all sorts of unappetizing, nauseating things, swallowing down a slowly stewed blueberry jam was nothing short of a moment of utmost bliss. It was just teatime. *Someone fetch the scones!*

Just smiling and giggling back at each other felt like they were basking in sunlight. In reality, the night sky was positively beaming with stars, but that was all well and good. So long as Livio was there with her, it was all well and good as far as Sophie was concerned.

Just as the two sat in the heartwarming company of each other, a knock rang out in the room.

Both of them flinched, their shoulders bouncing high. Sophie and Livio looked at each other and laughed.

After being told that dinner was ready and that they were summoned to the dining hall, the two entered, Vyce looking up at them, wearing a pair of glasses with documents in his hand.

For what it was worth, Vyce had merely tied his hair back in a

bun and put on a white shirt. While it was a little late to be pointing it out, he didn't look kingly at all. He seemed so rough around the edges it was a question of whether he was even fit to sit at the dinner table. Naturally, that didn't bother Sophie and Livio. Regardless, they upheld their etiquette with a polite nod before being guided to their seats by a maid.

"Get a little rest?"

"I did," Sophie answered. "Even though it might only be a part-time job, I'm a lady-in-waiting, and with no standing to call my own now...your hospitality is almost too much to accept."

Livio nodded along in agreement.

Vyce stowed away his glasses in his chest pocket. "Enough of all that. It's not like yer out in front'a the public or anything, so don't be so uptight. You two're staying here as friends of Lunetta and myself. I might not look it, but I'm still a king, y'know. I've got my own honor to uphold, so just can it and let me treat you."

Vyce bundled up the documents and handed them to the attendant who'd swiftly appeared at Vyce's side.

"Dressin' up suits you two," Vyce said, bursting out laughing. "This is about as fancy as it gets for me. They're all delighted they've got someone worth dressin' up now, y'know."

*I see...*

Comparing Vyce and the attendant heartily nodding beside him, Sophie couldn't help but mentally nod in agreement herself.

From the standpoint of someone helping him get ready, just having Vyce wear a white shirt was hardly worth it. On second thought, Vyce seemed like he'd turn down any attempts to help him dress.

As far as that was concerned, as a guest who was unable to turn Vyce down, Livio was also a subject worth assisting and then some. The servants might've wound up wanting to have him try on a whole mountain of clothes. Even Sophie wished she could've been in the mix with them.

Just when Sophie had found herself oddly convinced, she heard the latch of the door as it opened.

There was Lunetta, wearing a black dress with her black hair put

up. It was impressive, if not surprising, that she wore black from head to toe, even when dressed up.

"You get some rest too?" Vyce asked.

"I did," Lunetta replied with a nod, but the ladies-in-waiting behind her quietly shook their heads.

*I bet she's had nothing but magic on her mind even after she and Vyce went their separate ways earlier.* Judging from the tired look the ladies-in-waiting all had in their eyes, Sophie couldn't help but get the sense that they'd had to practically drag Lunetta here. *Nice work.*

"Don't give your ladies-in-waiting such a hard time," Vyce said.

"You're one to talk, Your Majesty," Lunetta replied.

They were birds of a feather. *They really do suit each other.*

With the well-matched pair now together, the servants brought out the food. It truly was an unusual sight, watching as dish after dish was lined up across the massive table.

"Sorry if it's not the best etiquette, but bringing out just a tiny bit at a time always got on my nerves," Vyce said. "Bear with me, yeah?"

"It's so thrilling to see the dishes lined up like this—I like it!" Sophie replied with a smile.

Vyce laughed. "Isn't it?"

Sophie had always eaten alone at home, so a trayful of food was all she'd been used to in the first place. Unless it was a special occasion such as a meal with the king or some other important figure, she had never gotten to experience the sort of meal where multiple dishes were elegantly served to her one at a time. To Sophie, it didn't matter whether the food was lined up all at once or brought out dish by dish——it all seemed a lavish feast.

There were thick steaks, glistening pies, a soup with beans floating on its surface, and a beautiful dish with multiple layers of vegetables arranged like a mille-feuille pastry. The wondrous sight of countless dishes lining the table was enough to make Sophie's heart leap.

But looking closely, each of their plates was a different size. Lunetta's was even smaller than a child's plate—so small it looked

like a toy. Vyce's and Livio's plates were so massive they brought to mind a question of how many mouths they were sized to feed. The plate in front of Sophie was probably the standard size.

After having dined together a few times, Vyce had likely instructed his servants on how much each of them ate. While it seemed a bit surprising in light of the way Vyce spoke and behaved, Sophie couldn't help but be secretly impressed by how considerate their host was. *He really is cool—that's the sort of grown-up I want to be*, Sophie thought, making sure to write that down in her mental notebook.

"All righty then," Vyce said. "Eat till you can't!"

Vyce earned high marks for the fact that he was just a little bit cute when he lit up and smiled like that.

*By the way...those two have massive plates, but didn't they already eat that monster meat earlier?*

The size of their stomachs was a mystery.

"So? What're you two gonna do about your jobs?"

"You bring that up like we're going to be living in this kingdom," Livio replied without blinking an eye, "We're not falling for that."

Vyce clicked his tongue in annoyance. Admittedly, there *was* something nice about having a king take a liking to you.

"That won't work," Livio continued. "Sophie and I are still in the middle of our journey."

"I'm just joking."

"It didn't sound like a joke."

"Can it," Vyce said, tilting back his wineglass, taking multiple gulps of the wine before gently setting the glass down. "Well, it is true that I want you two. It doesn't matter if you're from another country, another race, or even if you're elopin'—if you've got talent, then I want ya."

Vyce gave a mean-spirited sneer, leaving Livio and Sophie at an unexpected loss for words as they looked at each other. The red of Livio's cheeks perfectly matched the meat on their plates. Was that because of the pleasantly barrel-scented, full-bodied wine? Probably not. Sophie's cheeks had to be red as well.

Sophie cleared her throat, locking eyes with Vyce, whose eyes narrowed happily as if he were having a blast. “Do you have other races in your castle too?” she asked.

“Yeah,” Vyce answered. “There’re beastmen, elves, and...what else again?” Vyce turned around to look at his attendant.

The man smiled in response. “I’m demonkin myself, Your Majesty. And the soldier managing your armory is a dwarf.”

“Oh yeah, that’s right.”

*“That’s right,” he says!*

Sophie blinked as the attendant’s smile grew to a grin. “His Majesty only categorizes people into a handful of groups: those he’s related to, those he likes, those he can use, diplomatic relations, those he doesn’t like, and those he can’t use.”

“Hey, don’t you go pokin’ fun at me!”

“I’d never dream of it.”

The attendant gave a handsome laugh behind his round glasses. He was being honest—probably. His eyes were warm, looking happy and proud, with nothing but trust in Vyce, so it was funny to see Vyce himself grumbling about it.

“Have you decided on your next destination?” the attendant asked Sophie and Livio with a smile.

At that, Vyce nodded and raised his pointer finger. “There are three ships leaving from here in the near future. The first goes to the continent to the east, but it leaves the day after tomorrow, so you won’t make it unless you really hurry to make your preparations for the journey. Not to mention it’s a trading ship—don’t get your hopes up for any hospitality.”

Vyce flicked his second finger up. “The next goes to the neighboring country on the other side of the eastern sea. You’ll arrive after a day or so, so it’s probably good for your sea voyage. It sets sail two weeks from now.”

“And last,” Vyce said, raising his third finger, “is the ship going to the nation to the south. It’s a passenger ship, and the most luxurious of the three, so a young lady like you wouldn’t have anything to worry about, but it’s not going where you wanna go, so really, you only have two options.”

Just like that, Vyce propped up his chin with his hand and narrowed his eyes like a cat. “No matter what ship you go with, I’ll talk with them to make sure you’re not treated badly, and I’ll make arrangements so you can hop right on,” Vyce went on. “Either way, you have a whole day tomorrow. You can fret over it or start preparing—whatever you’d like. Once you’ve made up your mind, tell whoever’s close to tell me, Arvey, or Jeykos.”

“I apologize for the delayed introduction. I am Arvey,” the attendant said with a polite bow.

Arvey’s smile was frighteningly beautiful. Sophie remembered that she’d heard many of the demonkin had well-shaped features.

Crediting his beauty to the fact that he was a demonkin was just a bit nonsensical, given that Sophie had a human beside her who periodically left her wondering if he were actually an angel. Either way, Arvey had a sort of beauty that seemed to conceal both his age and gender—the sort of charm that made her nod right along with the stories she’d heard.

“Your Majesty...” Quietly laying down her cutlery, Lunetta called to Vyce.

“Huh?”

Come to think of it, Lunetta had been munching away in silence the whole time. The small plates that had almost certainly been prepared just for Lunetta had all been cleaned off.

“May I be excused?”

Vyce paused. “Sure. That’s enough for today. Get some rest now.”

Lunetta fell silent.

“Makin’ a face like that won’t get ya anywhere,” Vyce said. “Aysha, you locked the laboratory, right?”

From Sophie’s perspective, Lunetta looked completely expressionless, so she couldn’t say either way. The maid—Aysha—bowed her head and answered, “Naturally.”

*Guess he’s got a point. If he didn’t do all that, I could see Lunetta hiding away in her laboratory all night long. On second thought, she’s probably got a habit of doing that.*

“You heard me—that face ain’t gonna work,” Vyce repeated.

“I know...” Lunetta answered.

"Arvey, what about the library?"

"That door's been locked as well," Arvey said, beaming.

Lunetta froze. Even though she was expressionless, Sophie could tell Lunetta was so shocked she could practically see a bolt of lightning crashing to the ground behind the girl. *Yup, this has definitely happened before.*

"Your Majesty," Lunetta said.

"You were plannin' on runnin' off to the library, weren't ya?"

"I'll go back to my room..."

"Yes, you will."

With a heavy, defeated sigh, Lunetta rose to her feet and gave a polite bow. The way her black dress fluttered was stunning.

"I'll be taking my leave now, Sophie and Livio."

"Okay," Sophie answered. "Get some rest this evening."

"Good night," Livio said.

Lunetta nodded before the maid named Aysha—the one with the key to the laboratory—guided her out of the room. Sophie watched Lunetta's small frame as she exited. Even after she'd gone, Sophie couldn't help but keep her eyes fixed on the door.

"Is Lunetta okay?" she asked.

"Especially after all that commotion earlier," Livio added.

"Yer right," Vyce answered with a laugh. "Yeah...that's probably part of it."

"Was there anything else worrying her?" Sophie asked.

"Who knows?" Vyce said with an airy laugh. The smile that broke across his face seemed both mean-spirited and kind all at once—it was right in character for him. Sophie tilted her head in confusion.

"If you feel like it, go and check on her," Vyce said.

"Is it okay if I go?" Sophie asked.

"You'd prolly be the best choice."

As far as Sophie was concerned, there was no one better suited for the task than Vyce himself. But if Vyce, who knew Lunetta better than anyone, was telling her to go, then she was more than happy to rush to Lunetta's side.

"Would it be all right if I went after her now?" Sophie asked, knowing full well she was breaking etiquette. While she had her

reservations about taking her leave when she was in front of a king, letting it get too late wouldn't be good either.

Vyce nodded back and raised his hand toward one of the maids waiting.

"Grab some tea or something and show her the way," Vyce ordered.

"As you wish," the maid answered, then turned to Sophie. "Might you be so kind as to wait just a moment?"

Sophie nodded before turning to look at Livio, who greeted her gaze with a gentle smile. *Urgh! He's practically shining!*

"If you'd like, why don't we go down into town tomorrow?" Livio asked. "We can talk about which ship route we'll take then."

"That'd be wonderful!" Sophie replied. "I'm already looking forward to it!"

As a former noble lady, Sophie had never explored a town before. Even when they'd stayed in the inn, she'd slept through the chance to explore the town, so it was no exaggeration to say that it would be her first time going out and about. Sophie was so delighted she couldn't contain the wide smile that broke across her face, which made Livio cover his face with both hands.

"You're so cu—"

"You two goin' on a date?" Vyce asked. "Well ain't that nice! Go and have a good time!"

"Would you like me to provide you with a map highlighting all of our local recommendations?" one of the servants asked.

With the pleasant stares of the adults all falling on her, Sophie's face grew even warmer. She felt she was bound to be wine red.

After coming to collect Sophie and inform her that all the preparations were in order, the maid knocked on the door before her, the sound echoing out in the long hallway they now found themselves in.

In response, Aysha, the maid, poked her head out from behind the door, looking at Sophie and the maid who had guided her.

"Just a moment, please," Aysha said before bowing and retreating inside.

After a moment, the door swung open wide.

"Apologies for keeping you waiting," Aysha said. "Please—come in."

Sophie gave a brief nod to the maid and stepped inside.

The room was well organized—a far cry from the laboratory. Both the sofa and cushions in the room were plain and lacked any pattern, but even then they seemed fitting for Lunetta.

Just when Sophie started to feel alarmed that she didn't see Lunetta, the girl poked her head out from the other side of the balcony. Her hair and dress were the same as they had been at dinner—it seemed Sophie hadn't bothered her while she was trying to get some rest. *Whew!*

Sophie smiled. "Sorry to bother you."

"You're not bothering me..." Lunetta answered. "I wasn't planning on going to bed yet."

"Oh, okay. Um...would it be all right if I came over to you?" Sophie asked furtively.

Lunetta nodded.

Seeing this, the two maids began laying out the teaware on the balcony's tea table. The tea set was made of white porcelain with flowers etched onto its surface in black and gold. There were large flowers, small flowers, and tangles of ivy. It was an intricate design, but as the colors it used were rather simple, it had a refined elegance to it that suited Lunetta.

The two maids gave a polite bow to Sophie and Lunetta before leaving the room. The maids didn't miss a thing, that was for sure. Sophie wouldn't have expected anything less from the maids working in Vyce's castle.

It was now just the two of them as a gentle breeze of wind swayed the room's curtains. It was a splendid night, the air reverberating with the distant buzz of insects and the calm breeze.

Sophie looked back at Lunetta. Lunetta stared back at her, looking perplexed.

"I was just a little, well, worried about you at dinner back there," Sophie finally said.

Lunetta paused. "I'm sorry if I upset you."

"That's not it at all!" Sophie quickly shook her head. *Ugh...this is a tough one. Really tough.*

Making matters worse was the fact that Sophie wasn't good with conversations that weren't presentations or negotiations. It didn't help that it was also her first time trying to be considerate and asking someone if there was something bothering them. How was she supposed to bring it up? How was she supposed to make sure she didn't hurt Lunetta's feelings? More importantly, was this even something she should have been trying to do? *Just how does everybody else do this?*

"I just got a little w-worried thinking that there might be something b-bothering you, so..."

As a result of all her worrying, the words that came out of Sophie's mouth weren't carefully padded at all—instead, she'd shot her question out so straight that it seemed to tear through the air. *Kill me now.*

*Ha ha, just look! Lunetta's all frozen up! Of course she is! Urgh...*

"I-I'm sorry, that was terribly ill-mannered of me, wasn't it? Um..."

"No, it's, uh..." Lunetta fumbled for her words. "It just sounded like you were concerned for me. I was just a little taken aback, that's all. I'm the one who should be apologizing."

"You don't need to apologize for that. Hope I didn't make you worry on my behalf," Sophie replied. "I'm sorry."

"No, no, I'm the one who's not used to, well, *this sort of thing*, so I'm, uh...really sorry."

"No, not at all! I'm the one who—"

"No, it's my fault for—"

The two girls fell silent.

Realizing that they were deadlocked in an apology battle, the same thought occurred to them.

*There's no end to this.*

After having a full conversation merely by looking at each other, the two blinked. Lunetta dropped her eyes to the floor as Sophie laughed. "It's the first time I've ever tried talking to someone about something like this, so I'm not used to it either. So I really am sorry

if I upset you." She paused, turning frank. "Hey, Lunetta? Are you okay? All that stuff just happened, and I don't think you could be fine after all that, but..."

Lunetta blinked in surprise and turned her head to the side. "All that stuff?" Her bangs swayed across her face. "Oh, no. That's all okay. I destroyed the castle and felt a lot better, so I think I'm all fine now."

*You think you're "all fine now"?* Was it really okay for her to just sweep it all away like that?

Sophie was just a little—no, rather—*quite* surprised.

"In the end, sealing away our lives and deaths was the right choice, but now no more witches will be sealed away there ever again. So, I think that all worked out for the best. It's like, oh—how do you describe it? Like how it feels when the weather's nice."

Lunetta seemed completely unbothered as she twisted her head to the side in thought. Sophie wanted to say, *You've got to be joking!* But instead, she swallowed her words and smiled.

"Refreshing?" Sophie suggested.

"That's it. I feel better now."

In Sophie's lowly opinion, however, all that trouble wasn't something that could just be swept away like that.

*I mean, it was sixteen whole years!*

It was sixteen years that Lunetta had been there without being treated with any semblance of kindness. So many of her ancestors had suffered in the same way. Those around them had been terrified of the witches, blaming them for everything—claiming it was their fault, that they were a curse. But standing at the top of it all was the royal family, the true cause of everything. *Hmm? What's this now? Just thinking back on it is enough to make* me *so boiling angry I feel like I could topple over.*

But that was all fine for Lunetta herself, and everything from here on out was bound to put a twinkle in Vyce's eye. In light of that, there was hardly much left for Sophie to say.

"Really? Well, I suppose that's a good thing."

Was it *really* a good thing? Sophie didn't know, but since Lunetta was nodding, it must've been. Sophie took a sip of the warm tea.

The feeling was complicated and hard to describe, but Sophie swallowed it down along with the tea.

"Well...was there something else bothering you then, Lunetta?" Sophie asked, despite wondering if it was really okay for her to ask at all. Vyce had entrusted her with this responsibility, so now she had to fulfill it. With her own concern and Vyce's words in her heart, Sophie mustered all her courage.

Traversing into the inner world of another was a terrifying matter for Sophie. She could hear her heart pounding in her chest.

It went without saying that the pounding wasn't the saccharine beating of a lovestruck heart. It was the pessimistic, terror-driven sort of pounding—the sort that made her wonder just what she'd do if she made Lunetta uncomfortable, if Lunetta wound up disliking her or found her annoying. Sophie clenched her fists.

Lunetta's brow was furrowed.

Lunetta—the same Lunetta who hardly showed any expression at all—was furrowing her brow.

*Did I make her* that *upset?* Sophie's heart pounded in her ears as an unpleasant bead of sweat slid down her back. *But I'm wearing an expensive dress...* Sophie thought, only to break out in a sweat again.

"I-I'm sorry, Lunetta," Sophie stuttered, rushing to apologize. "That was really too much for me to—"

Lunetta shook her head back and forth. Watching Lunetta bite her lip, Sophie awaited Lunetta's next words, her eyebrows falling.

"That's...not it," Lunetta answered. "I guess you could say this is my problem, or maybe it's just me being selfish."

"And that's something I shouldn't be asking about...?" Sophie asked.

Lunetta lifted her face. "Oh, no, that's not, um..." Lunetta replied ambiguously, her gaze bouncing all around.

Part of Sophie was in a flustered rush to ask Lunetta if she'd asked something she shouldn't have. *Hold up*, Sophie thought as those same feelings wilted away; Lunetta looked far more shaken than Sophie was. Sophie was the type to calm down whenever there was someone upset in front of her.

Sophie tilted her head. If Lunetta hadn't wanted her to ask that, then she likely would've just apologized to dodge the question and distance herself. Sophie would've done the same.

Both Sophie and Lunetta were unaccustomed to having casual conversations with others or revealing how they felt inside. Even if Sophie had known nothing about Lunetta's upbringing, that was the sort of thing that she just knew, even though she couldn't quite pin down why. *Birds of a feather flock together, right?*

Which was exactly why, in the absence of a clear refusal, Sophie decided to resolutely call Lunetta's name.

"Lunetta! Would you tell me what it is then? If you don't mind, that is. I'm your, uh, that is..." Sophie felt her body grow warm.

It was a pleasant, temperate evening, but now? *It's hot! Guess that's the wine kicking in? No, that can't be it.* Sophie summoned up her courage.

"I-I want to be friends with you, Lunetta!"

Sophie could've sworn she heard some sort of popping sound come from Lunetta, her cheeks flushed rose pink beneath the faint layer of rouge on them. It was a sumptuous, adorable color—without so much as a hint of aversion.

Sophie gave a relieved sigh and smiled. "I was really happy when Vyce called me your friend. I've never had a friend before, and if it wouldn't bother you, Lunetta, then..."

"I-It doesn't bother me at all!" Lunetta replied in a voice that was rather loud by her standards. She seemed to have surprised even herself, her eyes widening. Sophie couldn't help but smile. *She's just like a little kid.*

"I'm really glad to hear that," Sophie replied. "So then, I guess, you're my first, uh...friend, Lunetta."

"You're my first too... My first friend."

Lunetta nodded as Sophie's heart filled with warmth.

*I really wish I'd met you sooner*, Sophelia's inner child said, speaking up from within as she wrapped her arms around a huge book.

If Sophelia had had a friend just a bit sooner—a friend who would have accepted her even though she wasn't interesting or cute or

charming—then she was certain she would've been able to like herself, even just a little bit. Even in the midst of those colorless, gray days, she was sure she would've been able to breathe.

*No point fretting over all that now, though!*

Sophie was who she was now because of those same days and because she'd found within herself the courage to cast off the depressing weight of it all. Sophie was certain that was exactly why she'd been able to do what practically amounted to confessing her feelings to Lunetta. Being able to tell someone you liked them was something you could only do when you could trust that they didn't dislike you. Sophie knew that full well.



The fact that Sophie had now acquired a friend by the name of Lunetta was all thanks to Livio, who'd showered Sophie in compliments and called her cute without any reservations. Maybe that knight really was an angel after all—an angel heralding good fortune ahead.

"So, then, um...Lunetta," Sophie asked, drawing on the courage she'd received from that same angel. "If you don't mind me asking again, would you mind telling me if there's something bothering you?"

It wasn't like Sophie would be able to do anything about it, but even then, Lunetta clenched her small hands in response. There, in her tightly squeezed fists, was bound to be Lunetta's own courage.

Sophie waited for Lunetta's response with bated breath, but she remained silent for a few long moments.

Finally, Lunetta spoke up. "You're going away, so..."

"Hmm...?"

*Wait,* me*? What?*

*Huh?* Sophie blinked.

"Because I'm...going away? Um...do you mean because we turned down Vyce's work and are going to continue our journey?"

Lunetta paused again. "I wanted to be together longer."

*Whaaaaaat? That's just so cute, though! She's so cute! And I'm so happy!!! What? You're telling me that's what she was sad about? Because she didn't want to say goodbye?* Sophie covered her face and gave a deep sigh.

*Oh, I get it now—so this is what Livio feels like when he covers his face? What even is that? I just like them so much! Who, you ask? Livio and Lunetta, that's who!* With the greatest love and the greatest friend to now claim as her own, Sophie's life was in the highest, blossoming peaks of spring. *Doo-doo-do-dooooo!* The wonderful music echoing through her mind was enough to bring a tear to her eyes. *I'm so glad I'm alive.*

"I'm sorry, Sophie, I didn't mean to—"

"That's not it, Lunetta," Sophie replied. "Right now, I'm just overcome with the joy of being alive."

"Hmm?"

Sophie clutched Lunetta's hands before she even realized what she was doing. Lunetta tilted her head in confusion. *The way she's just chirping about so anxiously is way too cute!* That was all in Sophie's imagination, however. Lunetta remained just as expressionless as ever.

"You're a dear friend and the greatest witch. I couldn't respect you more," Sophie said. "So tell me, is there a sort of spell that would allow us to communicate over letters?"

Lunetta looked surprised. "Not through voice or images but letters? You mean a spell for exchanging physical matter?"

"That's right," Sophie answered. "With letters, we can both take our time communicating with each other without having to rush, right? And I've always dreamed of getting letters from a friend."

Sophie had only ever received invitations with nothing more than a superficial interest in her. She'd never had any sort of private communication with anyone. *I wonder what it would feel like to receive a letter addressed to me?* Sophelia had always been envious of others who got to experience that.

"I want to get letters from you too, Sophie," Lunetta said, her obsidian eyes sparkling as she tried to conceal her own blush. "And the magic sounds fascinating too. We could repurpose the transfer spell that we used today."

"But if you either have to draw a magic circle on the ground each time or use a massive amount of magical energy, wouldn't that be a little bit inconvenient?"

"Correct," Lunetta replied. "But if it was only a small letter, it wouldn't take that much magical energy, so in that case it would just be a matter of carrying around a magic circle or using a magic gem..."

"So you'd have to be able to send it even when the recipient has their magic circle or magic gem put away, right?"

"Yes, you're right," Lunetta said. "Between the two of us, you're the one who'll be on the move, so... In that case, perhaps it would be best to weave in magic to manipulate space as well. No—that would be too burdensome. But if we were to try and limit the place where the required parts would be stored to a bag, for instance..."

Lunetta was likely sketching out all sorts of magic and spells in her mind that very moment. Almost as if she'd forgotten Sophie was standing right there in front of her, she began to draw something in the air with her finger as she muttered beneath her breath. *Is that a magic circle?*

Sophie couldn't stop a chuckle from sneaking past her lips.

Lunetta looked up as if snapping out of a trance.

"Hey, Lunetta?" Sophie started. "There are still so many different things I want to see. I want to go to all sorts of different places and try all sorts of foods and discover parts of myself I didn't even know were there."

Shut up in the castle, she'd taken tomorrow as a given, locked in a glaring match with the future. But she'd thrown those days away. That was why Sophie didn't just want to see more of the world—she wanted to learn about it.

It wasn't the castle that had given Sophie's life value.

It was Livio, who'd led her out of the castle, and Vyce and Lunetta—not the Vyce and Lunetta she'd met at the evening party, but the ones she'd met *outside* the castle walls.

It took courage to talk about yourself. And it took even more courage to express how you felt.

Calling someone's name or grabbing their hand was truly, overwhelmingly *terrifying*. The thing she could trust the least in all the world was herself.

But even then—even then, she wanted to know. Sophie wanted to know more of the world. She didn't want to know that pale, monochromatic world she was convinced she had figured out. She wanted to see the face of the world beyond her view.

"That's why I'm going with Livio. I want to try going on a journey."

"I see," Lunetta said, nodding.

Sophie squeezed Lunetta's hands—hands that were well accustomed to bearing hardship.

"So I'm going to write a whole load of letters," Sophie said. "And I want you to send me a mountain of letters back, Lunetta!"

"I will," Lunetta answered. "I'll write you—I'll write a lot of letters.

I'll be lonely and I wish you wouldn't go, but I'll complete the spell so we can write."

Lunetta's black eyes watered with tears, but her gaze was straightforward and honest. Sophie's own vision started to blur right back.

Sophie squeezed Lunetta's hands and nodded. "And let me help too."

It was a magnificent night, a truly sparkling, radiant night.

# Chapter Ten: A Garden Blooming with Resolve

Before Sophie knew it, it was morning.

With the assistance of the smiling maids and ladies-in-waiting, Sophie had changed into a pure-white dress with purple embroidery along the hem and tied up her long hair with a purple ribbon. The dress was adorable and left the nape of her neck cool and open. Sophie didn't have a single complaint about the garment.

She'd certainly had no complaints about the outfit that had been specially prepared for her stroll around town, but the blueish shade of purple had called a certain someone to mind. *This was definitely on purpose!*

Sophie had had her suspicions the moment she'd seen the dress, but when the maids had brought out the purple ribbon and asked what she thought of it, those same suspicions had changed into a conviction that it was *absolutely* on purpose. *Can we not? That's way too embarrassing!* That was what Sophie had wanted to say at least, but she couldn't turn down those bright, beaming smiles of theirs.

But still...it was embarrassing!

Azuello had suddenly shown up, only to give a nod and add, "It's the color of your mate." Sophie felt like her cheeks might erupt in flames. *I've gotta change into something else!*

Even after she had them tie a black ribbon in her hair instead, Sophie couldn't help but feel like it still resembled his hair color...but she couldn't just go and ask them to do it all over again.

*After that exchange earlier, anything's going to look like him!* Sophie concluded as she sat down at the table for breakfast.

Livio was fidgeting restlessly beside her. Sophie could feel his gaze burning into her skin.

"White really suits you," Livio said. "You look adorable."

"Y-You look really cool today too, Livio..."

"I'm g-glad to hear it," Livio stammered.

He gave her a bright, meltingly warm smile. He wore an indigo outfit today, a stark shift from his angelic attire from the previous night. His clothes were much rougher and plainer, but even then he was blindingly handsome and refined—so much so you'd be forgiven for thinking he was a noble.

And the deep amber brooch he had fixed to his chest? It was almost certainly just what Sophie thought it was.

The maids and ladies-in-waiting had been so enthusiastic about their jobs it was almost enough to give Sophie a headache.

*This is so embarrassing!* Even now, Sophie couldn't help but feel like there was something floating in the air—a tepid blanket of smug stares watching over them. Sophie couldn't keep her eyes from falling on Vyce's and Lunetta's empty seats. *Come soon. Please*, Sophie thought pleadingly. *If Azuello were here, then maybe it'd be... On second thought, he might just tease me again*, Sophie thought, remembering the god who was almost certainly buried in a mountain of cookies in the kitchen right about now. *Urgh.*

Almost as if Sophie's pleas for them to hurry had reached him, the door swung open just a few moments later.

"Sorry to keep ya waitin'. Never was good with mornings."

The king made his appearance wearing the same rough outfit he'd worn last night—a white shirt and black pants. He had his hair tied up behind his head. It was one of those so-called "half-up ponytails." *How dexterous of him.*

"We just arrived ourselves," Sophie said.

Sophie and Livio stood up from their seats and bowed their heads, only for Vyce to wave them back down. "Have a seat. Where's Lunetta?" Vyce asked, sitting down and turning to the maid behind him.

"I believe she'll be here momentarily," the maid answered with a nod.

As if in response, Lunetta appeared, dressed in black from head to toe just as always.

"Am I the last one again?"

"I just got here myself," Vyce answered.

"I see," Lunetta replied with a nod, and then she bowed her head to the table. "Good morning."

"Mornin'," said Vyce.

"Good morning," said Livio.

"Good morning, Lunetta!" said Sophie.

After the three had greeted her in three different ways, the servants began bringing out the food.

Same as yesterday, Sophie watched as dish after dish was laid out before them: bread, soup, salad, and sautés. Again, the plate size and portions were different for each of them. Sophie could only be impressed by the Big-Plate Club members. *Your appetites start early, huh?*

"And where are you goin' today?" Vyce asked as he buttered his bread.

Livio lifted his head to look at Vyce. "I'd like to go to that street you told me about yesterday—the one with all of the shops for adventurers. Whether we leave tomorrow or two weeks from now, we'll need to prepare either way."

*Yesterday?* Sophie looked up, puzzled, only to see Vyce smirking back.

"We had a bit to drink along with the Deadripper meat they prepared for us."

"A bit?" Sophie asked.

"He's gotten 'bit' confused with 'boatloads,'" Livio clarified.

"Can it."

*Hmm?* Just as Sophie and Lunetta had shared tea together, it seemed that Vyce and Livio had shared some drinks. *Wait, you're telling me they ate* even more *after that huge dinner?*

Both Vyce and Livio had figures that would demolish any actor's confidence, so just where did all that food even go? It was one of the mysteries of the human body.

Despite the fact that Livio and Vyce ate more than twice what Sophie and Lunetta did, all four of them ate at the same pace, making for an odd but congenial meal, like time spent between old friends who'd been close to one another for years.

*How odd*, Sophie thought as she comfortably sipped her postmeal cup of tea.

"Come to think of it..." Vyce said, letting down his half ponytail. His hair was unruly with a bit of a bounce, but it looked soft. He looked to Sophie. "I was talkin' with Livio yesterday, and from the sound of it, you had a hand in makin' things better for the knights, didn't ya, little miss? Kinda funny since that's the last thing you'd expect a proper lady to be focusin' on. What inspired all that?"

Sophie could've sworn she'd talked about that at some point.

"Well, um..." Sophie tilted her head to the side, searching for the words. It had hardly been some amazing story worth telling to a king.

"A boy that I met a long time ago did, actually," Sophie answered.

"What?"

"Oh?"

Sounding entertained, the "Oh?" belonged to Vyce.

The rock-hard "What?" belonged to Livio.

Sophie looked up beside her, only to find Livio making a face that seemed, well...almost like he'd plunged something terribly unsavory in his mouth. He didn't seem happy *at all*.

Looking at Livio's face, Sophie finally realized. *Oh.*

The knight who'd seen them off on their journey had warned Sophie, "Best not to tell that to Livionis." They'd said talking about her first love might be a "land mine." *You can't just nod along when you don't get something!* It was only barely still in her memory—it had just slipped out, fallen out even. Sophie had spilled the beans.

*But still—no, really!*

As far as Sophie was concerned, the boy hadn't been her first love. Livionis was her first love. It was Livionis who had picked up the plea for help she could never say herself. He was the handsome-faced knight who'd taken her away, whose face seemed to melt before her.

It was hardly the sort of story to get jealous over in the first place. First and foremost, it was preposterous: the most precious gem of the gods who'd been practically smothered in divine love getting jealous over someone as lowly as Sophie? There was just no

way.

*Eh, it's fine*, Sophie thought, ready to just continue where she left off. *Wonder why he looks so sour? Does he have to sneeze or something?* Sophie dropped her gaze back to her tea.

"There was a boy who helped me feel better when I was very tired," Sophie explained. "He aspired to become a knight."

"Really?"

Livio's "really" was completely flat. Sophie looked up in surprise.

Livio was staring off into space, his brow wrinkled despite the fact that his lips were still curved into a smile. *What? That's scary.*

"And just what was he like, huh? The boy," Vyce asked, making no effort to conceal the entertained look on his face. It was clear as day—he was toying with Sophie. On second thought, maybe it was Livio—who was making some sort of terrifying face at Sophie's story—that Vyce was toying with.

*What should I do?* Sophie thought, glancing up at Livio.

"And?" Livio prodded, smiling.

It was a smile that wouldn't have been out of place on an ice sculpture, beautiful and cold. *See? That's why I said it's scary!*

"Um..." Sophie looked away. "It's just that I don't remember his face very well—well, more like I couldn't see it very well."

"Was it at night?" Vyce asked.

"Oh, no—it was during the day," Sophie answered. "It was after a tea party had ended. I was terribly exhausted, and I ended up just sitting down in the castle garden."

At the edge of Sophie's vision, she saw Livio's finger, which had been resting on the table, suddenly bounce up.

*Wonder what that's all about?* Sophie thought as she looked back on that day.

Sophie's gaze fell to the tea swirling in her cup—just like the tea, Sophelia's heart had been swirling that day. She remembered back then she had been all alone: It had all felt so pointless and bitter she'd wanted to cry.

"I don't get along very well with my parents, and that boy got angry in my stead," Sophie explained. "He said I'd done nothing wrong. It was so reassuring. I was absolutely delighted." A smile had

grown on Sophie's face before she even realized it.

"Is that so?" Vyce said, sounding amused.

*What is it?* Sophie thought, looking up for a second time, only for Vyce to smirk.

"Well? What'd he look like?"

"Huh?" Sophie replied. "Well, um...his face was all swollen and red and covered with blood, so I don't really remember, but..."

"He was injured?" Lunetta asked.

"That's right," Sophie said, smiling back at Lunetta.

"It sounded like he was aiming to become a knight, so I'm sure it was an injury he sustained while training."

Sophie paused for a moment. "When I thought about how he was nearly the same age as me yet working so hard, it left me feeling braver."

That day when Sophie was able to feel meaning in her role was the day that had brought her to life. Even when her heart felt like it might snap in two, even on the days when she just wanted to throw it all away, the resolve Sophie had found that day roused her to keep on going.

"I wanted to make it the sort of kingdom that wouldn't make him regret choosing to become a knight—the sort of kingdom he could be proud to serve. I wanted to see him smile, just as he'd brought a smile to me in our time together."

Sophie paused again. "No matter what sort of unsavory things happened from then on, remembering that garden was all it took for me to be able to stand tall." Sophie looked back on that warm day in the garden long ago.

Suddenly, a loud clatter rang out through the room. Startled, Sophie looked up, only to realize that the noise had come from beside her—from Livio.

She looked up at Livio blankly and blinked.

"Livio, are you all right...?" Lunetta's question was sudden, but it was to be expected. After all, Livio's face was something else and then some.

He was bright red with a furrowed brow and watery eyes. He was clenching his teeth, practically exploding with the fragility and

cuteness of a child or maiden mere moments away from bursting into tears. *What happened?*

*But no, he's like,* really *red. Super red! He's so red he looks like he'd start steaming if you threw water on him. Is he overheating? He's really cute like this, though. Like crazy cute.*

"L-Livio...?" Sophie asked nervously, more worried than worked up.

Livio's shoulders twitched as he wordlessly moved his lips.

*What is it? What's wrong?* He was so shaken Sophie couldn't help but feel sorry for him.

Livio bowed his head low as he stood, despite the fact that Sophie couldn't even begin to make sense of the situation. Sophie's shoulders were the ones to bounce when Livio finally spoke.

"I-I'm sor— Um, please excuse me!"

"Huh?"

Livio was unusually flustered. Aiming for the door, he quickly swung it open and practically dashed out of the room. There wasn't so much as a feather left of his typical angelic poise.

"Oh, I get it now," Vyce said. "Now there's a sight to start the mornin' with."

"It's pure love," Arvey remarked.

"What happened to Livio?" Lunetta asked.

"Look at 'im and you tell me."

"I don't know," Lunetta answered.

"Wow... Look, I'll tell you later."

*Hold on—tell me too!*

It seemed that Sophie and Lunetta were the only ones who didn't have the slightest idea what they were talking about.

Sophie looked over at Vyce and Arvey nodding at each other, only to find that the maid on standby behind Lunetta was also wearing a vague smile on her lips. From the look of it, Sophie and Lunetta really were the only ones out of the loop. *What's going on?*

"Yeah, he'll probably come get her once he's settled down, so ask him later," Vyce said. "I'm sure he'll be ready for it by then."

"Pure love indeed..." Arvey said.

*What are you even talking about?*

With their tranquil breakfast upended, Sophie now found herself perplexed. Leaving the dining hall to return to her room, Sophie saw a figure in the hallway.

Who was that there—tall, red-faced, and sparkling like nobody's business?

It went without saying, of course.

"Livio."

"Ah, erm, um..."

*So. Cuuuute!*

Spellbound, Sophie looked up at Livio. With the sunlight from the window spilling across him, his blushing face was youthful and handsome enough to send any actor or singer running away in shame as fast as their legs could carry them. He was a gem of humanity. Even the way he cleared his throat was drop-dead adorable.

"My apologies for earlier," Livio said. "If you'd like, why don't we head to town?"

Would that make it— Oh, what was it called? One of those "date" things?

Livio's cheeks were painted a rosy pink as he stood before her. Sophie gave a hearty nod back.

"I'd love to!"

With the sound of her happy-go-lucky brain ringing its bell nonstop in her ears, Sophie found herself walking around the town's lively streets.

The town was overflowing with activity, so much so that she almost wondered if they were having a festival.

"Come on in!" Store owners beckoned customers inside as well-to-do ladies pleasantly chatted outside the store. All the hustle and bustle seemed to pulse with the hearty strength of human life. Just the sight of it was enough to fill Sophie with excitement.

"What's this store?" Sophie asked.

Sophie's eyes had happened to fall upon a pink rabbit toy bouncing around on the other side of the store window. Sophie looked up at the store's sign, which read "Magic Goods."

"Would you like to go inside?" Livio asked.

"Of course!"

The store's bell gave a cute chime as Livio opened the door. Greeting them on the other side were rows of all sorts of magical items.

There were handy items like a map that glowed to indicate places you'd been as well as accessories with magic gems, as well as dubious articles like candies that turned invisible as long as they were in your mouth and shoes that would take you home when you took a step—everything in the store piqued Sophie's curiosity.

*Now that's funny! I wonder if it's true. No, it can't be.*

Sophie tossed the thought around in her mind, only to turn around to see Livio with an amused smile on his face.

"Do you think they actually work?"

"I'm not terribly familiar with magic, so I can't really say, but..." Livio said. "From what I heard, the owner's a bit of a jokester, so there are a lot of novelty gag items."

"Gag items...?"

Even when Sophie asked Livio something that was probably just common sense to him, he didn't laugh. Instead, it was when Sophie tilted her head to the side in confusion that Livio gave a mischievous grin like he was plotting something.

"It's fun just to give it a shot even when you think there's no way it could be real."

"It's okay if it doesn't wind up being real...?"

"Well..." Livio replied. "It'd be nice if it were real, but I guess it's kind of fun even if it isn't."

*Fun.*

What was "fun" supposed to be? Sophie felt like she was at risk of losing her grasp on what the word "fun" meant.

Livio gave Sophie an amused laugh. "Well, why don't you get something then? Pick one that catches your eye, Lady Sophie."

Sophie still didn't quite get the "fun" Livio was talking about, but she was sure that she'd be able to grin just as happily as Livio when she did.

With that in mind, Sophie made a loop around the expansive

store. *Hmm*, Sophie thought as she wandered.

She didn't want anything pricey. Even if it was okay if the items didn't really work as advertised, Sophie wasn't a fan of letting money go to waste. She also didn't want something that would get her hopes up and make her wish it really did work. What Sophie wanted now wasn't disappointment—she wanted *fun*. Even if it did end up being fake, she wanted something she could just be surprised by and laugh off.

After all her deliberation, the item Sophie chose was a bag that multiplied cookies inside of it whenever you hit it. It struck a chord with her—it was just the right mix of unimportant, suspicious, and exciting.

*I want something that might come in handy too*, Sophie thought, looping around through the store again before deciding to buy an empty magic gem. Sophie wanted to be able to make magic gems like Lunetta.

As might be expected from a store with such a wide range of products, there was a bountiful selection of magic gem types to choose from. It seemed that all of them had already been processed and ready to be imbued with spells. There were small ones like the one Livio wore on his ear, larger ones the size of an egg like the ones Lunetta often used, and even beautiful magic gems that had been delicately cut like gemstones.

Calculating the funds she'd made by selling the blue gemstone earring she'd been wearing the night she left on her journey, Sophie purchased ten of the magic gems. Not only was it her first time purchasing a magic item, it was also her first time buying something on her own, so that alone was enough to fill her with excitement. Sophie had been delighted to say goodbye to that blue earring she never wanted to see again, and she'd been just as delighted to be able to turn it into money. *It just feels like those days are really coming in handy now!*

Still elated after she finished shopping, Sophie decided to search for Livio.

She had been wandering around the shop, and in the process, she'd lost sight of Livio. She was sure he hadn't just up and left her.

She walked around the store, keeping her eyes peeled.

While it should've been an easy task to find Livio, given how much he stood out, the tall display shelf was blocking Sophie's view. Just when she was thinking she might be better off waiting at the entrance, she heard a male customer nearby speak up.

"Whoa."

Following the man's voice with her gaze, Sophie locked eyes with Livio as he came down the steps. *Yup, there he is. Definitely standing out.*

"Lady Sophie," Livio said.

He was so dazzlingly radiant she could see a halo of light behind him.

Watching the man gasp as he clutched at his chest, Sophie almost wanted to nod back and tell the man that she knew just how he felt. *It's a hard thing to keep your senses in front of that melting smile of his.* Sophie couldn't help but sympathize with the man who'd never again be able to see run-of-the-mill beauty and innocently think, *Wow, she's beautiful.*

*Happens to the best of us.*

"There was a second floor?"

"That's right," Livio answered. "They said they process magic gems for customers there, so I went up and had a look. Did you find anything you wanted?"

"I sure did!"

Sophie showed Livio the bag Lunetta had cast a spell on, where Sophie had put her purchases.

"What?" Livio blinked in surprise. "But I was going to get it for you."

"Whaaaa?"

*Heavens, no!* Sophie waved her hands.

"You don't have to worry about that!" Sophie said. "And besides, I had a really good time getting to buy something on my own."

Sophie was being completely and wholly honest, but even then, Livio seemed crestfallen.

"This was supposed to be a date, though..." Livio said, his lips curling into a smile.

"Ugh!"

The gasp hadn't come from Sophie.

There, at the corner of her vision were the man from before and a female customer who just happened to be there at the same time. *I get it—trust me, I really get it.* Regaining her composure thanks to the two, Sophie fought back the urge to nod, instead giving Livio a polite smile.

"Well, would you be so kind as to accompany me to another store, then?"

In response, Livio's big eyes grew even bigger as he broke out into a cozy grin.

"It'd be my pleasure."

The thud of something hitting the ground was probably just Sophie's imagination.

"That guy just hit the ground!"

The shouts she heard behind her as she and Livio left the store were also probably just Sophie's imagination.

It was just her imagination...probably.

After leaving the magical item shop, Sophie stopped in at a variety of stores—not only those that would help them prepare for their journey but also confectionaries and accessory shops. No matter where she looked or what she looked at, there were things that Sophie had never seen before, leaving her on a constant cloud of elation and excitement. It was enough to make Sophie just a bit uneasy. *Is it really okay for me to have such a good time?*

It wasn't helping matters that right there beside Sophie was a stunningly handsome man with a bright, beaming smile on his face, having every bit as good of a time as Sophie. If she didn't give the whole world her gratitude and apologies, would she even live to see the morning sun of another day? Then again, lately, Sophie had been so exhausted that she'd been sleeping like a baby, so she hadn't been able to see the morning sun anyway—that was just one of those, oh, "figures of speech."

Sophie was full of energy, laughing and leaping in surprise so much that her happy-go-lucky brain seemed like it might malfunction from the confusion. And she ate. She ate until she was stuffed.

Even though she'd had a filling breakfast, foods that Sophie had never seen before slid down into her stomach one after another. The foods seemed like they'd come straight out of her dreams, from the savory, sauce-slathered meat skewers to the pie stuffed to the brim with cream. *And here I thought I didn't like sweet things.* She'd done a fine job of cleaning out the smooth, buttery cream in an instant.

After having eaten what had to be a whole lifetime's worth of food, Sophie was as full as she could be in her heart and stomach. Her gaze narrowed happily.

The landscape stretching out before them from the top of the hill was every bit as beautiful as Livio himself. Sophie's heart quivered with admiration as she watched the light from the setting sun sparkle across the water's surface. It was enough to make her wish she could watch it forever.

The water looked like a massive lake, a puddle of water after it had rained, and even a humongous orange. Planning for their voyage, Sophie herself knew full well that it was none of those things—and that was precisely why Sophie's heart danced with excitement at the ocean she saw on the other side of the streets and houses. The dance had to be a strange sight—Sophie's heart was bouncing around, kicking up its legs as it went. Sophie was sure it was a fun sort of dance, strange and unlike anything anyone had ever seen before but still so compelling it made you want to dance along.

"Hee hee," Sophie laughed to herself. *Oh—that's right.* She reached into her bag.

*Who knew things you'd never seen before could be so fun?* The wind felt wonderful as it stroked the nape of her neck. If she were going to laugh alongside Livio at the indiscernible magical item she'd bought, then today was the perfect sort of day for it. Sophie nodded to herself.

She knew there should be something inside the bag, but it felt empty. Fumbling through such an odd sensation, Sophie squeezed her wittle-bitty hand, only to grasp a small leather pouch that had appeared, as if to say, *You called?*

Sophie pulled it out of the bag and showed it to Livio.

"This is the magical item I bought today, Livio," Sophie explained. "Is it okay if I try it out?"

It was the cookie-multiplying pouch.

"Of course!" Livio laughed.

Sophie plunged her hand into the bag again and rummaged around. She'd even bought cookies to try it out with at the confectionery they'd stopped at in search of a souvenir for Azuello.

*Mm-hmm! I don't miss a thing!* Contrary to appearances, Sophie was actually quite capable.

"So you put cookies inside," Livio said.

Livio had taken the leather pouch while Sophie was rummaging through her bag and dropped his gaze to the paper inside it. It was one of those "instruction manual" things. Livio nodded and held the pouch open.

"Ready when you are!" Livio said.

Livio had stretched the opening of the pouch wide so she could easily put the cookie in. Sophie placed a single tea cookie inside. The cookies had nuts in them, and Livio seemed to be a fan of them as well—Sophie had made up her mind to buy them the moment they sampled one. She thought it'd be an absolute blast if the cookies ended up multiplying. She was terribly excited.

"Once you've put in the cookies, you pull the pouch shut."

Following Livio's voice as he read from the instruction manual, Sophie pulled the bag's strings tight. Just when she couldn't see inside anymore, Livio read the next step.

"Then you give the bag a sound blow."

"That's all?"

"It appears so," Livio answered.

*I dunno...* Sophie could imagine exactly what would happen. Sophie thought it, and Livio likely had as well. Neither one of them, however, said anything about it.

*Why not?* Sophie thought, returning her gaze to the pouch.

Sophie smacked it.

Just then, sure enough—if that was even the right way to put it—Sophie felt the cookie crumble.

*Hah ha ha ha! Oh wow, I've got such a bad feeling about this. I mean, I crushed it.*

But still, getting some over-the-top effect wasn't the point, and it was her duty to determine if this bag was the real deal or one of those joke novelties or whatnot. Sophie was a little bit fussy when it came to her duties. She was strict when it came to those. *Ahem.*

With that in mind, Sophie opened up the pouch without any hesitation and shook it out over her left hand.

And then! *Wow! Would you look at that?*

There, tumbling down from the bag, was an array of cookies!

They were all smaller cookies in various sizes, though!

Some of them were the size of the nail on Sophie's pinky finger. *They're so cute! So small and so cute!* It was a brand-new discovery.

Sophie paused. "Livio."

"Talk about tiny," Livio laughed, as if he'd accidentally blurted out his reaction. *Just look at that cute grin of his!*

Livio stared intently at the leather pouch he'd taken from Sophie, laughing like a little kid, making Sophie laugh right alongside him as she grabbed a cookie. It was a comparatively large cookie—the size of her thumb. It was perfectly bite-sized.

Then again, Sophie had never encountered a cookie that wasn't bite-sized.

"This just fixed the shape of the crumbled bits, didn't it?" Sophie asked. "Then again, just looking at the shape, it's the same as the original cookie, so I guess that's amazing in its own right, but...did it actually multiply?"

"Maybe in terms of sheer numbers?"

She'd never expected to be splitting hairs over a pouch. The joke had fallen flat—way flat. It wasn't some joke—it was a prank. *Sounds like a scam to me.*

Whoever made it had done a fine job coming up with this sort of nonsense. Weren't there any other items that made better use of the spell? Then again, even Sophie had bought it while thinking there was no way it could be for real, so perhaps it was just as it was meant to be.

But even then, just what sort of person had made this? And what

sort of look had they had on their face while they were making it? *Guess no one stopped them, huh?*

It made less and less sense the more Sophie thought about it until she finally found herself bursting out laughing.

"It's a lame joke, but you can't help but laugh at the fact that they nailed the details so well," Livio said, laughing.

Sophie laughed alongside him, taking the pouch. Sophie couldn't even begin to imagine just who on earth would make this sort of confusing object. Going even further, Sophie couldn't even begin to imagine how she could use it down the road. *Wow.* Sophie was even more impressed. There were all *sorts* of people out there in the world.

"The world really is a big place, huh?"

Considering one cookie was all it took for Sophie to get a taste of the world, the pouch had been a steal. *We'll just leave it at that. Yup. It was funny, so it's fine. It's lame, but that's the fun part.*

It was a new experience for Sophie—and a valuable one.

In a terribly unmannerly manner, Sophie shoveled the cookies in her hand into her mouth, as the faint aroma of tea caused her lips to curl. Unable to be contained, a smile broke across her face, only for Livio to beam in turn.

"Lady Sophie," Livio said, calling her name with a gentle smile on his face.

"Yes?" Sophie replied, still unable to hold a neutral expression.

Livio narrowed his eyes. "So, about this morning..."

"This morning?" she asked before nodding. "Oh..."

It seemed he was going to talk with her about this morning's mystery, wherein Livio had suddenly left from his seat at the breakfast table.

*Wonder what it was about? Doesn't seem like anything bad, though.*

Placing the leather pouch back into her enchanted bag and looking up, she noticed Livio's face was slowly growing redder and redder.

*Look how cute he is...* Sophie thought, tensing her mouth against the smile that threatened to break through.

Livio took a deep breath and simply said, “It was me.”

“Huh?”

The breeze blew through Livio’s bangs. “That idiot with the nosebleed...in the garden... Th-That...was me.”

Sophie’s eyes blinked wide in surprise as she tried to make sense of what Livio had just told her.

Sophie had been all alone, deathly exhausted—and he’d found her. That little knight...had been Livio. Sophelia’s little knight and the knight she loved were the same person.

How absolutely, magnificently wonderful!

“It was you? Really?”

Now that Sophie thought about it, the number of individuals whose fathers were in the Knights and had the standing to participate in the Knights’ training was limited. It seemed like something she would’ve been able to figure out had she thought about it, but unfortunately, the boy and Livionis had just looked too different. *And just how on earth do you take a national-treasure-level face and make it look like* that*?* Sophie thought to herself, just a bit terrified of the boy’s father, who’d apparently punched him that day. Even then, Sophie was delighted.

Sophie was delighted that she could finally thank Livio’s father—that she’d always had his son in her life.

“Thank you so much for what you did back then,” she said, pouring heartfelt gratitude into her words as she grinned.

“Urgh!” Livio gave a small moan and clutched his chest.

Sophie tilted her head to the side in confusion, only for him to sigh as the wind gently shook his lustrous hair.

“It was then—that was when I started having feelings for you, Lady Sophie.”

“What?”

“Ever since then, I wanted to take you out of that garden so badly I couldn’t stand it.”

*Ever since then?*

Before her brain could even process the words and name the emotion they made her feel, Sophie’s tears were already falling. They came one after the other, spilling down her cheeks with no end

in sight.

"I have nothing but respect for everything you built back then..." Livio paused. "I consider myself truly fortunate—both to have met you that day and to have been born in the same kingdom as you."

The hand that wiped away Sophie's tears was a sword-wielding hand—hard but kind. Cupped in Livio's large palms were all the days Sophie had convinced herself that her entire purpose for living was to fulfill her role.

"I was ashamed of how powerless I was... Ashamed that I couldn't do anything to help you. But..." Livio paused, narrowing his gaze. "I'm glad that the day I decided to become a knight means just as much to you as it does to me."

Livio's eyes shone that blueberry hue that Sophie loved as he spoke, a rich shade filled with joy and kindness—it made her chest ache.

Sophie had been neither a worthless waste of space without accomplishments nor a coward who'd run away because she couldn't play her part. She hadn't been just some insignificant pebble with no value of its own. There was no mistaking it: There had been meaning in Sophelia's life.

Sophie was the fortunate one.

It was only because she'd met someone on the other side of her responsibilities that she'd been able to believe that her role hadn't been a curse—that it had held meaning.

She cut an unsightly figure bursting out crying, but she was only able to let go because she knew the warmth of having a pair of arms to fall into.

Everything, every last bit of it was all thanks to Livio.

Livionis had found Sophelia. That was why Sophie could now look back on her life as Sophelia and commend herself for her own hard work.

She couldn't help but grin adoringly at the smiling face before her, a face that was the very embodiment of fortune and tranquility —so adorable she wished she could stare at it forever.

He was dazzlingly radiant. His eyes glistened like the ocean, painted orange in the light of the sunset, and his soft, black hair

glistened a mysterious shade.

He was so beautiful that he'd rendered passerby after passerby speechless, and yet he sat right there, laughing alongside Sophie at the most trifling of matters.

There was no way Sophie could let go of that smile.

Livio treasured Sophie more than she did herself, and she wanted to treasure him the same way, forever and beyond.

*What can I do to make sure you can always smile?*

He blinked, his long eyelashes casting rays of orange back at Sophie. "That's easy, Lady Sophie," he said. "All you have to do is smile at me."

"Did I say that out loud...?"

"As clear as a bell."

*As clear as a bell?* Sophie dropped her head, positively embarrassed.

"I-I'm sorry," she stammered, apologizing unconsciously.

"And why should you be sorry?" Livio asked kindly, putting his hands on her cheeks. "I'm absolutely delighted. I love your smile, Lady Sophie."

Sophie's heart pounded in her chest. *He said he loved my smile—right then, he said it! Livio said it!*

She knew better than to doubt any affection from Livio.

Livio had thrown it all away—all of it, everything—to run off with Sophie, then given her so much: mountains of one of a kind words and smiles and moments together.

Compared to all the years of her life, it was only a matter of moments, but those same moments were so massive for her that everything up until now didn't matter at all. They were moments that played out in the furthest reaches of Sophelia's life—moments that Sophie had thought would never come her way. Those same moments embraced Sophelia and made her a special but normal girl.

There was no other word for it than love.

The words, and smiles, and moments that Livio had given her all heralded his love for her.

Sophie should've known it already, so why...

"I love you, Sophie."

Why did it make her heart so achingly happy? Why was she crying?

Sophie wanted to see it. Sophie wanted to see his eyes with their unrivaled beauty—the eyes of the one who cared more for Sophie than anyone else in the world. She wanted to see this radiant moment playing out before her.

She'd thought she was supposed to be good at holding her emotions back.

But there were her tears, spilling all over the place! And the waterworks weren't listening to a single thing Sophie had to say to them.

"That's so mean."

Livio leaned his forehead onto Sophie's own. "What's mean?"

"You are!"

"Me?" Livio laughed.

Sophie felt like she could practically hear her eyelashes quivering.

"You always have to go and make me cry."

That was some accusation she'd made. It was so absurd that even the handy pouch that multiplied cookies (only on a technicality) couldn't hope to compete.

*Are you even listening to yourself?* she thought, biting her lip.

"You're adorable even when you cry, Sophie."

*That's not it!* Sophie wasn't the least little bit happy to hear something like that...or was she? *Nope, nope, nope!* It didn't matter whether she kept her eyes open or closed them tight—the tears kept spilling down regardless. Being with Livio, Sophie might very well dehydrate herself from head to toe. What a wonderfully sweet—and terrifying—thought!

"Hey, look at me." Livio's voice shook, as if his core had gone numb. Sophie slowly lifted her head.

His eyes were gentle, as if they might envelop her and melt her away, and there, reflected in those same eyes, she saw herself—only herself.

That was the last person Sophie could trust—she'd always hated herself.

She'd always hated herself, wondering why she couldn't be like

everyone else.

So why? Everyone else had something they took for granted—something that Sophie lacked. It hadn't mattered if she laughed or if she didn't, what she did or didn't do—Sophie had come up empty-handed regardless. There had been no one there beside her.

Why had she been unable to become the sort of person someone would love?

How could she ever say she loved herself when no one else had? And how on earth could she ever ask someone else to love her when she'd hated herself?

In truth, what Sophelia had really wanted to run away from was the person she was.

*It'd sure be nice if none of this ever happened. It'd sure be nice if I'd never even been around. That's what I thought, you know?*

And there'd been mornings she *had* thought that—days, and evenings too.

Sophelia *had* thought that—that she wouldn't be able to get anywhere unless she pretended not to see it—unless she pretended not to notice how she felt about herself. She hadn't had the sort of worth those cookies had—the kind that could be broken down to be more digestible yet still be intrinsically true to itself—the sort of worth deserving of Livio's adoration. Sophelia hadn't had any of that.

*Go on, laugh.*

Because even after all that, Sophie was glad now—glad that she was who she was.

*Ha ha ha, people really are simple, huh? They're so, oh...so foolish and wonderful you can't help but laugh!*

"Livio."

It was a scary thing to want something from another person.

"Yes?" Livio said, his smile chasing away Sophie's fears.

"Say it again."

In that moment—as her warm lips wove together the words—Sophie fell in love all over again.

"I love you, Sophie."

*See?* The gaze of those quivering jewels was all it took for Sophie to fall in love over and over again.

*Don't be scared. Say it.*

Sophie clutched Livio's hands and opened her trembling lips, his blueberry eyes blurring as her eyes brimmed with tears.

*He's waiting.*

Livio was waiting for her to say it—to say the words that she never thought she'd speak to anyone.

It didn't have to be just in her mind. Sophie could *say* it.

"I love you too, Livio."

Livio grunted and closed his eyes, as if it were too much for him to bear.

He forced his eyes shut, his long eyelashes quivering. *Oh, I just love him so much!* He was beautiful and strong and charming, and Sophie liked him so much she couldn't bear it. She placed her hands on top of his where they cupped her cheeks.

It was as if a shower of stars were falling before her.

She didn't want to let anyone else see this moment—the moment his eyes softly opened. She couldn't help but cherish even her own greed. Her chest felt like it might burst.

"I really love you," she repeated.

"I like love more," Livio replied.

His face was bright red as he gave a small snort and curled his lips up. *And where does he get off being this cute, huh? Huh? Tell me!* With her happy-go-lucky brain rampaging in a fit of emotion, Sophie couldn't help but close her eyes. She'd overfilled her tank.

There was the whispered sound of a kiss, and Sophie felt Livio's lips on hers, almost as if he'd been waiting for an opening. *Now that's just playing dirty!*

Reflexively opening her eyes, Sophie found herself looking straight at Livio's self-conscious smile, his eyebrows drooping down as he laughed. Her brain very nearly died for the second time.

He lifted her left hand and softly stroked her ring finger.

"Livio?" Sophie sniffled Livio's name in a nasally voice, drawing his gaze down to her.

The next thing Sophie knew, she felt cool metal against her skin.

Sophie blinked, finding that her ring finger was now sparkling before her eyes. There, a perfect fit for her finger, was a ring.

"Livio...this..."

"I had them make this at the magical items store earlier. I've imbued it with my own magical energy."

Sophie stared proudly at the ring, which was embedded with a shining purple magic gem. Just like Livio's eyes, it was a gentle purple, sometimes shining blue depending on the light.

"It transforms to fit your finger just right, but that's not all," Livio went on. "If you run your magical energy through it, it'll notify me of your location, and it can repel basic spells as well."

*What? That's amazing.*

"I thought you said you weren't good at magic...?"

"I'm not!" Livio replied. "Compared to wielding a sword, at least. I can't control how strong my spells are—I got chewed out more times than I can count for making an absolute mess of the drill grounds, so I just gave up."

*Is "not good at magic" how you'd describe that?* Then again, he was able to assimilate his sword and his magic gem, so it felt just a bit off to say he wasn't "good at" magic. But even then...

"Wasn't it hard to make this, though?" Sophie asked, laughing as she stroked the gem.

"That's classified," Livio replied in a sullen tone.

*What? That was way too cute. I mean, wow. Just wow. There he was, hiding an amazing gift like this, and he* still *said he wanted to get the bag for me at the shop?*

"You don't play fair," she pouted.

The purple gem blurred in her vision, the tears both frustrating and precious to her at the same time. It was too much for her to bear. Up until now she'd been able to manage it all, but this really, truly was just too much—way too much.

Livio squeezed Sophie's hand with his, as if to say, *Look up here.*

Sophie looked up, only to be greeted by Livio's beautiful, sweet face.

The ring was imbued with the grand blossoms of love, and there, falling softly upon it...were Livio's lips.



“I’ll keep you safe till the end of my days.”

That was what he said.

“I finally said it...”

Those were his words.

A single teardrop escaped down Livio’s cheek.

Even if someone told Sophie to give him back, it was too late for that. She couldn’t give him up. She had been blessed with gifts from both Livio and the world itself. They were Sophie’s cherished treasures that belonged to her and her alone.

# Chapter Eleven: Spring Has Come, and a New Journey Rings!

It was the day after their fun outing.

After breakfast, Vyce hauled Sophie and Livio to his office.

When the two told Vyce that, out of the three ships, they'd chosen the one going to the neighboring country that departed in two weeks, Vyce only laughed.

"Now that's unexpected," Vyce said, handing them a map.

"This is for us?" Livio asked.

"I have other copies besides," Vyce replied.

Livio and Sophie looked at each other.

"And what's that for?" Vyce asked, blinking.

"It's just, you've given us so much," Sophie replied. "You even told us we could stay here in the castle until we depart, so..."

"Don't sweat it," Vyce said. "We ended up gettin' you all tangled up in our problem, and besides, it was good for Lunetta to meet ya. I'm grateful, honestly."

"You didn't tangle us up in this," Sophie said. "I chose to go along. And it truly meant a lot to me to be able to make friends with Lunetta."

"Is that so?" Vyce laughed, taking off his glasses as he rose to his feet. "Fair enough—have a seat."

Sophie and Livio sat down on the sofa, large enough for three people, while Vyce sat on the other side of the table directly in front of them.

"We were talkin' about havin' you join our military training until you leave for your trip," Vyce said to Livio. "Just havin' the son of the legendary House Warrion put my men through the wringer is more than enough reward for me."

"Apologies in advance if they don't get up once I'm done with

them."

"Give it yer best shot," Vyce replied with a cynical laugh.

Livio's shoulders bounced with laughter in reply. The two of them seemed to get along quite well, no matter the situation.

"Well? So why'd you pick that ship?" Vyce asked. "You coulda gone all the way to the country to the east in one go."

"More than going to the country to the east, our goal is to take our time with a leisurely journey," Livio explained. "Not to mention, I don't want Sophie to strain herself."

Sophie continued, "We talked about how, rather than rushing off to our destination, we'd like to see other countries as well since we're already here. Not to mention that..."

Just when Sophie paused, a knock echoed through the room with perfect timing.

Vyce urged the maid inside and she quietly began setting out the teaware. It was a beautiful tea set, made of pure-white porcelain, accented with lines of deep blue.

"Not to mention what?" Vyce asked.

Savoring the aroma of the tea before her, Sophie lifted her head. "There was just something a bit *off* about the way you explained it," Sophie said. "The first ship had a lot of drawbacks—like how it's a trading ship and there's not much time to prepare. The second ship would arrive in a day and we'd have two weeks to work with as well—it sounded like nothing but good things to me. If those are just the facts, then that's all it is, but it's mostly intuition more than anything else."

Were there really no drawbacks to the second ship? Judging from Vyce's personality, wouldn't he have provided a bit more information for every option?

It went without saying that neither Sophie nor Livio thought Vyce was the sort of unscrupulous type who'd purposely try to conceal the downsides to push them toward that ship, but the thought, however faint, had occurred to her. It was an odd pricking sensation, like a tiny fish bone caught in her throat—just enough to make her go, *Hmm?*

Sophie was a bit hesitant to say it...

"We wondered if there might've been some reason you *wanted* us to go to the neighboring country."

But Sophie and Livio had had their suspicions—that Vyce might've had just a bit of an ulterior motive, almost like he was trying to say, *I'd sure be happy if you chose this one!* or *I'd like to ask a favor of you if it all works out!*

Vyce's eyes widened for a moment, but his expression quickly turned to a sneer. *Wow, that is one nasty look on his face!*

"Nice work, you two. Stay here—I mean it."

"No, thank you," Livio replied in no uncertain terms.

"My bad," Vyce chuckled back, running his fingers through his hair. "I'm not plannin' on foolin' you two."

"We know. We don't doubt that."

Both Sophie and Livio knew that, despite how scary Vyce's face might be, he was actually quite prudent. So perhaps he had a favor he wanted to ask of them but was trying to be considerate? *I guess he actually does know how to exercise some restraint!*

Giving it no more heed than that, Sophie and Livio had chosen their ship without any hesitation at all. They'd both neatly arrived at the same conclusion. They figured that if taking their time going on a leisurely journey could help someone, then that was a good thing.

"That so?" Vyce said, furrowing his brow as he laughed. "The ship's not some passenger liner like you have in mind, and it's not a ship I own either. But it is a large trade ship that I have faith in. You've got my word that you'll be able to travel safely and comfortably enough."

It wasn't particularly surprising. It was the response they'd been anticipating. Both of them nodded.

Had it been a normal king they were dealing with, they would've doubted his response and accused him of fooling them—they might even have been on guard waiting to see what sort of unreasonable demand he might spring on them.

But this was Vyce they were dealing with.

Even though he'd been given the grand title of the Usurper King, Vyce treasured his petite fiancée, and while Sophie and Livio had been noisily spouting off niceties, Vyce had just laughed at them and

told them he didn't care for all that "stiff and stuffy nonsense."

"So what's the errand you want us to run for you anyway?" Livio asked cheekily.

Vyce laughed. "What? Y'can hardly call it an errand. I just want you to get a read on how the young king of that country's feelin'."

Vyce huffed. "To be frank, I've known him for a while. Heard he got engaged, so I sent him my congrats, but I haven't heard a word back since. He's the type to stay on top of that sort of thing, so it's kinda outta character for him. I'm just a little worried, see?"

Sophie and Livio laughed, as if to say, *Called it!*

Vyce wasn't going to risk making the young king feel bad by sending another letter—instead, he was sending them to check in on the boy under the pretense that they just happened to be strolling through. He was nothing but considerate!

"We'll be glad to assist and report back here if there's anything we can do to help," Livio said.

"I didn't ask ya to come all the way back here. The little miss here's gonna make a spell for sendin' letters back and forth with Lunetta, right? Once you figure out what's goin' on, all you have to do is send a letter. See all the sights, and then you can just be on your way to the next town. Got it?" Vyce asked, furrowing his brow as he glared at Sophie.

For her part, Sophie wasn't scared in the slightest, and Livio was right there, clutching his stomach and laughing.

"What? That almost makes you sound like a nice guy!" Livio managed to say between laughs.

"I *am* a nice guy."

"Really now? What a shame," Livio replied with a laugh, bringing his finger to the corner of his eye to flick away a tear. *Did you really have to go and laugh so hard you cried? It really doesn't take that much to get you laughing, does it?*

Vyce, however, seemed rather displeased, his face contorted into a grimace.

"You just let us do you a favor and help you out then!" Livio said. "Having you in our debt might be a good excuse to come back to this kingdom someday too!"

"Do whatever the hell you want," Vyce snapped back.

Livio gave a masculine groan of disgust as he collapsed backward on the sofa, which made Sophie chuckle.

The days following that were quite peaceful.

Sophie spent her days going out shopping with Lunetta and her ladies-in-waiting, holed up with Lunetta in her laboratory only to be dragged out, and watching Livio train while looking so ridiculously cool that her soul nearly left her body. She even helped out Vyce with his work here and there.

There wasn't anything sad, or hard, or painful. The days were simply filled with fun and gentle warmth.

*Guess a world like this isn't the stuff of fairy tales after all.* Then again, Sophie already knew that.

Lunetta had taught her that the smell of a fluffy bed was called "the smell of the sun," and when Sophie had confessed that she felt uneasy when she didn't have anything to do, Lunetta had nodded back and told her she understood.

"Even when I was back there, I spent every day researching and making magic gems," Lunetta said. "But if I do that here, Vyce gets angry at me."

"It was the same for me," Sophie replied. "Livio said I couldn't bring the books and magic gems into my room, so he took them away..."

"Night's when you make the most progress, though."

"Right?"

Indeed. Not only did the two of them lose sight of their surroundings when they were focused on something, they were also both night owls. And what about their sleep? They'd just stay awake until they were at a good stopping point! They dove headfirst into their books and research, so immersed they were practically soaking in it.

*Wow...this is a blast!*

Even if she didn't get enough sleep or exercise, Sophie was having such a good time she felt like squealing with joy.

But since the kind souls around them didn't approve of the

nerdette duet's habit of egging each other on, the two were immediately forced to shift to a *healthier* lifestyle...against their wishes.

The next thing Sophie knew, she'd put on just a wee bit—no, more than a bit—perhaps a good deal of weight?

Harboring an uneasy feeling, Sophie tried on the dress that she'd received from Livio's mother the day they left the castle. She'd thought there'd be extra space around the waist, but then—sure enough—it fit just right!

*Sophie takes 10,000 points of damage!*

*Urk!*

She discreetly told her maid that she'd like to cut back on the snacks, but the maid only smiled and ignored her without a word.

In the end, the maid simply gave her a bright smile. "You'd like to do so even if saying such is impertinent?"

Sophie nodded, only for the maid to give her another bright smile, just as expected. "Lady Sophie, that's what most would refer to as 'picking a fight.'"

Sophie was stricken with terror, so she made up her mind to never again cross the castle's maids.

"Sophie."

Livio had finally gotten used to calling Sophie by her name alone.

She found herself positively infatuated with the way the edge of Livio's lips gently rose up as he said the last part of her name. She couldn't stop herself from beaming each time he called her.

Stopping where she stood in the passageway after Livio called to her, she ran to his side.

"Are you heading out?" he asked.

"No, I was looking for you, Livio."

For her part, Sophie had started to get rather used to having casual conversations.

After all, she'd been spending time with Vyce and Livio, both of whom could be rather vulgar. Being nervous just felt silly when they could both tell each other to can it without batting an eye. Sophie wanted to remind Livio that Vyce was a king, but Vyce didn't mind at all, and Sophie was polite as always, so she had just figured it was

all okay.

Livio looked down at her, tilting his head to the side. “Was there something you needed from me?”

“There is,” she answered. “Do you have time now?”

“If it’s for you, I have all the time in the world, Sophie.”

“Ohhh!” she sighed.

*That’s not what I’m asking! I’m asking so I don’t get in the way of the training. Don’t turn this into some sort of joke!* Sophie thought, puffing out her cheeks.

Livio smirked. “You’re so cute.”

“Come on!”

*How many times do I have to tell you that* you’re *the cute one?! Huh? Well? Tell me!* Sophie’s happy-go-lucky brain threw down its bell.

Huffing mad and sulking, Sophie thrust the box she’d neatly wrapped at Livio.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a present.”

“What?” Livio gasped, his eyes opening so wide Sophie was worried they might fall right out of their sockets.

*Time to harvest the sweetest, most beautiful blueberries you’ll ever lay your eyes upon! I wonder if I should hold out my hands to catch them just in case they do fall out...?*

“Wait, is this from the other day...?”

Sophie paused. “That’s right. It’s done now, so...”

Sophie had given it her very best.

It had all started when Sophie had mustered up the courage to tell Lunetta and her lady-in-waiting that she wanted to give Livio a gift and ask for advice while they were out one day.

“So you want to thank him for the ring,” the lady-in-waiting said, her white cheeks flushing pink.

Lunetta tilted her head to the side. “What about a magical tome or something like that?”

“The only one who would enjoy a gift like that is you, Lady Lunatietta.”

The lady-in-waiting was as calm as she was sharp-tongued,

leading Sophie to all sorts of different shops. The sad part, however, was that Sophie still didn't have the best sense for Livio's tastes. She couldn't pick out anything he'd like, not a single thing.

"So long as it's a present from you, Lady Sophie, I'm sure he'll be delighted."

"I suppose you're right..." Sophie said.

"But that's not what it's about now, is it?" the lady-in-waiting asked.

Sophie gave a hearty nod. That was it—that was precisely it.

Sophie wanted to give him something that didn't revolve around her—something that he'd be truly delighted to receive. That was why Sophie found herself struggling so—or rather, she had no idea what the right choice was.

It didn't help that *everything* looked good on a stunning young man like Livio, the gods' greatest masterpiece. If she tried to judge based on whether or not something seemed like it'd look good on him, the possibilities only multiplied. She couldn't even begin to whittle down the choices!

At a loss, Sophie clutched her head, only for Lunetta to point at her ring.

"Why don't you try making a magic gem like Livio did?" she suggested. "His Majesty doesn't like rings since he says they get in the way of his sword, so Livio might be the same way, but...you could take that earring of his and fit it with another magic gem or something like that. You could imbue it with your own magic and carve a spell in it as decorations—that sounds fun to make too."

"What a wonderful idea!" the lady-in-waiting exclaimed. "Why, it practically screams 'engaged'!"

With her soft brown hair the color of milk tea, the lady-in-waiting was absolutely adorable—and even more excited than Sophie herself.

And what of Sophie then? The mere thought of it was enough to make her face burn—and make the lady-in-waiting beam at the sight in turn.

"Very well, on our way then!" the lady-in-waiting said, pushing Sophie and Lunetta into a magical item store, where the group

loaded up on a whole assortment of different items.

It was that same day.

When Sophie told Livio she'd like to borrow his earring, he'd merely said, "Here you go!" and handed it to her without any questions.

"Sh-Shouldn't you be a bit more cautious...?"

"Why?"

He was dazzlingly bright. That smile of his was blindingly radiant.

*"Why?", you say?! It's because you seem like you'd do anything I told you to and just say,* Well, if you say so, Sophie! *You might wind up getting swindled by some dangerous sort!* Safe—she had to keep him safe. She had to keep that smile of his *safe*.

Sophie made up her mind: She must never go down the wrong path. If Sophie ever went down the road to evil, she was sure Livio would be right there beside her. *And just what's the road of evil, you ask? Look, that's not the point.*

"Um... Would it be all right if I played around with the magic gem a bit?" she asked him.

"Sure thing," Livio replied. "You know I just *happened* to waltz out with one of the ones given to the Knights, after all."

He'd just "happened to walk out with it."

*He "happened" to, did he now? Uh-huh. Well, I guess that can happen!*

They *had* fled from the castle in a rush. Even Sophie herself figured that he'd only accidentally run off with it, so it was fine. She didn't doubt him at all—no, really.

"I guess that sort of thing can happen, huh?"

Not that it was any of her business.

With that in mind, Sophie had taken Livio's earring with the black magic gem and returned to him the sword that had been stored inside. From there, Sophie had practiced and practiced until finally—just a little while ago—she'd succeeded in hanging a small, teardrop-shaped magic gem beneath Livio's black gem.

Sophie's addition was the same color as her eyes, a somewhat pale brown.

She had been a little disappointed to see that it wasn't a pretty

color like Livio's or Lunetta's, but Lunetta had seemed pleased, telling her that it was "the color of honey tea" before taking the gems Sophie had been practicing with—according to her, they could be used for the letter-sending spell.

Livio took the earring that Sophie had completed (after many trials and tribulations) and held it up to the sun.

Glistening, soft rays of amber light fell across Livio. He was so stunning that Sophie nearly forgot to breathe. It was like she was looking at a stained glass window in a church. *Get the artist who made this and give the man his reward!*

Livio paused for a moment. "It's the color of your eyes, Sophie. Your eyes...those sweet and adorable caramel candies of mine!"

Sophie jolted.

*Somebody, come quick! Seal this man's mouth shut! If not, get me a doctor, pronto! But then again, if he comes back to his senses, does that mean this honeymoon's done for? Would he bother to even look at me anymore? If that's the case, then I've just got to find some way to endure Livio when he's not in his right mind!*

Sophie grunted and bit her lip.

"I-I've even carved a spell into the decorative metal finish," Sophie explained. "It functions as a sort of amplifier to your magic and helps facilitate the flow of magical energy."

"Magical energy?"

"You use magical energy when you fight, right?"

"Oh yeah, guess I do."

Sure enough, he didn't have a clue. He'd already forgotten all about it. Sophie couldn't help but be a little worried by that side of Livio. Though she couldn't shake the feeling that her worrying wouldn't do much good even then.

"I just hoped I might be able to protect you too, Livio."

"Sophie..."

Just a bit. It might have been just the tiniest, most negligible bit, but if she could even slightly help out... Sophie wished that they might be able to stay together, that they could smile together even just a little bit longer.

Livio smiled and put the box in his pocket before pushing his hair

behind his left ear, then took off his glove.

Sophie's heart leaped with excitement.

Livio's pearly white fingers lifted up the earring. His long eyelashes fell as his pristine fingertips pushed the earring through his ear and snapped the backing in place.

Sophie's heart throbbed wildly in her chest.

*What? But why?! He's just putting in his earring, that's all! Why does he look so sexy like this?* It was like she was watching something she wasn't supposed to—she was so embarrassed she could hardly stand it, and yet she found herself so tempted she couldn't peel her eyes away.

Sophie's heart thudded away like a massive drum.

"Does it look good on me?"

"Yeep!!!" It was more of a shriek than an answer.

The earring dangled down and swayed at Livio's ear. *Excuse me? Look good on you? Don't be silly. Just who do you even think you are, Livio? I really should be calling a doctor, shouldn't I? It looks so good on you, my happy-go-lucky brain is on the verge of keeling over any minute now!*

"Sophie?"

"Urgh!"

*Please! Don't! Turn your head like that!*

With his earring swaying alongside his black hair, he was just so unbearably...sexy. It didn't help that the gem now reflecting Livio's own charming beauty had been made by Sophie herself and was the color of her own eyes.

It was like she couldn't bear to look at it straight on—like she might go blind. She might very well come to regret it.

"Doesn't it look good on me...?" Livio asked.

*That's it—he's actually trying to stop my heart.*

Sophie clutched at her chest.

*Don't sink your brow down like that! Ugggh... He's so cute! He's beautiful.* Sophie's happy-go-lucky brain finally dropped its bell—the sound of the fallen bell echoing through her skull. *The game has been thrown, so that's a total loss for her brain. That's all from the field!*

"I love you..." The words left Sophie's mouth before she could catch them.

"Whaaa?!"

*I'm sure glad I'm alive.*

Sophie gazed up at the sky.

"You can't ride a horse?"

With a change in both time and location, Sophie found herself in Vyce's office in the early hours of a tranquil afternoon. She was assisting Vyce with the translation of a book from another country that he'd said he wanted to use as a reference.

Sophie quietly looked away from Vyce's wide-eyed, disbelieving gaze. She knew just what he was trying to say—she could hardly believe it herself. But there wasn't a thing she could do about it.

"I-I'm scared of heights, so..."

"But you've given speeches from places up high before, haven't ya?"

"There was the pressure and my nerves then—I had all these different sensations numbing it..."

"I mean, I guess I get it, but..."

In truth, even when she'd been up high on a platform, Sophie had never been able to get close to the railing. Her shoulders sank in defeat.

"Then I shall carry you, master."

The relaxed voice came from Azuello, who'd been munching away at cookies in the form of a cat. He had been frequenting the kitchens, and lately, he'd been walking around the castle looking like he owned the place. Today, however, he was beside Sophie, flicking his tail as if he were in a pleasant mood.

"I can transform into a size that won't make you afraid," he explained.

Azuello became a burst of light. The next moment, he'd transformed into a humongous cat.

He was large enough that Sophie couldn't wrap her arms around his neck. If he were to get on all fours, he would've come up to Sophie's chest in height. If he were like this, Sophie's newly

awakened fear of heights that screamed out whenever her legs weren't on the ground was sure to quiet down.

"B-But is it really okay for me to ride on a god...?" Sophie asked.

"I shall permit it for you, master."

"There're sacred beasts and whatnot out there too—I don't see any problem with that," Vyce added.

Was it really okay? Sophie felt like it wasn't. No, it probably wasn't okay. He was a god! Sophie already knew about the god stalking Lunetta, and as adorable as Azuello might be, that was its own matter. *What? He's a god, for crying out loud!*

"Whaaa?" Sophie said, furrowing her brow. Despite being at the center of it all, however, Azuello merely yawned and returned to his prior form as a small cat.

"I shall lie down now."

"What?" Sophie gasped.

She felt plenty odd and had plenty of doubts as to whether riding Azuello was really okay, but that had probably already been settled. As if he'd lost interest, he curled up on Sophie's lap.

In doing so, Azuello had forfeited any attempts at divinity; he was simply an adorable little kitty. But even then, was it really okay? But...well? Then again, Azuello himself had said he was wholly—holy?—fine with it. So it was fine.

After half forcibly convincing herself that it was okay, Sophie cast her gaze back to the desk. She ran her pen along the page as she followed the flow of the sentence with her eyes, only to be interrupted by Vyce's whisper.

"Scared of heights, huh?" Vyce said, a bit of amusement in his voice.

"I-I'm not proud of it..." Sophie groaned.

"Nah, that's not it," Vyce said, shaking his head. "I just think that's awfully human of ya. That's a good thing, don'tcha think?"

"Human of me?"

"You always looked like you didn't have a single flaw to your name," Vyce replied.

"Huh?"

Just what sort of ridiculous nonsense was that? Sophie was

startled to her very core.

She could list any number of her own shortcomings. Every single part of her fell short of others. All she'd ever done was desperately dispatch the tasks before her—that was all.

"You were always just so perfect after all, Lady Sophelia."

Startled at the sudden voice that echoed out, Sophie's shoulders gave an exaggerated twitch. *Oh no, the ink! The ink...!* The ink had leaped across the page so that the words on the page now read "which is why yerm." *What on earth is a "yerm" anyway? What's that supposed to mean?*

Sophie stared at the documents before her despondently.

"Hey now!" Vyce said, sounding stern. "Jeykos, don't go startlin' a delicate little lady like that! See, now she's down in the dumps!"

"Oh my! Was that my fault?"

Sophie had been startled when he'd both appeared and spoken up out of nowhere, so while it was Jeykos the prime minister's fault in that sense, the fact that Sophie had been so startled that she'd sent the ink flying was her own fault.

She shook her head. "No, it wasn't. I was just about to fix a part I'd messed up."

"She's lyin' through her teeth."

"Vyce..."

*No, come on!* Sophie didn't want to see an older man apologize with shoulders slumped down like that. It was enough to prick at her heart!

Sophie glared fixedly at the mean-spirited king before her.

"Okay, okay," Vyce said, shrugging before looking up at Jeykos from his seat. "Was there somethin' ya wanted?"

Jeykos snapped his head up in an instant, beaming as he spoke—a far cry from how he'd been slumping. "Indeed. I'd like to talk with Sir Livio as well. Might I ask for a bit of your time?"

"See?" Vyce said. "The moment you take this old coot seriously is the moment you lose."

That was *quite* a way to put things.

"You're far too cruel, Your Majesty!" Jeykos responded.

Sophie couldn't find so much as a trace of servile meekness in

Jeykos's smile anymore. *Ah, I get it now.* Jeykos had done a splendid job of teasing her. Sophie very much felt like she'd lost.

*Yeah, let's just put that aside for now.*

And so, it was decided that Jeykos would also join Sophie and Livio for their final dinner in this kingdom.

"As it so happens, I've obtained information on the neighboring kingdom," Jeykos said.

"The neighboring kingdom," Lunetta repeated, stopping her knife mid-slice through her sautéed whitefish to look at Sophie.

"Indeed," Jeykos answered. "I speak not of the other side of the ocean but, rather, the neighboring kingdom where Lady Sophie resided. If I may jump straight to the long and short of it, at present, no one knows the whereabouts of Lady Sophelia and Sir Livionis. Apparently, the search has been brought to a close."

"Well now."

"Huh?"

"Hmm..."

While Vyce, Sophie, and Livio each voiced their own reactions, Lunetta only tilted her head to the side.

"Do they think the two of them are dead?" Lunetta asked.

"As if!" Vyce replied. "If the Warrions were the type to die so easily, there'd be a whole lot more tryin' to claim the kingdom for themselves."

"To be fair, I knew it was a rather poor ploy to begin with," Livio said.

They'd made their grand escape so suddenly. And yet, even then, thanks to Livio's skillful preparations and the support of those helping him, Sophie found herself here now, passing the days away with not a scratch to show for it.

But still—while Sophie and Livio had been able to leave the kingdom far quicker than planned due to the irregular exception of teleporting to another country with magic, it was still unlikely that the king would let Sophie—who knew all the details of the kingdom and its workings—get away so easily. Under normal circumstances, the two of them might've still been desperately trying to escape

from their pursuers. It would've been no time for them to be eating sautéed fish without a care in the world.

"So even though he thinks they're alive, he stopped searching for them?" Lunetta asked, tilting her head to the other side. "But, Your Majesty, didn't you say that their king wouldn't let Sophie escape?"

"That's enough. Are you just tryin' to scare her for the fun of it, Jeykos?"

"Such slander!" Jeykos laughed, shaking the white wine in his glass. "I only intended to say that you can rest at ease knowing that there won't be anyone coming after you, that's all."

"And that brat got stripped of his right to the throne, didn't he?" Vyce said. "Would it kill you to say that first?"

Sophie gasped as her cutlery fell to her plate with a clang.

*What did he just say?*

Vyce had said it as if it were trivial, but Sophie was stunned.

Paying her no heed, Jeykos simply laughed. "I'd expect no less of you, Your Majesty."

"It's just as you say," he went on. "I believe there must have been something that convinced him that it would be more beneficial to allow Lady Sophelia to run away and give up on that pitiful excuse for a prince."

*Hold on just a moment.* Sophie placed her hand on her forehead before she even realized what she was doing.

What did the prince have to do with Sophie's absence? *How odd.* She thought she'd been in a position that would have had her involved in the kingdom's politics. She couldn't even start to follow the conversation.

Paying no heed to Sophie, Vyce merely laughed. "It's Oznil, of course."

"My father?" Livio asked.

"Now *there's* a scary one," Vyce said with a jaded laugh.

"You'd never think it lookin' at him, but he's one helluva devoted father," Vyce said. "I bet he pressured the king to turn a blind eye while you and the little miss escaped. Even if I were in the king's shoes, I wouldn't be stupid enough to go makin' an enemy outta House Warrion. In that case, it'd probably be quicker to give up on

the crown prince and set up the second prince instead."

"W-Wait just a moment, please!" Sophie said. "I know that House Warrion is in an important position, and I know that Livio and I caused problems, but what does that have to do with His Highness's right to the throne?"

"The hell?"

*Oh wow, that is one scary look on his face!*

Vyce's eyebrows were squeezed tightly together, his mouth agape in disbelief. The expression was so terrifying, Sophie caught herself standing down before she even realized it.

"Sir Vyce, please don't frighten Sophie like that," Livio said.

"Before you go tellin' *me* what to do," Vyce started, "do somethin' about the little lady in the dark here! Have you lost your mind?!"

"It's all fine," Livio replied. "I'll just keep telling Sophie she's the greatest ever until the day I die."

"That so? Nothin' to worry 'bout then."

There *was* something to worry about. This whole conversation was something to worry about!

Sophie's cheeks were flushed red, but Jeykos only laughed. His eyes were warm and kind, the corners of his eyes drooping down.

"I'll speak plainly since this is an informal setting where you both can address His Majesty at ease," Jeykos said, "but that prince never had any intention of becoming king in the proper way. He was under the false assumption that he could gallivant his way to the throne. I myself wouldn't have wanted any part in being lorded over by such a dull-witted fool of a king. The true misfortune of it all, however, was the fact that the far more capable second prince was born after he'd already become crown prince."

Jeykos's voice was warm, but his words were biting. *You just mixed some insults in there, didn't you? Is that any way to speak of the prince of another country?*

Then again... Sophie didn't have so much as a shred of affection for the prince who, as Jeykos put it, had been on his way to becoming a "dull-witted fool of a king," and Sophie herself had run away, so that hardly concerned her. *By all means, do whatever you'd like!* Sophie cared for him as much as the sautéed fish on her plate.

*Oh, but that would be an insult to the head chef, wouldn't it?* Whatever dish the prince was, it didn't matter if he were boiled or baked—Sophie didn't want a single bite.

"The reason he was able to function as the crown prince was because you were there with him," Jeykos said.

"What?"

Looking at her plate and imagining the prince arrogantly jutting out his chin on its surface, Sophie jerked her gaze upward in surprise.

"You were always whispering something in his ear when you were in formal settings, were you not?" Jeykos said. "You were leading him, weren't you? Telling him what he should say in his speech or who was who and where they were from."

Jeykos was exactly right.

No matter how much time had gone by, the prince never had memorized the names or faces of any of the influential figures in other countries, let alone those of the nobles in his own kingdom. Sophie had been in charge of feeding him all the answers.

As his fiancée, Sophie had been perfectly suited for the role—no one would raise an eyebrow if she were always beside the prince, no matter where he was. Seeing her always glued to the prince's side, the wiser nobles laughed about how well the two of them got along, while the noble ladies merely sneered at the plain and unfortunate Sophie for her "unbecoming" behavior.

*Then please, by all means, take my place!* Sophie had wished that from the bottom of her heart.

The prince's speeches, for example, had been praised for being brief and to the point...but Sophie had been whispering the two or three sentences that she'd deemed absolutely necessary into his ear beforehand! When the situation had absolutely called for a longer speech, the two always stood close together—or at least they made it look that way, so she could whisper the lines into his ear beside him. He'd *looked* like an excellent prince, speaking boldly, almost as if he were speaking to an old friend—almost as if he'd thought of the words himself. If nothing else, Sophie did have faith in his acting skills and his ability to handle what was thrown at him.

Sophie was silent for a moment. “What’re you talking about?”

She had contained her reaction to Jeykos blabbing openly about the nation’s affairs, merely letting a smile grace her face, whereas Vyce snorted.

“If you’ve got eyes and a brain to think with, you’d know exactly what I’m talkin’ about! There had to have been plenty that noticed, so you don’t have to try ’n’ cover it up.”

Now that it was all out in the open, Sophie couldn’t help but feel just a bit down. She’d thought no one had noticed, but all she’d done was make a proper clown out of herself.

“He was that stupid and he was still the crown prince?” Lunetta asked bluntly.

Livio gave a hearty laugh. “Sophie was tremendously talented, so everyone thought it would all be fine so long as she was the queen. What a load of horse dung! In that case, those brainless bastards would’ve been better off skipping the prince entirely and just putting Sophie straight on the throne! To hell with them!”

Livio’s words didn’t match the smile on his face. His expression was that of a dazzlingly radiant angel—and yet it spewed all manner of curses.

Sophie was just the slightest bit scared of this side of Livio, but she liked it all the same. The dissonance was just right. It was just like sweet-and-sour candy—it left you wanting more. Then again, Sophie was fine with anything so long as it was Livio, so all it took was a smile on his face to leave her in fulfilled bliss.

Sophie smiled, clutching her throbbing chest. “Oh, don’t be silly. The kingdom will go on just fine without me. There are all sorts of people who could serve in my place. I was merely fulfilling my role as His Highness’s fiancée, that’s all.”

“That may be, but listen up.” With his elbow on the table, Vyce ran his left hand through his hair and tapped one long finger of his right hand on the table. His expression was suddenly grave and mature. “Yer right—it doesn’t matter how important somebody is to society; the world ain’t gonna end just because they kicked the bucket. Even if I died today, someone’d keep this kingdom runnin’. In an organization, no one is irreplaceable. So if it’s got ya worn

down, then you can run as far away as you want. Ya can go look for some other place to be."

"But," Vyce continued, staring at Sophie. His gaze was piercing and intimidating, and yet, his dark blue eyes were illuminated with kindness.

Indeed, it was almost as if he were trying to tell her, *Don't forget this. Take it with you.*

"When it comes to people that *individuals* find to be irreplaceable, though? There are more than you can even start to count."

Tomorrow, Sophie would be departing alongside Livio on a journey into an unfamiliar world. It would be a long, long time before they would be able to receive guidance from Vyce like this again.

The first adult that Sophie had ever encountered who worried about her had looked at her with the face of a king—and the face of a friend.

"You were irreplaceable for the prince to become king," Vyce explained. "But to Livionis Warrion, you were also the very one who could be replaced by no other. To try and deny that would be an insult to me after I felt so much pity for you I wished I could keep you here in my kingdom. Stand tall and have some more pride in yourself." Vyce's expression shifted into a grin at the end.

Wearing that characteristic cynical grin, Vyce pointed at Livio with his thumb.

"If you don't, you're gonna leave our young little lover boy here in tears."

"Sir Vyce, why don't we wrap this up?" Livio said.

The following morning, a great number of people gathered at the entrance to the castle. There were Lunetta's maids and ladies-in-waiting who'd taken care of Sophie; the castle librarian; Jeykos, the prime minister, and the civil servants Sophie had assisted; the mages who'd gone in and out of Lunetta's laboratory; the kitchen cooks and maids that Azuello had frequently visited; the military members Livio had trained with...

And Lunetta and Vyce too.

“Sophie, I have a letter for you.”

Lunetta clutched the rectangular metal cases close to her chest. The cases were larger all around than an envelope and engraved with magic circles for transfer magic, with a protective spell guarding over the circles. Sophie’s case was inlaid with one of Lunetta’s red magic gems, while Lunetta’s was inlaid with one of Sophie’s brown ones. The cases sparkled, decorated with little ornamental touches and a number of smaller magic gems that had been set in the case alongside the center stone in each. The letter cases were both beautiful and cute—Sophie and Lunetta had put everything they had into making them.

“I have one for you too,” Sophie said.

The mighty witch—Sophie’s very first friend—gave a hearty nod, her obsidian eyes trembling.

“I mentioned this yesterday, but it doesn’t look like you’ll have to worry about anyone comin’ after you,” Vyce said. “Sophie, Livio—leave all your fears behind in my kingdom, you hear? Go out and have some fun.”

“We will!”

The corner of one side of Vyce’s mouth was curved up in a jaded grin. Sophie gave a hearty nod back.

“And take it easy with the booze, Vyce,” Livio said. “Don’t go croaking before we get back, okay?”

“Who d’ya think you’re talkin’ to, twerp?!” Vyce shook his hand, as if to send them on their way. Sophie and Livio laughed.

“We’ll see you around.”

“Yeah.”

“See you soon.”

“Of course.”

Sophie and Livio looked at each other. Those sparkling, sweet, and gentle blueberry eyes that Sophie adored so much were narrowed by his wide and loving grin.

Sophie smiled back at those eyes of his before returning her gaze to the people seeing them off.

Each and every face was lit up. They all warmed Sophie’s heart, like a cascading ray of sunlight or a tranquil spring day. It was a

sight that could've come straight from a fairy tale—the sort Sophelia had always yearned for as a young girl.

It was all because Livio had taken her hand. It was because Sophelia—because *Sophie* had lived to see this day. That was why she'd been able to see—and claim—all those glistening specks of light.

*I'm so glad I hung in there*, Sophie thought with a smile as she gently caressed the inner child crying within her.

She let a wide grin grow on her face and gave them a big wave.

It was a far cry from "ladylike" behavior. *And? So what? A graceful lady? Oh, how wonderful!* A lady would wear a beautiful dress, stiletto heels, and ribbons and lace and swallow down all sorts of unsavory things. She'd be perfectly armed with a smile that kept everyone out, fooling herself and others over and over again as she crushed her own spirit only to be left all alone. That was the type of "lady" that Sophie knew. It was a curse.

*I'll be damned if I have any more to do with that nonsense! Throw it all away, straight out the window!* Sophie wasn't the daughter of some noble house anymore.

Without a family crest or title weighing her down, Sophie's shoulders were light, and inside her small enchanted bag, she had all sorts of items she couldn't wait to use. In her heart, she carried the excitement of beginning her next adventure.

And there, shining on her ring finger, was the light of her beloved.

Sophie was alive.

And she'd go on living.

*I'm not alone anymore.*

"We'll be back!"

*My Fiancé Cheated, But a New Love Rings! Volume 2*

## THE END

# Side Story: An Opera of Dazzling Color

Sophie felt a pricking sensation on her skin. She slowly blinked at the feeling.

It was like a needle pricking her, just the slightest sense that something was off. But it was just enough for her to feel so uneasy she couldn't write it off as her imagination. Sophie had felt that sort of odd, uncomfortable feeling before.

When was it? Where had it been? What came to Sophie's mind as she looked back through her memory was the knights' uniforms. It was that odd sense Sophie had often felt from the knight at her side, guarding the crown prince and herself—the prince's fiancée.

Whenever Sophie had happened to look up and make eye contact with one of the knights, he had always smiled and said, "There's nothing to be concerned about."

And yet, the number of knights surrounding her had been dwindling—it was because there had always been a knight going around taking care of any suspicious figures to ensure that there wasn't anything to be "concerned about." Sophie had realized this rather soon after she got engaged.

Most of the suspicious figures were onlookers who were a bit too tense around the royal family, but Sophie had heard her fair share of bone-chilling reports. With that sort of experience under her belt, Sophie concluded that what she felt *now* was tension emanating from the knights nearby.

In other words, that meant...

"I knew it."

Shifting her gaze, Sophie found two rugged-faced men standing there, just as expected. Sophie wasn't trying to suggest that *they* were suspicious, however—Sophie didn't have the skills to sniff that

sort of thing out. They were her guards.

Lunetta had been the one who'd said she was going out into the town to shop, and Sophie had been the one who'd said she'd like to go with her. Vyce had been the one who'd laughed and told them to get some guards if they were going on a date, while the men who'd been assigned to guard over them had been the ones to say, "We'll be out of sight to avoid getting in your way."

Just as they'd said, the two men—brawny with wonderfully kind smiles—had never stepped in Sophie's line of sight once. They had been so well hidden, in fact, that Sophie had completely forgotten they were there.

But now, they were close—close enough for her to find them immediately.

Sophie looked at Lunetta beside her.

The witch was completely absorbed in the quills lined up at the front of the store, so she hadn't even noticed Sophie's attention. She was muttering about all sorts of hard-to-understand things, like how the magical energy did such and such, and how it was distributed in such and such a way. *She looks cute like that from the side—she doesn't have any expression at all, but you can tell she's having a good time. Good. All is well.*

Just like Vyce, Sophie didn't want to expose Lunetta to any sort of danger. She just wanted Lunetta to have a good time looking at all sorts of pretty things. She also hoped to avoid having Lunetta, the tremendously curious and exceedingly talented witch, let loose some earth-shattering spell in the middle of town. After all, Lunetta might wind up remarking how she'd "thought up a spell that could make only the specified targets in a crowd explode." *That'd be just a little bit, well... You know, right?*

Still, the fact that the guards hadn't moved must've meant that they weren't on high alert just yet.

Sophie looked up. She couldn't say why, but...

It was truly just an impulse, but Sophie looked across the road.

*Why'd I do that? I dunno.* Sophie didn't know why, but she shifted her gaze, only to find Livio there.

She'd immediately lost sight of him in the crowd, but there was

no way Sophie could ever mistake Livio. More importantly, how could she ever mistake that beautiful face of his? Sophie had heard Livio whispering about how he wanted to go to the blacksmith's as he stroked his sword, so she wasn't surprised that he was in town, but still—Sophie couldn't help but blush at finding Livio in the middle of a bustling crowd like it was nothing. *Love really does do a number on your brain, huh?*

"Look at this, Sophie," Lunetta said, calling her attention back.

Snapping out of her thoughts, Sophie looked back at Lunetta.

"This is a feather from a monster with strong magical energy," Lunetta explained. "And the tip's rather fine, so it seems perfect for drawing small magic circles."

"Where would you draw a small magic circle?"

"On the bottom of a pot or such."

"A pot..."

"One of the cooks was saying that they wanted a pot that would keep the food from burning."

"Would ink even stick to a pot?"

"I'd make a magical ink," Lunetta replied. "I'd circulate my magical energy into it, draw the magic circle, and..."

Before she realized it, Sophie found herself nodding along, completely absorbed in Lunetta's magic lecture as she held the quill in her hand. After all, Sophie couldn't help but get excited by what Lunetta had to say—it was all new to her. With a topic as shiny as the two obsidian eyes beaming in front of Sophie, how could she resist? Sophie realized that she had to be wearing a dim-witted, slack-jawed expression, but she *was* having a good time. What was she supposed to do?

"If you do the incantation, then—"

"Excuse me, miss."

Sophie had completely forgotten about her nerves and her embarrassment, only to be stopped by an unfamiliar voice.

"Sorry to catch you when you're having such a good time, but can I assume you'll be buying that quill?" The store owner gave an uneasy laugh, although it wasn't clear whether he was worried about the feather pen Lunetta was clutching or if he'd just gotten fed up

with their unending conversation.

Snapping back to her senses, Lunetta stuck her hand in her bag. "I'll buy it."

Having snapped back to her senses just the same, Sophie turned around once more.

While she'd been absorbed in her conversation with Lunetta, that uneasy feeling that something was off had vanished—along with the guards who were supposed to be there.

Sophie felt relieved, glad that there was "nothing to be concerned about."

*Hey, don't tell me...* Sophie's happy-go-lucky brain whispered, bell in hand.

That same moment...

Sophie's eyes locked with his so firmly it almost made a sound. There in the distance, were those sweet, beautiful blueberry eyes.

*I wonder if Livio protected me?*

It was the same way he'd always protected her, watching over her when she didn't even realize it. The same way he'd always come rushing to her side.

It was a ticklish sensation that made Sophie's heart leap. Sophie placed her pointer finger over her lips.

*Let's just keep this our secret.*

Sophie wanted Lunetta to return to the castle with her high spirits undimmed. She was sure that Livio would make that wish come true as well.

*Okay?* Sophie laughed, only for Livio to blush and nod.

*Oh, how is his face this adorable?* Sophie was deeply grateful for her eyesight, which let her clearly see Livio even from this far away. After all, he *was* adorable. Absolutely, positively, ridiculously adorable! *Let's hold the playoffs for the Cutie Cup right this very moment! Livio beat all the contenders undefeated to take home the grand prize!*

*Still, I wish I could have that cuteness all to myself.*

Livio was the one who'd turned her into such a greedy creature—and he meant the world to Sophie. Just how happy could she be?

"Thank you!"

*I wonder if Livio heard that?* Sophie thought after putting her feelings into words.

She'd left on the journey in high spirits, and her heart had been pounding in her chest ever since. Livio had given Sophie the gift of a world like that—and Sophie would fall in love with him over and over again for it.

And she'd stay in love with him, from here on out!







# Bonus Short Story

## Farce of the Fools

"Oh, so it's a date?"

"Yeah, ya could say that."

"What sort of face am I even supposed to make in this situation?"

"D'ya have to say it with *that look* specifically?"

"That look" was likely referring to Livio's expression, featuring a furrowed brow and the edge of his mouth drooping down in over-the-top disgust as if to say, *Bleh!*

Livio knew he wasn't making the sort of face that won him countless compliments. He furrowed his brow even more intensely, only for Jeykos and Vyce to burst out laughing. *Talk about rude!*

While it was annoying having adults toy around with him as if they had every right to do so, Livio's little noggin was no match for the two of them. Even if he gave them a death glare back, it'd just be a hoot and a half for the two old men.

*I hope you both go bald!* Livio thought, silently cursing them. But the smiles they gave Livio in return made it look like they'd caught on to that as well. *Aaarrrgh, those smirks just make my blood boil!*

Their smiles had none of the pleasantness or approachability found in the sort of expression people imagined when they heard the word "smile." Meanwhile, Sophie had one that Livio loved—a smile so adorable he was worried to no end that it might be snatched away from him. Sophie was truly, undoubtedly adorable.

"I think I'd like to see Sophie now, so may I return to my room?" Livio asked.

"And just who was it who asked *me* to take 'em to the blacksmith to get their sword some maintenance?"

"I did..."

*Whoops—got carried away there!* Retreating from reality into his own thoughts, Livio had imagined Sophie graciously giggling at him. His vision of her was so adorable, in fact, that he had very nearly forgotten he'd been given the honor of a date with an old man.

"Besides, the little miss is off on a date with Lunetta herself," Vyce added.

"She's with Lady Lunetta?"

Whenever Sophie talked with Lunetta, she always beamed with a gentle smile. The way she smiled when they talked was so absolutely adorable that Livio could hardly begin to describe it—just seeing the two of them together was bliss for Livio. He was honestly glad that Sophie had been able to meet a friend she could be so open with—that much was no lie. It wasn't any sort of fiction or fib.

Although Livio had often needed to brace his core to keep the words "I'm just a little lonely over here—I'd sure love it if you gave me some attention too!" from bursting out of his mouth.

Having won his love, Livio was now rather narrow-minded. The breadth of his heart had become so shockingly narrow, in fact, that a single sheet of paper would have needed to be crumpled up to fit inside. Livio's heart had grown so narrow that there wasn't even the space to lay down a single page of paper describing his love for Sophie, but even then, it was no matter of shame for him. Livio, after all, was a fool drowning in the ocean of love.

"And just why do you know what Sophie's doing when I don't?"

"*That's* what yer upset about?"

In the end, Livio found himself on the receiving end of Vyce's and Jeykos's laughter yet again.

"By the way, will Lady Lunetta be all right?"

Staring out into the lively streets before him, Livio bit into the meat skewer in his hand. The meat was springy, tender enough to easily bite through, overflowing with juices, and covered in a flavorful sauce.

It was a culinary masterpiece Livio couldn't find any fault with. *I want Sophie to try this too...* Livio thought as he chewed.

Livio loved the face Sophie made when she ate, as adorable as a

baby squirrel. Just remembering it was enough to put a warm smile on his face.

With his heart (and mouth) full of happiness, Livio looked across to find Vyce stuffing his face with meat, raising his eyebrows as if to say, *What d'ya mean?*

*Gulp.* Savoring the flavor of the meat before swallowing, Livio furrowed his brow. "It's just... I just get a little worried thinking that that stalker might find Lady Lunetta."

"Lunetta said it herself, didn't she?" Vyce answered. "The god'll never find her so long as she has that seal. Not to mention the fact that it's a barrier stronger than that room that was designed to be the first line of defense. So long as she's alive, she's as free as can be."

"The room was the first line of defense, huh?" Livio gave a sarcastic laugh as the appalling prison sprang to his mind's eye.

When a Landslayer Witch neared death, her power would weaken, causing the seal she'd placed upon their own soul to dissolve. In that instant, her fully matured magical energy would be released, only for the god who continued to search for the princess he'd loved long ago to realize that her soul had been lost again. He would know the joy of finding his beloved only for a moment before he would lose her once more.

Livio knew nothing of the hell of losing hope time and time again. He counted himself fortunate for that, and as a human in love, a part of him even pitied the god.

"You're not going to just let the stalker roam free, are you?" Livio asked.

Their situations were two entirely different matters. Their situations were as different as the delicious meat skewer and the sword wielded by the strongest in all the land. They couldn't be any *more* different.

*You think we're going to sit by and let you stomp around doing whatever you want just because you "miss her"?* Though it might have been painful for the god to accept the death of his lover, the way he clung to the witches just because they shared her soul—and took out his frustrations so recklessly to boot—was nothing short of

narcissistic love.

Fuming, Livio looked beside him, only to see Vyce scrunch up his face. “That ain’t even a question,” Vyce said. The wrinkles in his brow—harder to remove than any stain—had increased even more. *Whoa. Now there’s a face you wouldn’t want to cross.*

“The creep’s tryin’ to mess with my fiancée.”

*Yup. I’d expect no less from the king who’s the walking definition of “barbarian.” That’s what I’d hoped he’d say*, Livio thought with a nod.

“But,” Vyce went on, “finding out where that clingy bastard is means there’s also a chance he might catch on to me. If I’m not careful, I could wind up dragging the common folk into this. Guess what I’m tryin’ to say is...” Vyce licked the sauce clinging to his finger and lifted the edges of his lips into a grin. “God slayin’ is gonna take a helluva lot of prep.”

“Sl—”

*What?*

What had the king just said? *God slaying.* He’d said he was going to kill...a god. *Talk about fearless! And impudent!* The nerve to say something like that so easily about a being with power far beyond that of humans... He might very well give Livio’s own father a run for his money.

“Can you actually kill a god?”

“Hell if I know.”

*I see.* Judging from how disgusted Vyce sounded, it seemed he was rather angry at the god. *Of course he is!* The god was immensely powerful but instead only went around weeping and wailing—thanks to that good-for-nothing god and the royal family that had continued to conceal his existence, so many witches had met a horrible fate, perishing in silence.

The witches had simply perished—without a soul knowing anything of their labors, their agony, or their pride. Lunetta, too, had very nearly met such an end herself. It was enough to make Livio angry as well.

But even then, Vyce wasn’t so shortsighted as to conclude that he should just kill all involved. The fact of the matter was that the king

of Magyck still lived...in the strictest sense of the term, at least. In short, Vyce had Lunetta at his side, fully informed on what that might mean.

Vyce cut a sour look, only for Livio to smile back.

"A king picking a fight with a god for his fiancée?" Livio said. "It's absolutely stupid but really cool!"

"That don't sound like a compliment to me!"

Vyce's feelings were both rough and delicate at once. They were far too heated to be called mere affection yet far too gentle to be called love. Vyce's devotion was like a lukewarm yet intensely spicy soup—just how would the king himself go about labeling such feelings?

Livio certainly hoped that Lunetta would bring this clueless charmer to tears, but rather than saying such, he laughed instead.

"Please call me when you go at it with that god."

"What?" Vyce replied. "I'd expect nothin' less outta the son of House Warrion! Think we've got a chance of winnin'?"

"No, I'm not quite *that* overconfident."

But still...to think that he'd even make an enemy out of a god to protect someone he cared about.

The king was just like one of the brutes of House Warrion himself, so if Livio let the likes of a god do as he pleased with Vyce, Livio could never show his face at home again from the shame of it.

*Well, not that I plan on telling anybody as much.*

"Lady Lunetta is Sophie's dear friend, after all."

"Straight as an arrow, aren't ya?" Vyce laughed, concealing how he honestly felt with another honest admission. *Dammit, why's he gotta be so cool?*

Satisfied to see Vyce's entertained expression, Livio stuffed his face with the last chunk of meat. *Man, the way those herbs and garlic are balanced together is perfect.* It was an irresistible treat, showcasing the meat's natural sweetness and rich flavor.

*I could really go for another*, Livio thought, but as he was about to suggest just that, he lifted his head and reflexively threw the skewer.

Bolting from his fingers, the skewer flew straight through the air

and landed in a wall.

"Eeeek!"

Livio tilted his head to the side as the sound of part of the wall crumbling to the ground mixed with a scream.

"Could I have misheard you, by chance?" he mused.

Nope—there wasn't a chance.

Livio was confident in his senses; they'd been praised for being as keen as any animal's.

There was no mistaking it—the roughly dressed men had said, "Let's kidnap the two of them and try to squeeze some money out of them." They'd been looking straight at Sophie and Lunetta—and there was no way Livio could ever mistake that face there beside Lunetta, smiling like a flower.

"Wh-What the hell? Where'd that come from?!"

"I thought it was an arrow, but it's just a skewer! What the hell's a skewer doin' stuck in a wall?!"

"More importantly, how does a skewer *demolish* a wall?!"

They certainly were a noisy bunch.

Livio briskly approached the men, and they gave a stiff shriek when they noticed him.

"Talk about mean—you make it sound like I'm some monster!"

Seeing Livio chuckle, they'd likely realized he had thrown the skewer. The men readied their weapons, likely feeling cornered.

They were adventurers from the look of it. The six men wielded a balanced spread of weapons for both long-range and close-range combat, bearing not only a sword and a lance but also a rifle, throwing knives, and a stave. Given that they'd been plotting a kidnapping, it was likely their reputation matched their appearance.

"Wh-Who the hell are you, punk...?!"

"I could ask the same to you," Livio replied. "Just what sort of *punk* tries to harm a delicate young lady, hmm?"

His face split into a grin, only for the man wielding a massive sword (apparently their leader) to shout back, "I don't wanna hear it!"

*And I don't wanna hear* you, Livio thought, before ultimately deciding to hear the man out for now.

"There aren't any monsters worth any coin around these parts anymore! This is the only way we can feed ourselves!"

"Excuse me?"

Vyce's personality aside, he was a king who loved the peace his kingdom enjoyed. Ruling the kingdom in a way that would allow monsters to have their way with the land was never even an option for him. While that was overall a good thing for the people of his kingdom, it seemed that adventurers, who depended on the materials they harvested from monsters as a part of their income, could hardly welcome such. *I get it now. And? What about it?*

"If you've got the skill for it, there's any number of jobs out there—like guards for nobles or castle soldiers. If you're that dead set on hunting monsters, there's nothing stopping you from going to another kingdom. You really are an unintelligent bunch, aren't you? Then again, I guess that's why you had the dumb idea to talk about kidnapping them. My apologies for pointing out the obvious."

The term "adventurer" referred to the sort who traveled the world all on their own, finding treasures that slept in unexplored regions, slaying terrifying monsters that carried bounties, and even pioneering undeveloped lands to expand the residential sphere. They brought people both joy and surprise, and that was exactly why they were able to reap such bountiful financial rewards. Their strength alone was what gave them purpose. They were free and yet laughed in the face of the danger that such freedom brought. They were a brave—and foolish—bunch.

Even if Livio were wrong in his assessment of them, adventurers weren't this sort of scum.

"Can it, you damn brat! Even that phantasmal nightmare feared our party!"

"And who the hell are you supposed to be?"

"The nerve!" the man said, brandishing his blade. "You don't know about us?! We're the Pitch-Black Noirs!"

Kicking off the ground, Livio leaped to the magician who'd been muttering an incantation underneath his breath, hiding behind another man.

"First I've heard!"

The magician gasped.

Livio couldn't use magic, so leaving the magician to his mutterings would only spell trouble. Even if it weren't a problem, the magician—shooting off spells from a distance—would only be in the way if Livio didn't make short work of him right at the start.

The magician's face was painted with shock. Livio grinned at him. "That's one long incantation, gramps."

Incantations were meant to be brief and quick—the magician didn't even have the basics of combat down. Livio grabbed the magician's robe before throwing him against the wall.

"Guggh—!"

The sound was every bit as satisfying as he'd expected it to be. Livio turned around, only for six knives to come flying at him. Still gripping the robe, he ripped it off the magician and used the fabric to knock the knives to the ground.

*What a pain*, Livio thought, furrowing his brow. "Oh?"

"Urgh!"

Vyce's boot sank into a man's cheek with a dull thud. *Oh wow!* It was a splendid jump kick.

"I was wondering what was up when you suddenly walked off..." Vyce said. "Just who the hell are these guys?"

"They're the scum of the earth that tried to kidnap Sophie and Lady Lunetta."

"Hmm?" Vyce lowered his kicking leg and lifted his chin, his long hair flowing and a veritable gorge carved into his brow. "They must be awfully brave."

"Hardly. They say they're the Pitch-Black Noirs."

"The hell? Are they dumb?" Vyce said, snapping the adventurer's longsword in two as Livio broke the arm of the man aiming his rifle at Vyce. "Not a one of 'em's wearin' black!"

*Bwa ha ha! Now that's a scream of agony!* Livio smiled, surrounded by all sorts of horrific sounds he'd never want a dainty lady to hear.

"I told you they were scum."

Satisfied to see the scumbags lined up and locked in a loving,

face-first embrace with the dirt, Livio looked up, only to see Vyce looking deep in thought as he stroked his chin.

"I should bolster the system for introducing jobs to adventurers," Vyce said. "And maybe I should tighten the standards for renewing their identification too..." Muttering all sorts of complicated matters beneath his breath, Vyce's face was that of a ruler. At the end of the day, he was a serious king.

*Now then...*

Livio had had his fill of the messy sight before him, so he decided to search for Sophie. The scumbags were bunched together in one friendly heap, so he didn't think they'd be able to get the better of him, but there was always a chance.

Livio trusted Sophie's and Lunetta's magic, and he knew there were knights with them keeping guard. But the knights were simply present to keep them safe—Livio couldn't let Sophie be subjected to anything frightening in the first place.

Livio's gaze wandered about impatiently before immediately finding that hair the color of new leaves and that radiant smile of his love.

"Glad she's okay," Livio said, breathing a sigh of relief, only for Sophie to spin around.

Livio was taken aback when they locked eyes. Sophie silently lifted her pointer finger over her mouth. Her caramel eyes narrowed as she laughed.

"Shhh!" Sophie hushed him, then let out a mischievous giggle.

*How is she this cute?!* Didn't she know that Livio could feel his heart being squeezed so tight it bled? Or maybe she did...?

The words escaped Livio.

"Thank you!"

That was what Sophie said. It was a small whisper of a voice that only Livio could hear, but she'd said it. And she'd said it with a melting smile as delectably sweet and saccharine as sugar.

And just like that, Sophie swiftly returned to Lunetta's side. Watching her turn away, Livio found himself unable to endure the onslaught of dizziness, palpitations and breathlessness that assailed him and leaned back against the wall. The sweet pain he felt was

proof that he'd become a love-drunk fool. It was proof that, without her, Livio could hardly even breathe.

*If...*

If he were to ever lose Sophie... If she went somewhere where Livio could never reach her again... Just what would become of Livio then?

"That's a scary thought..."

That day, Sophie had tearfully said she felt just like she was dreaming, and now, Livio thought he understood that feeling just a bit better. The terror that came from finding happiness was as cold as ice as it whispered to his heart. *I get it now.* It was enough to make his knees buckle. It was far more terrifying than his father's sword or a gargantuan monster. Livio was ashamed of himself for being unable to truly stay at Sophie's side back then.

Ignorance truly was bliss.

If he were to lose Sophie...Livio himself might very well rage about indiscriminately and cut an unbecoming sight. He was sure to fall into despair at the thought of never seeing her smile again. The prospects of such were far, far more terrifying than his own death.

*Hmm.* So? Then what? What of it? It was too late to be worried about looking unbecoming or being a barbarian, wasn't it? Wallowing in his sentiments wasn't like Livio at all!

"I'll cleave it all down!"

If there were something—or someone—that ever tried to steal Sophie away from Livio, then it didn't matter if they were a thug, a king, or even the grim reaper himself. He'd cleave anything and everything in two!

"Like hell I'll let anyone take her," Livio said. That was what he'd promised Sophie. "I've gotta get stronger..."

Looking at Sophie with her back to him, Livio made his vow, his chest feeling like it might burst wide open from the sheer force of his affection. And he'd make his vow again and again and again.

"Hey now, and just what the hell're ya gonna do gettin' any stronger than ya are? You tryin' to take over the world or somethin'?" Vyce said, teasing Livio in a suspicious tone before bursting out laughing beside him.

“If that’s what Sophie wants!”




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My Fiancé Cheated, But a New Love Rings! Volume 2
by Ehito

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