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My Fiancé Cheated, But a New Love Rings!
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Chapter One: Project Your Voice

Oh? And just why do I have to put up with all this again?

As the revelation washed over her, Sophelia von Lotus tilted her head in curiosity at the unexpected question.

A *revelation*.

And what a revelation it was. Why had she never questioned it until now? And why had she started to interrogate it now, of all times? Sophelia wasn't bright enough to have even the slightest idea why, but that hardly mattered. Well, she could've realized a tad sooner, but better late than never.

That's right, Sophelia thought to herself with a nod. *I don't need to put up with any of this!*

Sophelia took a breath in. *Deeper, deeper, deeper, deeper— Uh-oh, too much! I'm gonna choke! But before I do…*

"Waa-aaa-aagh!!!"

She'd given that scream everything she had, so she was sure it had echoed all throughout the castle. If there was one thing she was confident about, it was her voice.

After all, Sophelia was a diligent lady of class, never once falling behind on her running or strength training. But why would a lady of class need to do strength training, you ask? To project her voice, of course. A faint, tremulous voice would've been charming, no doubt, perfect for attracting men. And yet, such a voice lacked persuasiveness and grace.

Even a firm, trained voice could lend itself to numerous interpretations, so Sophelia had trained to control those nuances as well. It wasn't merely the words she spoke, or even the way she spoke them; from her tone of voice to the particulars of her breathing, Sophelia never had any other choice of reply…

Because right before her eyes was none other than her fiancé, the crown prince, half naked and entangled with another woman.

It was funny in a way, how those itty-bitty baby blues of his snapped wide open, his face a pale porcelain doll white to match. *Heh heh!* She struggled to contain herself—it was all over if she laughed.

Sophelia wheezed one shallow breath after another. “Y-Y-Y-Your Highness, h-how…”

No way! Sophelia took a closer look, and sure enough, the woman was her very own half sister! *Seriously? You really did me a favor messing everything up like this! Thank you!*

Sophelia fought back the urge to leap for joy, her body shaking with the effort. She was racked with sheer delight, but she couldn’t let *them* see it. Though it was painful, Sophelia continued to exhale, her vision slowly beginning to bend and blur.

“Sophelia, it’s, uh, it’s not what it looks like! Please just calm down and—”

“Y-Your Highness!” Sophelia stuttered.

Not what it looks like? What else could *it possibly be, hmm?*

Even as a dainty daughter of nobility, Sophelia knew all about such intimate matters. Why, instruction had even been included in her training to be the next queen. More than tea parties, mingling with Lord So-and-So, visiting orphanages, or hatching plans to vanquish monsters, she’d been told her primary duty as queen would be to give birth to an heir. She’d been in no position to call that absolute nonsense.

When it came to talk of “how to spend an evening with a gentleman,” Sophelia’s instructor had simply told her, “This is no time to get embarrassed,” with a stern expression and a textbook in hand.

That’s right, a *textbook*.

Of course, Sophelia had never had the chance to act upon any of its instructions, but it seemed her fiancé had been finding opportunities to practice all over the place.

Oh, is this part of your *curriculum then?* Or at least, that’s what she’d always wanted to ask. Instead—being the reserved and graceful lady that she was—Sophelia had kept silent at every turn. After all, it would have been simply *unbecoming* to share her opinions with a gentleman! She would do no good raising a fuss over a bit of fun…as she’d been told time and time and time again.

But that was all outdated now, wasn’t it? Such an attitude was a product of a bygone age, and an appalling one at that!

Time’s march forward never stopped, and the current age was for the new generation to build. It seemed too much trouble to simply sweep away customs and traditions that only brought pain,

so if they were going to throw them away, then they might as well spectacularly cast them down and mop the floor with them! And it was with that same conviction that Sophelia collapsed to her knees after noticing the guard knights had arrived at the scene.

"Lady Lotus!"

Unlike her precious little sister who flaunted her snow-white skin, Sophelia was plain and unremarkable. Even if she were to look up at the knights with tear-filled eyes, she couldn't expect much of a reaction from them.

I hope I get a little *bit of a reaction at least...* Sophelia thought optimistically, tipping her head up at the knight who'd called her name.

The knight had jet-black hair like velvet, lustrous even against the darkness of night. Unspeakably handsome, the knight extended his hand toward Sophelia, only to freeze up halfway.

Oh, you hesitate to touch a betrothed noble woman? My, what a gentleman!

He was quite the opposite of a certain crown prince. *Hmm? Which crown prince would that be, you ask? Why, the crown prince of this very nation! That dumb, naked bastard over there practically begging people to look at those chiseled abs of his!*

"H-His Highness! H-He—!"

Sophelia was clenching the knight's clothes so tightly that her fingertips had started to go numb. On top of that, she was actually having a hard time exhaling. She'd done a fine job of hyperventilating.

Watching Sophelia shake and tremble, the knight's gaze seemed to show he was stricken with pain. He was bafflingly attractive with his eyebrows hunched together in worry.

Hey there, what's wrong? Did something happen? she almost wanted to ask the knight, but she also realized a lady of status hyperventilating in front of him put him in quite the bind. *Not to mention the prince is right in there with the door wide open, looking like he's ready to wrestle! Sorry, but I really need to drag you into this!*

Though she wordlessly apologized to the knights who'd come bounding into the room, Sophelia couldn't contain her joy at the growing sound of footsteps rushing inside.

Oh Gods, thank you for giving me the ultimate opportunity! I vow to use it to the fullest!

Sophelia caught herself nearly gazing up at the heavens, only for a dignified, quiet voice to call her name.

“Lady Sophelia.”

While she certainly wasn’t a particularly prideful woman, as a serious and graceful noble lady, His Majesty the King, her family, her servants—oh, and that dirty bastard over there were the only men to have ever addressed Sophelia by name.

“Huh?”

Locking eyes with the knight in surprise, Sophelia noticed his blueberry-candy-drop eyes staring back at her with care.

“Please, try to relax. Lean against me and inhale slowly. Take slow breaths. Follow my voice. Breathe in…and out. There, just like that.”

Almost as if he were stroking her back, the knight gently patted between her shoulders over and over again with the flat of his hand. The knight cradled Sophelia’s head in his other hand, gently guiding her breathing. Calmly folding her body into the knight, Sophelia found herself with her head against the knight’s uniform, almost as if it were an embrace.

You don’t need to worry! It’s not like I can die from hyperventilating. You really don’t have to take it so seriously, you know. Sophelia could’ve laughed. He was an interesting knight, this one. His Royal Sleazeball the Prince was a rotten, smelly excuse for a man, so Sophelia didn’t quite know how to make heads or tails of a knight this dependable.

I’d hoped to make a kingdom for people like him…a kingdom that wouldn’t punish the kind, Sophelia thought to herself, only to realize that she was crying.

The knight took a quick breath, gently patting Sophelia’s back again with the palm of his hand.

“There’s no need to hold back, m’lady,” the knight said. “No one is looking at you.”

He did have a point, didn’t he?

“Your Highness…!” screamed none other than the prime minister.

“Lilly!” shouted Sophelia’s father.

At this point, there wasn’t a soul who could simply turn a blind eye to a commotion like this. And every single person who’d come bounding onto the scene of the disaster found themselves in the

middle of utter chaos.

Even then, Sophelia's attempts to stop crying only left her breaths more and more shallow. Trying to hold back would only defeat the purpose, especially since she'd just now started to calm down. The knight was simply stating a fact.

But it was a *kindness*.

This knight certainly was something, wasn't he?

Sophelia had always considered such kindness the stuff of fairy tales, a flight of fancy forever out of reach. She'd always thought it akin to the cuisine of the country to the east that she'd never tasted. *I wonder what that spicy red soup of theirs tastes like? I'd love to try it, but I'll likely never get the chance!* It was just as simple as that, and yet…

Sophelia cast a nervous glance up at the knight.

At first, he looked as if the weight of all the world's troubles rested on his shoulders, only to seemingly push it all down and gaze back at Sophelia with a caring smile.

"You've worked harder than anyone else, m'lady. You can rest now."

"Why…?"

Why do you know that? And why are you being so kind to me?

Her voice barely above a whimper, Sophelia found her words washed away by the tears rolling down her cheeks.

His uniform had to be a mess by now. Wrinkled and tearstained, it had to look terrible. And yet, the knight neither mocked her nor struck her. He was kind. As if he'd stepped straight out of the pages of a fairy tale, he was simply *kind*. He was a shining, handsome man with a soft, gentle smile for her, even though his wrinkled brow made him seem on the brink of tears himself.

Sophelia gasped in surprise as the knight wiped a tear from her cheek with his fingertip. Before she knew it, Sophelia found herself grasping that same gentle hand.

You mustn't! You mustn't drag him into this!

She had no business laying hands on such a kind, stunning soul, but even as she reminded herself of this, Sophelia found herself holding him tightly anyway.

She yearned for those blueberry eyes that seemed to wrap the shattered remnants of her self-esteem in a warm embrace. She

wanted nothing more than to lose herself in those sweet, pain-tinted eyes.

For the first time in her life, Sophelia felt something overwhelmingly ravenous within her, and yet words escaped her. How could she hope to find them? How wonderful would it be if he might only listen to her? Ashamed of herself for even thinking such, Sophelia pulled her hands off the knight's clothes.

She would stand on her own—as she always had.

And yet, Sophelia was happy. She was aimlessly, boundlessly happy. To think that having someone recognize her efforts could be such a release! It was as if she'd been born anew.

Everything was fine. She could go anywhere.

"Thank you, Sir Livionis."

Livionis's eyes snapped open—those deep, blueberry eyes like a night so searingly clear you could catch a shooting star bounding across it any second. Eyes wide open, he pulled Sophelia's hand as she tried to stand up.

Sophelia softly collapsed back into his warmth, blinking in surprise as Livionis's soft, low voice washed over her.

"Run away with me."

That night, everything Sophelia had scraped together and claimed for herself in her fifteen years of life transformed into stardust, shimmering in the night sky.

Chapter Two: Let Me Hear Your Voice

Livionis Warrion was a knight. Born to a long line of knights, he was destined to become one from his first cry of life.

While it wasn't that he hadn't dreamed of a different career—say, a gardener or a chef, or perhaps a butler—the fact was that such dreams could never come true. After all, the only world he'd ever known was the one within the walls of his family's manor. Same as his father, and his father before him, and indeed, his father before him, and so on and so on, Livionis had found himself sent off to attend the Knight Academy, following the long tradition of the men in his family. It was only after he stepped into the outside world that he had realized his family was of considerable pedigree.

Though he was just a bit too late to realize he was hopelessly trapped.

Because from "good morning" to "good night," rules and his family's reputation followed him around like an obsessive girlfriend.

It reminded him of his tired-faced friend who'd always run off to dates on their days off and the familiar complaint that preceded it each time: "I wanna break up with her, but at the same time, I don't, y'know...?"

Of course, Livionis had never even been able to *think* about getting a real girlfriend, so he had no idea what that was actually like, but still. He had to take the utmost care of that suffocating reputation, and depressing as it was, it was still important. It wasn't that Livionis wanted to *actually* run away. And it wasn't that he didn't *want* to be a knight.

But he wasn't convinced.

He hadn't even been given the choice. Why did he have to bear the burden of their expectations and spend every moment of the day swinging his sword, running around, and listening to his instructor berate him over every tiny mistake? It made sense, but it didn't really.

And then one day—just one moment out of the blue, without so

much as a warning—Livionis fell in love.

It all started when his father had taken him to the Knights' drill grounds during a break from the Academy.

"I'll be generous and spar with you," another boy, about Livionis's size, declared with no small amount of self-importance. He was the only one on the sparring grounds wearing a helmet.

Figuring the boy was the son of one of the higher-ups, Livionis took him up on his offer and made a half-hearted swing at the boy with his wooden sword. With the many nobles that attended the Knight Academy alongside him, Livionis knew a thing or two about humoring egos with his swordplay.

"Is that all you've got?!" The boy snorted, making it clear he wasn't too bright. Even then, Livionis made a show of clenching his teeth in frustration. Livionis's performance rivaled any star actor's, so much so that his father could only watch on disapprovingly.

Noticing the knight moderating their match give an uneasy laugh, Livionis was still clearheaded enough to consider tossing the match.

But thirteen-year-old Livionis had just a bit of a temper. He was quick to anger, and just like a gorilla, the angrier he got, the stronger he got.

"This is the best Warrion's eldest can do?! What a disgrace!" the boy shouted. "If I were you, I'd be too ashamed to even get within a mile of the drill grounds! I'd love to see your father's face right about now! Well, why don't you show me, Lord War—?"

"Huh?" The next thing Livionis knew, he'd sent the boy in armor flying through the air.

He soon found out that the armored brat was no mere noble's son either; he was none other than His Highness the Crown Prince.

Wait, seriously?!

After Livionis sent His Royal Brattiness flying without any idea he was the prince, Livionis's father spared no effort laying into him.

"Just saying you didn't know won't cut it!" his father warned.

If he didn't want to get punched, then he shouldn't have been playing around on the Knights' drill grounds! Or picking fights either! Besides, I couldn't even see the brat's face with that shabby armor he

had! And if you *knew who he was, why didn't* you *say anything?!* Even if Livionis's retorts were on the tip of his tongue, it went without saying that he wasn't allowed to voice a word of them.

He knew full well that getting on his knees beside his father and pleading for forgiveness wouldn't earn him a lucky break. If it hadn't been for the good offices of the Captain of the Knights, the Warrion line could've very well ended right there on the spot.

"You've done nothing wrong, lad. Don't worry," the captain said with a smile, so quietly that only Livionis could hear him, before looking over at the prince. "Hope you finally knocked some sense into him."

The captain's voice was barely even a whisper, but Livionis heard him loud and clear.

But still...

By the time his father was through, it was too much of a bother to sulk off to the medic's room, so Livionis wiped the blood from his nose and plodded off, without any particular destination in mind.

Maybe I should let them know just how much of a tyrant my father really is! Livionis thought, considering the smallest act of rebellion. On the other hand, his father had given him a lesson he wouldn't soon forget. He walked on, with a swollen cheek and a shirt stained with blood and dirt. He might get another "lesson" out of it, but that was fine. If worse came to worst, he could just sheepishly explain that he'd gotten lost and make his most sincere and humble apology from the bottom of his heart.

After a while, Livionis made his way to a quiet garden filled with colorful flowers swaying gently in the wind.

All the gardens Livionis knew were utterly terrifying places where women giggled with fans in hand and exchanged fake smiles and faker compliments, so Livionis nodded to himself and made the swift decision to turn back.

A moment's decision meant life or death on the battlefield. Should you flee to the right, dodge to the front, or flee to the rear? Or do you perhaps leap into the air? Out of all the endless options, correct choices were few and far between. It was a matter of taking the riskier yet sound option and putting it into action in a fraction of a moment. That was Livionis's specialty after all.

That settled it—all the more reason to retreat.

Stopping Livionis in his tracks just as he was about to leave, however, was a small, quiet voice.

It was a sniffly, faint whisper of a voice.

Livionis's instructor had praised his sharp senses—as sharp as any beast's—and it was precisely because of them that he was able to pick up on the voice at all.

Yup, no one else would've heard that! Livionis thought to himself as he headed toward the voice.

He couldn't just leave them there if they were lost. *I mean, I'm kind of lost too, but at least I've got a handkerchief.* Livionis thought to himself, wiping his still-bleeding nose. *Man, the bleeding just won't stop! Guess being a hot-blooded thirteen-year-old just makes you bleed more.*

Pushing aside the rustling trees in his path, Livionis was greeted by a sight that made his eyes snap open in surprise: a young girl with bright green hair the color of a fresh sprout.

Her dark, chestnut-colored eyes were wide, perfectly round, and brimming with tears. Her cheeks were bright red, and though the teardrops filling her eyes looked like they could spill over any minute, she must've been holding them back. Her fists were clenched white on top of her knees.

"Um, are you okay...miss?"

After a moment of consideration, the girl said, "I should ask you the same."

She had a point.

"I'm fine," Livionis said with a nod, sniffing up some of the blood still spilling from his nose. "Happens all the time."

"Nosebleeds?"

That would make him just sound like a weirdo, so he wanted to set the record straight. "No, getting punched by my dad."

"Your father...?"

Uh-oh. Maybe that was just a bit extreme for the girl. It was probably not the sort of thing a dainty young lady on the verge of tears needed to hear. Then again, he had stepped onto shaky ground the moment he appeared on the scene a bloody mess. *Now how am I gonna smooth this over?* Livionis thought to himself, searching his mind for a topic that wasn't so violent.

"So I'm not the only one, then."

"Huh?" Livionis's eyes widened at the words the girl had forced

from her mouth.

"Yeah."

So he *hadn't* heard wrong. "Want me to punch your old man right back?" Livionis's father was frighteningly stern, but in the same measure he was frighteningly kind to his wife. His father wasn't just sweet and sappy with his mother—he was absolute *mush*.

His father was a dishonorable man who would extol the virtues of knighthood while he punched Livionis and his younger brother into the next week. Yet…

"Under no circumstances are you ever to injure a lady!" his father had barked while they were sparring one day.

"Then how about you stop injuring kids too, huh?!" his younger brother had bitten back, before being launched through the air as if he weighed nothing.

And what of Livionis? Needless to say, Livionis had obediently replied, "Yes, father," while extending his middle finger behind his back. Something must've given him away, because the next thing he knew, a swift kick from his father had sent him flying.

Growing up in an environment like that, the only conclusion Livionis could reach was that any dirty scum who dared punch the little girl in front of him deserved to be wiped off the face of the earth. That wasn't excessive. It was just tradition.

The girl shook her head, eyes wide in shock. "You can't do that. That'll mean a scolding for sure!"

A scolding for me? Or for you? Livionis thought to himself with a grin, proud of himself for being such a considerate thirteen-year-old, despite what appearances might suggest.

"It's fine. My old man's not quite right in the head, but he told me to kill each and every bastard who'd dare abuse someone weaker than him." The fact that he wasn't exaggerating in the slightest was a testament to his father's character.

The young girl blinked and laughed. "That's a wonderful father you've got, isn't it?"

"*That's* what made you think so?"

Even though Livionis was a bit remorseful for bringing up such a violent topic, the girl who'd been on the verge of bawling her eyes out just a few moments ago was now smiling as if she'd forgotten all about it.

Her face was soft and warm—sweet, just like sugar.

Making sure not to dirty the girl's dress, Livionis carefully sat down beside her.

"My father's an absolute barbarian. He thinks it's fine to beat up his sons and subordinates as much as he wants as long as he calls it 'training.'" Livionis sniffed as the blood continued to run from his nose. *Jeez, this just won't stop. Damn that old bastard...* "I know full well I've got to become a great knight for the kingdom, though."

That was the house he'd been born into, and there was no changing that.

Livonis knew all about the riches and luxury that came with it precisely because they had a duty to produce great knights—that was the sort of house they were. It only made sense that he'd have to pay the price in turn. He understood, but he couldn't help but wonder at the same time if *that* was what they'd chosen to protect instead.

"I'd be more than happy to hunt monsters all day," Livionis said, sighing into his shirt, now stained a murky black from wiping the blood from his nose.

The girl gave a small laugh. "My parents always make sure to save the violence for when no one else is looking, even during my studies. It's almost rude to compare your saint of a father to them."

So her mom's a dirtbag too? Can that even be a thing?

Livionis's mother was a merciless master of arguments, and when she got angry, she never left Livionis so much as an opening to defend himself in the middle of her rapid-fire verbal onslaught. Still, she wasn't one to shout hysterically at him or strike him. She was always a noble lady with a noble air, and a skilled actress who knew how to put on the young and innocent maiden look in front of his father.

Livionis tried to imagine a mother lifting her hand against a young girl, only to denounce it as an outright impossibility.

"They do it when no one's looking, right? So that means they have to know they're doing something they shouldn't be. Even if there was someone there to see it, my father would punch me all the same. Want me to do society a favor and get rid of them?" Livionis really was excessive. But what was he to do? It was family tradition, after all.

The girl snickered, seeming to think he was joking. “I think your father wouldn’t be too happy about that.”

“If he were the type to get upset about that sort of thing, the Knights would’ve given him the boot a long time ago,” Livionis replied. If he wound up in hot water, he’d just run away from home while he was at it.

“It’s fine… I just haven’t been trying hard enough, that’s all,” the girl said.

Livionis furrowed his brow. This girl who hadn’t shed a single tear wasn’t working hard enough?

“That’s nonsense.”

“Perhaps,” the girl replied, then laughed. “You don’t know who I am, do you?”

Livionis had a fairly good idea.

While to her, Livionis might’ve just been another face in the crowd, there was only one girl who stood beside the crown prince. Livionis had seen her before, at tea parties and celebrations with a brilliant smile plastered on her face. She was always smiling—a beautiful, radiant smile.

Faced with unashamed flattery or biting sarcasm, and even the sort of nastiness that would leave Livionis secretly gagging in disgust, the girl sat upright and unbending.

That royal bastard was even causing problems for the Knights, and yet he lived as free as a bird. But this girl who *refused* to cry, even when she was all alone, wasn’t trying hard enough? Who on earth could’ve ever told her something so *absurd*?

It made Livionis want to vomit.

“That’s the house I was born to. I simply wish to fulfill my duties,” the girl said with a soft smile. “So you needn’t worry.” She spoke like a noblewoman, her gaze strong and firm. “After all, if my efforts don’t match yours, how can I ever hope to ever support His Grace?”

And he’s *worth all that?* Livionis couldn’t even bring himself to joke about it.

The girl’s eyes rested half closed, their gaze so sincere he could almost cry. They held strength and a kindness that brought a pain to his heart, and also a tragic fragility.

Her eyes were clear, the dark brown of tea—and Livionis couldn’t stop looking at them—which sent him into even more of a

desperate scramble when he felt a handkerchief against his face.

"It'll get filthy!"

"That's what handkerchiefs are for."

"They're not for wiping off some brute's blood!"

The girl giggled happily at Livionis's reaction, watching his alarm at the soft feel of the handkerchief. "Mine's quite cheap, so there's nothing to fret over."

"Cheap's the last thing it is!"

As much as he wanted to peel her hand from his face, there was just no way he could grab the girl's slender hands with his own, stained with dirt and blood.

The girl wiped Livionis's face off without the slightest hint of worry in her expression, despite Livionis's frantic scramble. He found himself even more startled when he realized just how close the girl's face was to his. She was even cuter up close.

Seemingly oblivious to the fact that Livionis's young, thirteen-year-old heart was on the verge of exploding, the girl continued to wipe and pat away at Livionis's face with the handkerchief.

Calm down, you have to calm down. Livionis thought, remembering the bearlike face of his instructor. Even then, Livionis couldn't tear his eyes away from the girl's face.

The girl's eyes were like two round, sweet caramel candies. Her eyebrows curved upward, and the bridge of her nose was straight as an arrow. Her small lips were the color of cherries, and her softly sun-kissed skin glistened with life.

Living in the company of brutes every day, Livionis couldn't help but stare, wondering if she were even from the same planet.

That's why Livionis caught every word of it.

"I'll work just as hard as you to make this a country you won't regret serving."

That voice, like young leaves sprinkled by mist on a bitingly cold morn, those words she spoke...Livionis didn't miss so much as a syllable of it.

The words that softly escaped her lips—like a vow, like a declaration, like an admonition—were almost certainly never intended to be heard, but Livionis wouldn't allow her voice to slip through his grasp.

Livionis fell in love with that voice.

It was wonderful—the type of love that upends everything about the person you were before it. It wasn't enough to say that it had all been turned upside down. It was the sort of love that sent you for a total loop ending up right back where you started, except everything from your pockets to your brains had been turned inside out.

It didn't change the fact that Livionis would become a knight, or that his instructor was insufferably strict, or that his friend was always thinking of his girlfriend at every turn, or that the girl was betrothed to the crown prince. None of that had changed at all, but for Livionis, it was so painful he could hardly stand it.

He felt an unrelenting ache to protect the girl, no matter what it took.

Ah, love! What a damned wonderful thing it was! It only made sense that romance novels were so popular!

He just *had* to help that girl somehow!

Livionis tried frantically explaining it all to his father on their carriage ride back, only for his father to mutter back "Ah, I see" or "Is that so?" before giving Livionis a rough pat on the head.

The hell? C'mon old man!

"And did this young lady ask for your help?" his father asked.

Livionis hated when his father did that—asking a question he already knew the answer to.

"No…"

"Figured as much," his father said with a nod.

Livionis wanted to knock the old man's mug into next week, but unfortunately, he wasn't yet strong enough. Instead, he only glanced over and noticed his father's gaze had narrowed as if he were watching some inevitable travesty.

"A knight's duty is to save one and all, but that doesn't mean we can save everyone."

Livionis glared into his father's eyes defiantly, the same purple hue as his own.

"Can it, old man!"

It was no surprise he found himself on the receiving end of a punch.

"Lady Sophelia's mother is deceased."

His father had given him a sound thrashing he had been helpless to fight back against, and even though he'd flailed around until his spirit and stamina were at their breaking points, Livionis still couldn't forget her voice, her gaze—her smile.

"It's a hard thing to foster new connections," Livionis's mother told him that night, speaking slowly. "I'm sure Lady Sophelia's desperately trying to build a connection with her new mother and younger sister right now." His mother's words weren't sugarcoated, but they were covered in a layer of polite niceties as thick as the quilt he was burying his head in.

"In a fistfight, people can only come to an understanding when they're both allowed to throw punches," Livionis said discontentedly, puffing out his cheeks. "And if I'm being honest, that's just for barbarians like father anyway!"

As the son of that same barbarian, whether it was sugarcoating, a quilt, or even gelatin, he *hated* being wrapped up in manners and etiquette. He wasn't a fan of exchanging blows, but he had to give it credit for being a simple language. At the end of the day, he was, after all, the son of a barbarian.

"I know, dear," his mother said. "But you understand, don't you, my sweet little Livvy? She's engaged to the crown prince. I'm afraid it's not quite that simple."

Livionis was a smart boy. He'd been raised by his mother, a noblewoman, and his father, who had something of a standing in the Knights. Of course, he got it. He *understood* it full well.

It was just like the time he'd stepped in to help one of his peers who was being bullied: The moment Livionis punched the offender, the boy he'd helped had claimed he'd never been bullied at all, and Livionis had immediately been labeled a violent rule breaker. He knew that problems of this sort were delicate matters.

He didn't harbor an inkling of resentment toward the boy.

It was the adults who had refused to lend an ear to the discordant sound of the boy's teeth chattering in fear who were the real scum. The boy himself was prideful through and through, but it was his family—scoundrels that perpetuated meaningless violence—who were the real scum. The boy wasn't in the wrong.

It was just as Livionis's father had said. Even a knight doesn't have the slightest idea where to go unless there's a cry for help. He understood that.

And yet, even then…*even then*.

What of the boy who couldn't ask for help even if he wanted to? What of the girl's silent plea for help? Where would they wind up? It was all so meaningless, so frustrating, so tragic, that Livionis couldn't hold back his tears.

Even when he was told off and beaten by his instructor, even when his father had broken his bones, Livionis had never cried once.

But that night, Livionis couldn't forgive himself—couldn't forgive how powerless and small he was, how *weak* he was, watching the girl walk away the same way he hadn't been able to stop the other boy from leaving the Academy behind.

He cried for himself. The misery and frustration of it all was just too much.

"It's well-known that Lady Sophelia's father couldn't settle for the marriage that their families had arranged for him and Sophelia's mother," his mother said. "He'd found another lover for himself, so when he and his new wife welcomed a daughter into the family so soon after Lady Sophelia's mother passed, none were surprised. Indeed…I'm sure even Lady Sophelia herself was not shocked." Livionis's mother was well-versed in all the rumors whispered in the fashionable circles.

Livionis clenched his fist tight in anger as his mother went about calmly explaining away the infuriating injustices.

"Her family traces its lineage to the royal bloodline," she continued, "so His Majesty hoped to avoid its downfall. Lady Sophelia understands all of this full well, which is precisely why she is able to smile and hold her head high, no matter the occasion." His mother paused. "The kingdom will hold on to such wisdom."

In other words, there wasn't a thing in the world that Livionis could do.

She was the one standing there with that brilliant smile, claiming there was nothing wrong at all. No matter what befell her, the answer would always be that nothing was wrong.

It was a damned pile of nonsense—that's what it was.

"I put up with father and my instructor beating me left and right so I can get strong enough to protect others! So then what the hell is this, huh?! Damn it all to hell!"

“You got that handsome face of yours from me, so don’t go spoiling it with such vulgarities.”

The adults all told Livionis to give up with their words—and their fists.

Livionis was a child, and for a while, he could only submit before the power they wielded. But even Livionis came to learn that reckless actions would damage the good name of his house.

Had Livionis been of the right mind to give up, he would’ve escaped from his father’s fists long ago. But no man of the Warrions was the type to change his colors frivolously. Well, he couldn’t speak for all of them, but he did come from a long line of barbarians, after all. *Why don’t* you *give up then, how about that?!*

After wrestling with his thoughts all night long, Livionis made an oath:

He vowed that he would live a life true to his love.

In the wake of his vow, Livionis started by graduating from the Knight Academy three years early.

Pretty impressive. I can do things when I put my mind to them. But I already knew that.

Even if only from a distance, Livionis wanted to go fight alongside the girl who wrestled against something far larger than that tiny frame of hers.

He wanted to join the Knights as soon as he could.

With a wholehearted resolve, Livionis had been reborn as an exceptional student—an exceptional warrior student who’d trained well into the night to transform himself.

Before then, not only had Livionis been hotheaded, but he’d been a lazy slacker of a student who kept his grades just high enough to advance to the next year of study. When it came right down to it, he had been a problem child.

It had been a busy time for him—constantly getting cold stares, making others jealous, and driving them to tears of emotion—but in the end, he’d been successful in graduating quickly.

He’d been busy for sure. He’d transformed into the very epitome of busyness!

As much as it pained Livionis to say, the consensus on the woman he loved, His Highness the Crown Prince’s fiancée, was—

oh, how to put it...? Complete and utter sacrilege though it might be, the consensus was *far* from positive.

Everyone should have been well aware of the fact that it was the prince's betrothed keeping him afloat through all his gallivanting, but the younger generation was more fixated on her young half sister who went out of her way to seem dazzling and charming.

Pray tell, just what the *hell* was that?

What. The. Hell.

And that's just what Livionis had replied when one of his peers came strolling by, a drooling, smitten mess.

"Come to think of it, I met Lady Lilina at a tea party when I was back home, and she was a looker if I've ever seen one! As nice as they come too. Quite the opposite of her older sister."

"What the hell?" Livionis replied. "Her older sister's a looker too! *And* she's super nice!"

"Well, it's not like she's *not* cute. It's just, she's, uh, a little...plain? Too stiff. And get this!" He added, "Apparently she's always hard on Lady Lilina too! Guess a high-ranking noble girl like that's bound to be on one helluva high horse!"

"That's it. Get out."

"Get out? Why?"

From that day forth, Livionis bore the title of "Chief Excessive Officer of the Next Crown Princess Fan Club." Livionis was the only member of the club. He couldn't fathom why.

But it was a blessing that no one realized Livionis was a healthy young man consumed in the flames of love. Livionis had no contact with the girl, and all the other knights in training who lived in that messy Academy had a goddess of their own imagination keeping them company, so none thought it strange. Not only that, but knowing that the goddess *he* dreamed of would one day be the nation's queen mother, Livionis found himself commended time and time again as a shining example of a knight loyal to the royal family.

It was a stroke of luck, as sweet as cake that had fallen right into his mouth. Even if he cursed that damned prince and royal family from the bottom of his gut, no one was any wiser to it.

Whenever he heard those dimwits spreading unsavory rumors about the girl, Livionis took it as a fortunate opportunity to extol

her brilliance. Not that he was close enough to her to really be able to talk, but still.

And yet, here and there, as he investigated matters…he found traces of her.

"Hey, you! What's that you've got there, hmm?"

"This? It's cake."

"That's right—*cake*," Livionis repeated. "Every day, we get absolutely dragged through the wringer and worked to the bone, but then we get three wonderful meals—and *cake* alongside it. It's a dessert."

Livionis continued his sermon. "You must have known that was an act of benevolence from Her Grace, and yet you just proclaimed that her younger sister would be a better match for His Highness, did you not?"

"What…?" The man's fork fell to the ground with a clang as his plate was smacked up into his face, covering him in fresh cream frosting.

"And you there!"

"Huh? Me?"

"What's that you've got?" Livionis demanded, pointing to another man who stared back at him with a dumbstruck expression.

"It's a…chessboard?" the man replied.

The dining hall had desserts and tea and plenty of seats, so there were many students at the Academy who would relax there after they'd finished their meals.

"And what are you doing?" Livionis asked the man sitting beside the other.

"Huh? I'm reading a novel," he replied.

Looking closely, Livionis realized the man was older than him but nonetheless seemed to be swept up in what was happening, so maybe he was in the clear to continue. He made it a point to let out a long, forced sigh. "Do you realize that all of that, *everything* is thanks to her?" he asked, slowly casting his gaze across the noisy dining hall.

Gwah ha ha! This is perfect! Know the truth and tremble, knaves! Kneel down and worship at her feet!

"There are many among you who remember well how the Academy used to be," Livionis announced. "We were allowed no

form of recreation and were given only the most modest of meals! Such restrictions were supposed to be a part of our training, so that we might stand strong against the trials of the battlefield."

"That's right…" A group of older students who'd been at the Academy before Livionis were dabbing at the tears that had welled in their eyes at the memory.

Livionis spoke with the utmost kindness to both the men trembling in fear as they imagined the brutality he described and the ones who shrank away as they recalled the brutality of the past.

"Her Grace took pity on us! She claimed that it was essential for us to have an environment to amply rest our minds and bodies so that we might wield our power to the fullest should the need ever arise! Claiming it only fitting for those who would endure great hardships for their country, she made her plea directly to the Captain of the Knights and, in turn, the headmaster and passed the budget for her proposal."

Watching his easily captivated peers stare back at him with eyes wide in astonishment, Livionis raised his voice with growing excitement. "Are there any among you who can do the same?! Any hero who could speak up to those bears in power?!"

On that note, Livionis certainly couldn't, nor did he even think to try. Negotiating directly with a ring of violent brutes who looked to their weapons over their words, even though it wouldn't help you in the slightest? It was absurd! There was simply no way he could ever do such a thing.

All for a gang of filthy ruffians he didn't even know? If it were up to him, they could all go to hell. Protecting himself was more important. Protecting his *life* was more important. And yet, Lady Sophelia had calmly done just that, going out of her way to help them, all while claiming it was for the kingdom. The meals and recreational time were small things on their own, but when the scoundrels found out about them, they were brought to tears.

"I'll join the fan club…"

"Me too…"

Her work had brought just a bit of happiness into someone else's life. It *mattered*.

Deeply frustrated, Livionis had been on the verge of ripping up all the documents he had gathered as evidence of Lady Sophelia's

efforts because only the mean-spirited adults in power were ignorant of them. While *they* might not have placed much weight on her seemingly small accomplishments, he'd declare their cumulative weight as proof of her abilities and saddle them with the truth.

No, it should be known far and wide, all across the land!

Because of those stuffy adults, the younger generation had heard nothing of her benevolent deeds, instead leaving only worthless criticism to fall upon her. Or perhaps they were worried her image was *too* pristine when compared to the prince's sullied reputation. In truth, as Livionis's investigation had found, the girl was instrumental in *all* of the accomplishments that had been attributed to the prince.

To say it seemed suspicious would've been an understatement.

You have other things you should be covering up besides her hard work, you royal bastards! Spitting out such complaints, Livionis went about extolling each and every one of the "small" luxuries to the ruffians whenever he had the chance.

He felt like a missionary. Even after he graduated, Livionis continued his work converting people from the Church of Lilina.

And so, the Chief Excessive Officer of the fan club he didn't even remember making welcomed his sixteenth birthday.

As Livionis continued to rise ever upward, he grew closer and closer to the prince—meaning he heard many stories he would rather have not.

When Livionis had seen the girl smiling all on her own at a soiree one evening, he'd had to desperately hold himself back from leaping to her side right then and there.

Each and every part of her had been so charmingly captivating that he couldn't stand it: her fresh-sprout green hair that she'd learned to tie up somewhere along the way; her delectably sweet caramel eyes; her lips, now featuring a hint of crimson, highlighting her grown-up face. She was so dangerously attractive that it had taken everything in him to resist the urge to abandon his post as guard.

And now, here she was.

The girl Livionis had dreamed of was right there in his arms.

Livionis had fantasized about it, prayed for it, dreamed of it: the

feel of her hair, her real smile, the moment she cried the tears she'd held back—a world where she would no longer be forced to endure. Livionis had opted to fight alongside her of his own volition, and now, she was there in his arms, looking up at him.

It was far from uncommon for the crown prince to disappear in the middle of a party at the castle. While Livionis had his own opinions on the allowance of such a thing, the fact of the matter was that it was simply a standard of the country they lived in.

Would you look at that? Looks like this whole kingdom's just as dumb as ever today!

Rumor had it that the second prince's supporters were plotting an insurrection. Livionis was torn as to whether he should secretly support them in hopes they'd give it their best shot. He was at a loss about seeing how his father felt on the matter.

Livionis had plenty of reasons to celebrate the possibility of His Royal Dumbass being stripped of the throne, but it was unacceptable to imagine all of the girl's hard-fought efforts so far going to waste. As adept as he was at making spontaneous decisions, Livionis had no choice but to exercise caution on the matter.

It'd be nice if I could just go up and ask her *what she wanted to do. But I would've talked to her* ages *ago if that were possible!*

Not so much as a scratch could befall such a refined and noble young woman without drawing attention. So just how could he talk to her without raising suspicions from the public…?

That's it! he thought. *I could dress up as a woman!*

Livionis found himself thinking about the matter quite seriously, despite how unseriously he'd been taking his guard duties.

His task at hand was to find His Royal Birdbrain, the crown prince. *A fortuitous excuse*, he thought with a grin.

Right around when the prince and the famously beautiful Liliana had left the party, the girl—Lilina's older half sister—had taken her leave as well.

It was unthinkable to imagine the girl walking about all alone on a night so drenched in wine and spirits. Livionis had set about searching for her, energetically calling on his peers to help him find the prince. The prince was no concern of his. After all, he was

off working hard somewhere. Working hard at *what*, Livionis wouldn't say.

As they ran about, Livionis heard a piercing scream echo through the halls, so startling that it seemed his heart might leap from his mouth, do a triple twirl in the air, and then dash away. Livionis's feelings required no explanation.

It was a deathly terror.

The moment he saw her crouched and trembling in the cold hallway, his freshly caught heart felt like it might shout, "I'm *freeeee*! See ya!" and then dash out full speed ahead.

In a display of gentlemanly behavior only fitting for the Chief Excessive Officer of the fan club, Livionis fought back the urge to lift the girl up in his arms—a feat that would have surely earned him the admiration of all the other fan club members.

Although, to be fair, that was about as "gentlemanly" as Livionis got. After all, he wasn't a gentleman—he was only acting like one. When it came right down to it, he was still a barbarian at heart.

"H-His Highness! H-He—!"

The moment those quivering, tear-filled caramel eyes of hers—kind, yet worn with the scars of suffering—looked up at him, it was all over.

Everything—all of it went out the door.

Livionis had resolved himself to be a knight who would watch over her from a distance so as to never sully her resolution or get in her way. But he dropped such pretenses—along with his duties—in the span of a moment.

Oh, I'm terribly sorry, sir. We're closed for the day. Come back soon! What's that? You want to know when we'll be open again...?

Hell if I know!

"Lady Sophelia." Livionis finally called her name. It was a treasured, important name, so much so that he'd hesitated to even say it. But he called her name.

"Huh?"

The girl's perfectly round eyes looked up at Livionis in shock.

Her eyes—that little girl's eyes—were just as they had been that day. He remembered them as if it were only yesterday. Watching her, Livonis's stare narrowed into a warm, caring gaze.

Hold up, this is bad! I feel like I might cry!

"Please, try to relax. Lean against me and inhale slowly. Take

slow breaths. Follow my voice. Breathe in…and out. There, just like that."

She was hyperventilating, so Livionis lay her down as gently as he could. Carefully stroking her fresh-sprout green hair, Livionis guided her breathing, only to notice His Royal Numbnuts half naked with Lilina on the opposite side of the room.

So that's *what happened.*

The girl—Sophelia—had finally, *finally* given up on that royal pile of excrement! Sophelia was both strong and clever, so the fact that she was this beside herself was almost certainly an attempt to make an even bigger scene. He was the Chief Excessive Officer of the fan club, after all, and his assessment was not to be underestimated.

Normally, Sophelia would've just feigned ignorance or made efforts to conceal how shaken she was. But it was also true that Sophelia had been hurt time and time again—so much that her patience had been worn to rags.

Did you think you could keep the truth from the Chief Excessive Officer of your fan club?

Calling upon all of his spirit and strength, Livionis patted her back as gently as he possibly could. When he cast his gaze to their surroundings, Livionis wanted to laugh. He might as well have been looking at a painting of hell itself.

Luckily, his peers who'd come bounding over, Knight I and Knight II, were members of the fan club. Noticing Sophelia trembling in Livionis's arms, the two knights nodded in understanding. Making sure not to get too close to Livionis, the two lined up in front of him from a bit of a distance to keep careful watch.

In addition to the two knights who were trying to shield Livionis and Sophelia, more knights and soldiers appeared on the scene one after the other, followed by the prime minister, the minister, the head of House Lotus, his wife, and—*oh!*—even His Majesty the King.

Livionis looked up at Knight I and Knight II in surprise, and the two gave him a big wink. *Gross.*

No, that wasn't what they were implying! They'd called everyone. The fan club members had gathered this crowd. Livionis would've done the same.

To the knights and soldiers, he would've said, "Something's happened with His Highness the Prince!" To the palace leaders, he would've said, "His Highness the Prince, he... Well, we, uh..." making sure to imply something scandalous. And he would've told the head of House Lotus, "Lady Lilina's in an emergency!" After making sure to tell them all stories that were *just* different enough, he'd do everything in his power to shepherd them onto the scene.

The two knights would've been able to synchronize all this by making full use of the newly introduced devices—capable of transmitting information in an instant—that they'd been given by their instructor at the Academy. They more than lived up to their roles as members of the Next Crown Princess Fan Club! Everything they'd done was *excessive*. It was no surprise though. It was simply the Chief Excessive Officer's family tradition. So what they would do, they must do quickly—and *thoroughly*.

"It's all going to be okay," Livionis whispered into her ear, which was adorned with a glistening blue gemstone.

You can cry. I want you to cry all you can.

All this time, she could've cried whenever she wanted to—she *should've* cried. But Livonis was certain that the princess he'd pledged his love to had never shed a tear even once.

"There's no need to hold yourself back, m'lady," Livionis said. "No one is looking at you."

Sophelia lifted her face up apprehensively. Another tear tumbled from her wide-open eyes. All the fragments of Sophelia's resolve crumbled away and spilled out, drop by drop.

How did she cry so beautifully and sorrowfully all at once? It was a painful cry, as if she'd been slashed with a blade. Who could ever leave this small, little girl all alone?

Simultaneously wishing to curse the world itself and yet finding himself unable to resent the world Sophelia lived in, Livionis chuckled to himself. He was sure his face looked like a botched mess. While Livionis had long taken pride in his reputation as a handsome knight, his face was doing him no good now. His expression must've seemed so unbecoming. He was just a small little knight, with nothing to his name. He held neither title nor royal rank. He was a barbarian and nothing more.

Yet even then, Livionis was certain he knew Sophelia better than anyone.

“You’ve worked harder than anyone else, m’lady,” Livionis said. He’d been watching her the whole time. He’d been *yearning* for her all the while. Sophelia had lived a life where she would bleed more readily than she would ever shed a tear. He *knew* Sophelia. “You can rest now.”

“Why…?”

Why*, you ask? Why simply because I’ve been secretly watching you. Because I’m the Chief Excessive Officer of your fan club. Because I adore you.*

None of which Livionis could bring himself to say. Seeing Sophelia helpless and forlorn like a lost child, Livionis felt powerless. He might’ve been excessive, but he had sworn never to hurt Sophelia.

Please, rest easy. I beg of you. Livionis smiled, as if praying she would listen.

The font of feelings sprung up endlessly from within him. If even a fragment of his feelings reached her, then it would all be okay. If Sophelia opened her heart to him even a fraction of an inch, then it would all be fine.

Wiping away her tears with his gloves, Livionis found her grasping his hand. He noticed her trembling eyes, her lips—

Livionis felt like he could shout.

Ask me.

I beg of you. Ask.

Livionis had been waiting for her to ask him for so, so long. Had she only asked the question, he would’ve dropped everything to run to her side. He would’ve thrown away everything to answer her call. He could do anything—he *would* do anything.

So, please, just—

“Thank you, Sir Livionis.”

Huh?

What? Ha ha, of course! That was who she was.

Livionis knew. He knew full well. He knew full well that Sophelia hadn’t even the slightest idea that Livionis’s heart was trembling in anticipation. Livionis knew it so well he could laugh; no matter how worn down and battered she was, she was going to stand up on her own. He knew better than anyone and everyone else that she would look at him with all that pain and yet never voice a word of it.

After all, it was that same beauty of Sophelia that Livionis had fallen in love with.

It's all fine now. It's okay. I hear you. And Livionis *had* heard her.

Hey, you asked. You asked, right? You asked the question, didn't you? Any guy who could ignore you has no right to call himself a man! Not when your face and voice could make anyone watching fall apart.

Livionis certainly couldn't ignore her.

I'm hearing things? If I am, then so be it.

If Sophelia said the word, Livionis would proudly call black white, call cats dogs, and call mice lions. He'd kneel down and offer his service to any fool for her. If it meant living such a life, then Livionis would protect her as a knight till the end of his days.

Apologies for being such a conceited fool—I'll get on my knees to beg for forgiveness or whatever you might ask of me.

So, when she returned to his arms with only the slightest tug, Livionis held her as tight as he could.

"Run away with me."

Allow me to be the one and only man in this world who will never miss your plea for help.

Incidentally it wouldn't be until the next morning that, trembling with emotion, Livionis realized that she knew his name.

Ha ha, guess I really was nervous! Now that's not like me!

Chapter Three: Answer with a Bold Voice!

It was spring.

Spring had come to the world. Flowers bloomed with reckless abandon, the sun sang, and the wind played a melodic fanfare. The world was warm and soft.

Responsibilities? Duties? What are those? Are they tasty? Sophelia's thoughts grew more foolish by the minute.

Foolish? Why, that makes it sound like I was smart in the first place! Sophelia thought to herself with a laugh. Had she been a bit smarter, she would've been able to make it through life more easily.

For example, Sophelia had known that her father had taken plenty of lovers before he'd ever married her mother. She also knew that he had no intention of changing his ways after her birth.

From the sound of it, Sophelia's father had never seen eye to eye with her grandfather, so it was no surprise that he was less than pleased with the partner her grandfather had picked out for him.

At least, that's what she'd assumed. But when her father brought back her stepmother, Sophelia found herself strangely making peace with the fact that her own mother had never had a chance. Her stepmother was stunningly beautiful, with her wavy pink hair and shimmering lips.

The arranged marriage hadn't been the issue; her mother just hadn't been his type. All she could do was laugh.

Ha ha! Laugh away!

So just what sort of person had Sophelia's mother been then? Why, she'd been the very portrait of a noblewoman, far removed from anything of charm or flair. She'd been a plain, classical type who valued history. She'd valued it a *great* deal.

She'd been in the habit of proclaiming the proper place of a noble or a lady and held it a virtue to never oppose her husband's wishes. She would direct the same smile she put on for her husband toward Sophelia, her own flesh and blood, so it always

felt somehow cold and indifferent.

Thinking back on it now, her mother had probably hated her father—and with good reason. Her mother had hated herself. And just who could love a man with countless lovers all across the land? Sophelia was his flesh and blood, so her mother probably hadn't cared much for her either.

But back then, little Sophelia had known nothing of the outside world. She'd never felt sad or lonely. She'd just figured her experience was true to how the world worked.

Her father had always been frowning. The servants had never so much as cracked a smile, as it would have been unbefitting for servants of a famed and venerable house to be giggling like fools when there was work to be done. Thus, Sophelia had grown up in a home without laughter. She'd never heard her parents praise her efforts, nor had she ever held hands with anyone. She'd figured that was just how the world worked.

People who would grip their sides in laughter. Parents who would embrace their children or run their hands through their hair. She'd thought it was all the stuff of fairy tales. She didn't mean that as a metaphor either; she had honestly believed it.

So imagine her surprise when they'd rolled through town in a carriage, venturing outside her manor for the very first time for a tea party.

What? Is this normal? Has House Lotus fallen? Shaken, the young Sophelia had turned to her mother beside her and softly tugged at her dress, only for her hand to be smacked away a moment later.

That moment was lodged firmly, immovable in Sophelia's memory. Discomfort, shock, hesitation—her mother had looked at her with an expression that escaped description, as if all her pulpy blots of uneasiness had twisted and melted together into a goopy mess before finally separating.

Oh, I did something wrong.

It was the moment Sophelia had given up.

Her mother, her father, her whole house—they all saw her only as a sort of creature called "Sophelia." They were nobles, so their only choice was to feed it, train it, and take it around with them. Was she a pet to them?

I'd rather be a pet! Woof! At least then they might like me and pat me on the head!

Whether Sophelia tried to recite a tricky poem from memory (that she didn't even understand), or whether she tried to embroider their family crest (even if it didn't look cool at all), it all ended the same: with her parents looking back at her as if to say, *And?*

Bleh.

So she would always put on that smile, cute and kind and nothing more, and giggle emptily before her father. She would watch her father who couldn't quite seem to remember who she was, and her stepmother and half sister who would laugh as if they'd been the ladies of the house right from the start, as if they'd belonged to House Lotus ages before Sophelia ever had. She'd been impressed by just how clever they all were.

She'd made her peace with the fact that that was just how the world worked.

If Sophelia could have lived like them, not buried in overwhelming responsibility, she never would've had to find out that suffocation alone isn't enough to kill someone.

But she digressed.

In other words, even His Highness the Prince, whose only response to seeing Sophelia was a "Hmmph," had never even touched her.

And now there she was, in the embrace of a man—not to mention a dazzlingly handsome and strong man—mere moments away from exploding.

It was her first time touching another person, and it was overwhelming. She felt out of place, like she'd shown up nude to a party held by the royal family.

Oh, but the prince was already half naked, so she'd be fine, just fine.

"Are you okay? It's just a little bit farther to the carriage."

"I'm f-fine." How on earth could she be fine? She wanted to scream and he just went and whispered into her ear with a voice like that.

What's that? What am I going to do? Is this my last reward?

He was strong, and kind, and warm. Not to mention he smelled nice, and when she looked up at him, the stunningly handsome knight met her with a warm, caring smile.

Wow. *Shouldn't the kingdom be protecting a face this handsome?*

Just why on earth was this man a knight? It'd be a national tragedy if anything ever happened to that face!

But that made it all the more amazing that this absurdly attractive knight had said he'd run away with Sophelia.

"Run away with me." That's what he'd said.

He'd said that to Sophelia, looking at her with those blueberry candied eyes that were somehow sweet, and kind, and sad all at once, those eyes she wanted so badly that she could've screamed. But there was no way she could do what he'd said.

It wasn't "I'll let you flee" or a mere "Run away."

He'd said, "Run away *with me.*"

It was the "with" in "with me." The "with" that meant "together."

Looking up at him from the tight confines of his embrace in surprise, Sophelia noticed his eyes were dreadfully beautiful. Livionis's eyes were perfectly placed, clear, and stunning.

"Please, run away with me," he said with those shapely lips of his.

He said it *again*!

You're not hearing things after all! That was all it took to convince Sophelia. Duty? Responsibility? Why, Sophelia didn't have the slightest idea what they were!

Why don't you *try having a guy with such a handsome face tell you that—and so earnestly—right when you've given up on wanting to cling to him?! Is there* anyone *who could say no? Nope, didn't think so!*

Sophelia nodded again, and once more after that. And that's when Sophelia thought her heart might stop.

"I'm so glad," Livionis said with a smile.

She'd heard rumors here and there about the "handsome-faced knight," and now that handsome face seemed to melt before her as he smiled, cheeks painted with color. The gentle droop of his eyebrows, those lustrous eyes, those warm, pink cheeks, and the soft outline of his mouth…

Sophelia felt as if her eyes might catch fire. *If this were the last thing I ever saw, I'd have no regrets*, she thought.

Sophelia had lived her fifteen years of life as a gentlewoman, and now seeing a real smile—not a put-on smile for politics—for the first time left Sophelia wondering if this might be some misfortune instead. A flicker of unease about the rest of Sophelia's life fell over her.

But now—now, in this very moment, she was shockingly happy.

Maybe “happy” wasn’t the right way to put it. It was *spring*—an everlasting spring.

This was it! This was the love she’d heard rumors of!

You must be thinking,“You smothered all of your emotions—what do you *know about love and romance?!” But just hold on!*

The knight with the amazing face had said he’d go with Sophelia. That was all he’d said.

But just look at that face of his! Look!

She liked him. She *really* liked him. There was no question about it—she loved him. *What’s that? Was there even a question about whether or not I would fall for him? Was there even a chance? There sure wasn’t!*

Which is all to say that Sophelia had never slacked off with her running or her training, and to be quite honest, she was more than capable of walking on her own. But Sophelia just couldn’t let this turn of events—the jackpot of a lifetime—slip through her fingers, so she chose not to tell him she could walk. There was simply no way she could say that. She’d never part from him for the rest of her life!

That’s what she thought…until they parted when they arrived at the carriage. Apparently Sophelia’s life was short.

And yet, Livionis sat down beside Sophelia in the carriage! Sophelia came back to life, rising from the ashes like a phoenix.

Livionis slammed the carriage door shut and stared at Sophelia, casting his kind gaze upon her.

Too much. It was too much to bear!

“Lady Sophelia.”

“Yars?” *Oh.* That wasn’t supposed to come out like that. Whether she was meeting with the king of another nation or presenting a budget proposal to His Majesty, Sophelia had always spoken smoothly without hesitation. Stumbling over her words was a new experience.

“You’re so cute.” Livionis smirked at Sophelia as her cheeks flushed red. “Too cute.”

That was *her* line.

That’s right, “cute”! You’re violently *cute. What does “violently cute” even mean? Beats me.* Sophelia’s fists ached, unconsciously clenched.

“Steady now,” Livionis said to himself. “We don’t have much time, so allow me to explain quickly.”

Eek! Don’t make such a tense face all of a sudden like that! I just might die! But Sophelia bit the inside of her cheek and nodded.

“Wow, it’s just like I’m dreaming!” Livionis continued. “No, no—that’s not it! Get a grip, Livionis!”

Sophelia didn’t quite understand what he was saying, but she was in complete agreement with every word of it, so Sophelia simply stared deep into Livionis’s eyes.

He was absolutely stunning.

No, no—that’s not it! Get a grip, Sophelia!

“Just to confirm,” Livionis said. “You screamed at that scene because you wanted to cancel your engagement. Is that correct?”

Sophelia blinked. *Guess so.*

“That’s precisely right,” she replied. “While stumbling upon them was truly a coincidence, seeing His Highness like that was enough for me to decide that I’d had enough. And what was more, when I took a closer look, it was my younger sister he was with!”

“While I may have been able to overlook it had it been someone else,” Sophelia continued, “my father would be all too happy to call things off if it benefited his beloved youngest daughter. Not to mention the royal family cannot cut ties with House Lotus, so it actually got the situation under control quite efficiently. To be quite honest, I was lucky.”

The only thing Sophelia’s father excelled at was his role as head of House Lotus. He wouldn’t be able to bear to have Sophelia’s precious little sister be subject to unsavory rumors, so he’d likely concoct a love story for her and the prince and have her take Sophelia’s place as his betrothed, no matter the cost…and Sophelia would be all for it.

Livionis quietly considered this. “You’ve taken too low an estimate of yourself, m’lady. I can’t imagine His Majesty would so readily give you up.”

“I can certainly imagine it,” Sophelia replied. “His Highness is far from fond of me. The only reason I was betrothed to him is because I was the eldest of House Lotus.”

“Argh… Very well… There’s so much infuriatingly wrong with the situation I may lose my senses, so let’s go with that. I certainly can’t have you changing your mind on me either.”

Once more, Sophelia had no idea what Livionis meant. “Change her mind”? Absurd. Who in their right mind would leave such a gorgeous knight to go back to that blind fool of a crown prince or her father who never even spoke to her? Not to mention becoming a laughingstock for having her fiancé stolen away was the last thing she wanted.

Sophelia laughed. “Now *that* I certainly can’t imagine! Even if I am all on my own, I am determined to flee from this country.” She couldn’t live as “that creature called Sophelia” anymore. Not after she’d discovered the joy of being human.

Looking up at Livionis, she saw his eyebrows were furrowed together in an expression of utter displeasure. “There’s no way I’m leaving you on your own, though.”

“Oh, okay.” Sophelia couldn’t bring herself to say any more than that. Her face was almost certainly a bright red. *Oh, what do I even do? I’m just so happy! He said he’s not going to leave me on my own! Aaaaaaaah!*

Sophelia felt like she could scream, so she clenched her teeth with a huff to hold it back.

Livionis didn’t notice. “So long as you understand,” he said with a satisfied grin.

Hee hee. And just what was that supposed to be? Aagh…! Livionis was so stunning Sophelia thought she might groan, biting the inside of her cheek again.

“Assuming I could take you away with no misgivings on your part,” Livionis began, “even then, there’s quite a difference between swapping sisters for the prince’s betrothed and the royal family allowing you to escape with everything you know, wouldn’t you say? We’ll have to ensure no one comes after us…”

Sophelia and Livionis laughed, like two children plotting some act of mischief.



Casting Livionis an upward glance, Sophelia sat with her elbow resting on her crossed leg, only to be met with a smirk.

And what's that supposed to be? He was absurdly handsome and just as charming.

"Die with me," he said simply.

"Oh, okay." *Hmm? What was that?* Livionis was just far too cute for Sophelia to bother asking.

Her brain was a proper mess. *This is love!*

Even though Sophelia still had her head in the clouds, hearing Livionis's plans for their next steps drained the color from her face.

"That's absurd!" Sophelia shouted.

Livionis, however, was nonchalant, speaking as if it were no matter at all. "That's what it takes to run away with the crown prince's fiancée."

It was as if cold water had been poured over her still woozy head. Even the blank stare that Livionis cast her way was adorable. *No, this is no time for that!*

Sophelia regained her senses all at once. She knew full well that she carried no value, but her position in the kingdom was one of a kind. Running away on her own and "being taken away" were indeed two different matters.

Initially, Sophelia had thought that she couldn't bring Livionis into this, but that was just a vague idea she hadn't thought through. She was thoroughly unimpressed by her own stupidity. *What am I supposed to do? This isn't what I planned!*

Sophelia's hands trembled at the fact that she'd taken Livionis's hand without an ounce of thought.

Noticing that the carriage had stopped, Livionis opened the door.

Hold on, I have to tell him I can't! I have to tell him we shouldn't! I've got to stop him! If I speak up now, there's still time! Sophelia made up her mind and looked up, only to see Livionis standing outside the carriage, extending his hand to her with a bright grin.

"Lady Sophelia," Livionis said, "even if you were to take your leave of me here, you would still run away, would you not? In that case, I'll be in full pursuit no matter what it takes."

The face looking back at her was far too attractive for her to have any say in the matter. The blood had drained from Sophelia's

face only moments ago, and now she felt it bursting up from inside her. *Wait, let me actually think this through!*

Sophelia tried desperately to put her thoughts in order, only for Livionis to continue with a happy, charming grin. “You’re the one who took my hand, m’lady.”

No, hold on! Wait just a minute!

“I said I wouldn’t leave you on your own, didn’t I? In that case, don’t you think it would be far more efficient to run away together?”

“Efficient.”

It wasn’t a matter of efficiency!

Calm and collected, Sophelia tried her best to argue her point, but when he tilted his head in curiosity at her response, his smooth black hair swayed in an alluring— *No, that’s not it!*

“I’m no good at giving up, Lady Sophelia. It’d be much more efficient if you gave up.”

No, that’s not the problem here! Sophelia thought, but Livionis was positively brimming with confidence, and that sparkling proud smile of his was just too ridiculously cute. *Well, better to be more efficient than less, right? After all, it’s just more efficient!*

Sophelia had no idea what was happening. After all, the moment she cupped his outstretched hand between her gloves, she was met with a tight squeeze!

“Gotcha!”

Just what business did he have grinning so happily, huh?

Ha ha ha! Oh, this is bad. I’m done. Dead. I’m brain-dead.

Her thoughts? Shut down. Her functions? Shut down.

I can’t handle any more. I surrender. My brain’s set for an honorable burial after it died in the line of duty. Let’s leave an offering of blueberry candies at the graveside! May you rest in peace from your labors, dear brain.

“Hey!” a frustrated voice called, snapping Sophelia back to her senses. She’d had her hands pressed together, as if to offer up a prayer.

“Look, Mr. CEO, I know you’ve got your head in the clouds right now, but save it for later. We don’t have time, so hurry it up!”

“Bleh!” Livionis said, sticking out his tongue in play.

The knight who’d descended from the coachman’s seat and a robed man who’d appeared from somewhere both glared at

Livionis.

"Cross me and die," the robed man bit back.

Livionis snickered. Even the way he laughed was cute—so cute it hurt.

Sophelia tilted her head to the side and asked what this "CEO" stuff was about.

"It's a sort of code," Livionis answered, letting go of Sophelia's hand. "Nothing to worry yourself over."

From the side, a woman holding a large bag gave them a humble nod.

"This is Kannon, one of our servants," Livionis explained. "She's a tight-lipped lady. When I was a child, she always kept my mischief to herself, so our secret's safe with her."

"I knew your father and mother would find out eventually, so I just remained silent, that's all," Kannon replied.

"Really?"

Kannon joined them on the carriage and pulled a simple dress from the bag. With a smile on her face, she helped Sophelia change into it. The dress she'd worn to the party that evening was heavy, hard to move around in, and was eye-catching—it was no dress to run away in.

Despite her surprise at how deftly Livionis was handling matters, Sophelia changed into attire suitable for making her escape, before yanking out her blue gemstone earrings.

I should just throw these away! Sophelia thought to herself. *Wait a second! These are worth money, aren't they?* Sophelia squeezed the blue gemstones tight. After all, the gems had done nothing wrong. She'd take them as her compensation for everything. The prince should have been thankful this was all she'd taken.

Here we go! Sophelia thought to herself, tearing the embellishments from her old dress. It was a dress made for evening parties, so the small stones and lace that decorated it were of superb quality.

Quietly pleased, Sophelia looked for a place she could store the embellishments. Kannon offered her a leather pouch, and Sophelia thanked her in return, only to be met by a bright, warm smile. "The young master's got plenty of strong opinions with quite the temper to boot," Kannon told her. "And that foul mouth of his—you'd hardly believe him to be of nobility! But even then, I

haven't the slightest doubt he'll bring you happiness, m'lady. You can rest easy."

It was a terrible explanation, but seeing Kannon's bright, beaming smile, Sophelia couldn't help but smile back. "I'm already happy."

"Well now," Kannon replied with a warm grin.

Do you have any idea how happy I am to have someone smile at me? No, you probably don't. Sophelia fought back the urge to cry and descended from the carriage. She took the full leather pouch and placed it in the bag she'd received alongside the dress.

Outside the carriage, Livionis stood speaking with the other knight and the robed man with a map spread out before him. He'd kept the black pants of his uniform as they were but switched out the rest for a rough jacket and pair of boots. Draped over his shoulders was a dark blue robe. He'd let down his flowing bangs in a way that made him seem boyish and cute all at once.

"Very well then. I'll return to the manor with Kannon," one of the men said.

Livionis nodded. "Many thanks. Be careful on your way back."

"And you as well, Sir Livionis…but then again, you've little need of such well wishes, do you?"

"I suppose. My father's probably the only one who could ever hope to kill me."

"Well? We'll burn the carriage right around"—the man pointed to a spot on the map—"here, right? Still, I'm impressed you knew of a road like this. It's pitch-black, nothing but trees, and there's not a soul to be found. You could get up to whatever evil scheme you wanted to here."

"Oh? Weren't you aware?" Livionis asked back. "This is the road those thieves we caught a while back were using. It's the one the captain spoke of—he mentioned felling trees to improve visibility."

"And that's here?"

"Young master," Kannon called.

"Hmm?" Livionis turned around, smirking when he saw Sophelia. "You're so cute."

No, the cute one here is you, thank you very much! That's what Sophelia wanted to say at least, but she found herself unable to speak.

Beside her, Kannon gave Livionis another leather pouch. Taking

it in hand, Livionis furrowed his brow in confusion.

"Isn't this a bit much?" he asked.

"It's from your mother," Kannon answered. "You know, she was laughing and saying she'd expect no less of a man of House Warrion."

"Tell her I'd expect no less of the lady of House Warrion."

"Certainly, sir."

Sophelia watched Livionis, staring at his cheerful expression as he laughed.

"Excuse me, miss," said the knight who'd been in the coachman's seat.

Sophelia looked up at him.

"May I have a moment?" he asked in a nervous-sounding voice.

Why on earth would you get nervous in front of someone like me? Sophelia thought to herself before giving the knight a hearty nod.

"Livionis has told us of your tireless efforts for the knights, from improving the Knight Academy to making new plans to slay monsters, all while you upheld your public duties as the next crown princess," the man explained. "On behalf of all knights both present and future, allow me to offer up our sincere thanks. We are utterly grateful!" He finished his praise with a bow.

There were plenty of thoughts that ran through Sophelia's mind at this. Like...

My, what a wonderful bow!

Aren't you speaking a bit too loudly?

Why do you know about all that?

But what caught her attention the most was the name that left her blinking in surprise. "Sir Livionis told you?"

"Indeed. He's a fan of yours, m'lady. There are many knights who became fans of you thanks to his efforts. You can rest easy knowing you'll have the full efforts of your fan club ensuring the success of your escape."

Huh? Wait, what did you say? A f-fan club?!

Sophelia looked up in shock.

"By the way," the knight went on, tilting his head.

Hold on, don't just move on! Sophelia was still processing his first spiel.

"Why did you ever deem knights such as us worthy of your attention, m'lady?"

“Uh, well, you see…” Sophelia stammered. “When I was a child, a boy who encouraged me was training to become a knight.” As much as she wanted to tell the knight to slow down with his questions, she gave her honest answer as she recalled that day.

That day long ago…

Sophelia had attended her monthly tea party with the crown prince. Far from smiling at all in her presence, the prince had wrinkled his brow, complained to Sophelia to his heart’s content, and then trounced off somewhere.

Excuse me, I’m *the one who really wants to run away here.* Sophelia had a complaint or two—or three, or four—of her own to make, but to voice them before the crown prince would be unbecoming. Or, thinking about it positively, at the very least she’d been set free quickly. She decided to think about it like that.

Sophelia was terribly exhausted after she was left on her own, but she declined to be seen off by the knights and maids, instead opting to wander aimlessly through the garden.

It was simply too early to return from the tea party. While she was delighted it had ended earlier than planned, if she went straight home, she could already see that she’d have a scolding waiting from her father, demanding to know if she’d made His Highness angry again, even though she couldn’t recall doing anything of the sort.

Hiding herself in the garden’s hedge, Sophelia decided to waste some time and squatted down among the bushes.

Just then, the thought occurred to her:

If she stayed still just like this, no one would find her, would they? Whether she was hungry, or cold, or afraid, so long as she endured it all, wouldn’t someone just find her dead body in the morning?

At twelve years old, even Sophelia understood that you couldn’t die from just one night in the elements, but if one day wasn’t enough, then even if it took two or three days, she could just stay there and bear it.

It’d be nice if they didn’t find me… she wished to herself.

But, then again, that wasn’t the sort of thing you could wish into existence. After all, being born to House Lotus, Sophelia’d had her duties and responsibilities beaten into her by her mother.

She was to devote herself to her duties—to her house, to her father, to her country, and to her king.

That was the role—the only role—that had been given to the creature called Sophelia. Being struck was an inevitability, and if she didn't want to be on the receiving end of a blow, her only option was to work harder. It was quite simple. She'd made her peace with it. There was nothing to mourn or be sad about. It was so easy she could do it all before breakfast. After all, she had to be a proper lady to eat breakfast in the first place.

There was a boy who'd gotten angry on Sophelia's behalf.

He was a strange boy, with a swollen, bloody face, but he had worried about Sophelia.

"I'd...never talked with anyone like that until then..." Sophelia said to the other knight. "I think I was happy. I really hoped I could make that boy happy somehow, wherever he was."

So the boy wouldn't give up on becoming a knight.

So he wouldn't be disappointed when he became a knight.

To keep their country from being the sort he'd be disappointed in.

"It was thanks to him that I was able to work hard," Sophelia added with an unconscious laugh.

"Well now..." the other knight said, scratching his head. "Best not tell that to Livionis."

"Huh?" Sophelia cocked her head in confusion. "I won't. But why?"

"He seems like the jealous type, that one," the knight answered. "Talking about your first love might be a land mine."

"Hmm?"

While Sophelia was grateful for her shocking encounter with the boy back then, she couldn't help but tilt her head to the side and wonder if it had really been her first love. After all, she'd only just now awakened to her first love. She didn't just have her head in the clouds, she was *walking* on the clouds! She'd even made a grave for her brain!

It wasn't that she didn't even remember the boy's face—it was just that the impact his bloody nose and swollen cheeks had left on her was too strong. It wasn't fair to compare him and Livionis, the gods' most brilliant masterpiece, the product of immeasurable

practice, after whom they could rest on their laurels in molding humanity forever.

For now, Sophelia decided to nod.

Based on the fact that the knight nodded back to her, that was probably the correct answer. He seemed satisfied enough.

The knight called to Livionis, who was deep in conversation, and tossed a leather bag at him.

“Huh? Wh-What’s this?”

“It’s from the captain,” the knight answered. “Says it’s your salary for the month. I was also entrusted with messages for you. One was ‘This is what makes you a man of House Warrion,’ and the other was ‘Don’t worry, I intended to inherit the family estate right from the start.’”

“From my father and Arthur, right?” Livionis asked. “Tell them they’re just jealous.”

“I don’t think I’ll be able to recreate that infuriating smirk of yours.”

Livionis guffawed as if he were truly enjoying himself. She admired that beautiful masterpiece of a face, touched with refinement and yet boyishly young at the same time. When he laughed, he seemed to be truly, undeniably happy. He opened his mouth wide in unbridled joy. He laughed happily.

Seeing his face painted with joy, Sophelia felt like she could start crying again. He was just too cute. He was so charming, so joyful.

He seemed happy.

And that was proof that Livionis was loved by those around him.

Each and every one of these people was supporting their dramatic escape as if it were the most natural thing. It was proof he’d been born to be loved and had lived as such in turn.

As he escorted Sophelia home, Livionis’s carriage would be assailed by thieves and burned to the ground. It would be unknown whether they’d survived.

It was such a tragic plan. And it might make this the last time…

It might make this the last time he’d ever see his beloved family and friends. The position he’d built for himself, his reputation, his hard work—Sophelia was snatching it all away from him.

Yet Livionis, the other knight, the robed man, the servant lady—

they were all laughing.

“See you.”

“Yeah, catch you around.”

“Stay well.”

“We’ll see you again someday.”

It was as if he were just about to head off on a stroll. They wished him safe travels with bright and beaming spirits. Their smiles hid no regrets or sadness as they bid him a casual farewell.

Sophelia clenched her teeth.

Leaving behind the kindest place in all the world, Livionis looked at Sophelia and cracked a smile. His eyes shone like a star-filled night sky right before the dawn, making nothing of the darkness around them.

“Let us be on our way, Lady Sophelia.”

The tears escaped her. She couldn’t bear that smile. All those years she’d never once shed a tear, gone in an instant.

The tears cascaded down her cheeks, one after the other. Her chest ached. She felt like she might go crazy.

“Wh-What’s wrong?” Livionis asked. “You don’t want to go after all? Would you like to go back home?”

“No. No, I certainly wouldn’t!” Sophelia answered. “As long as I’m with you, I can go anywhere, anywhere at all!”

Seeing Livionis run over to her in a fluster, Sophelia made her best attempt at a smile. She wasn’t particularly beautiful—unlike her stepmother and half sister. Between all the tears and snot, she was sure her face was a mess by now. She was in such a sorry state she couldn’t bring herself to look in a mirror.

If only she were smarter. If only she were prettier. If only she were more, more, more. She’d worked so hard already, so couldn’t she have just tried a little bit more? If she gave up now, wouldn’t everything she’d endured till now be in vain? If she had been someone else, wouldn’t things be different now?

Deep, deep down, she had no end of regrets and lingering feelings, but Livionis’s smile was so filled with joy, none of that mattered.

I’d put everything I have on the line to make him happy. Sophelia made a vow—a vow on the love that had picked up the plea for help she’d never been able to voice.

It was the first night in her life she had laughed aloud.

And on that beautiful, starry night, Sophelia gave the first cry of her reborn life.

Chapter Four: They Say Seeing Is Believing, But...

It was a beautiful, still night.

Gu...! Sophelia swallowed the words, her green hair flowing in the breeze.

Gulp. She swallowed, right when it seemed they might get the better of her. *There!* Sophelia thought to herself. She'd lived as a proper lady for fifteen years. *Hmmph! Just leave it to me! I'll swallow as many words and emotions as I have to!*

Sophelia had once even forced down cake smothered in chocolate sauce, even though it made her gag. *"Oh, it's quite delicious!"* she'd said, but in truth it wasn't even remotely delicious. Sophelia wasn't very fond of sweets. But tea parties were nothing more than a mass procession of cakes, cookies, muffins, and all varieties of sweets. Even then, Sophelia had made it through each event with a smile.

So she'd be just fine now.

Sophelia squeezed the reins she'd been holding on to.

A soft voice called out from behind her. "Are you all right, m'lady?"

Oh, that voice of his! Yes, yes, why, of course I am! Even if I weren't all right, I'll make myself all right, thank you very much!

Sophelia nodded back. "Yes, I'm fine."

"Please tell me at once if you grow tired." The worry-laced voice surrounded Sophelia, as if to apologize.

That wasn't a figure of speech. Make no mistake about it—the voice surrounded her *physically*.

Thin as she was, Sophelia's body completely sank into the knight's sturdy frame.

The horse cantered along the road that was rough and wild and overgrown with trees. *No, "cantered" isn't the right word, is it? It's more like a gallop. We're going so fast, after all!* They were galloping—dashing along.

None other than Livionis Warrion directed the steed. Known as the handsome knight, Livionis had charmed the hearts of both

young and old.

Sophelia had leaped out of her days mired in resignation, led away by that handsome face that made her wonder if he was an angel or a fairy. Livionis had taken Sophelia by the hand and placed her atop a horse with a brilliant black coat. A horse. That's right—*a horse*. It was a new experience for Sophelia, having grown up with a massive list of things she mustn't do.

After swooping Sophelia up with a bright grin and placing her atop the horse, Livionis had nimbly leaped on the horse to sit behind her.

My, he's quick! And close. Very close. Try not to think about it…

Grunting with effort, Sophelia had managed to straddle the horse. If she were to sit on the horse like a proper lady with both legs together, it seemed like it would only make it harder for the horse to gallop along. Sophelia knew nothing of horses, but she racked her brain for ideas nonetheless.

The horse was remarkably tame; according to Livionis, it had grown up alongside him at his family manor. Even with Sophelia squirming and fidgeting with unfamiliarity, the horse simply waited patiently for her. It was a fine horse.

And that's when Sophelia realized:

This is…terrifying!

We're so high up! This is scary! Aaaggghh…! I'm scared of heights, aren't I? After fifteen years of life, Sophelia had made a new discovery about herself: She was scared of heights. *Good to know, I suppose.* The world was brimming with things Sophelia didn't know.

Hee hee! All she could do was laugh.

Having gone about her days quietly playing her part, Sophelia had never even had the chance to experience much.

Guess that means I've got… Oh, what was it called? "Acrophobia." Probably. I never knew! I mean, it's scary when your feet aren't on the ground! I'm floating—floating—*off the ground!* Sophelia thought to herself. *What's that? I'm not actually floating? I'm just riding on a horse? Listen, you lunk, I'm saying my feet aren't on the ground so it's* like *I'm floating! That's some logic you've got there!*

Come to think of it, when you're on a horse, is it normal for it to look like you're so far off the ground?

No, it's just because it's your first time, Sophelia told herself. *That*

has to be it. You'll get used to it—you're fine. See? Look, it's night. You can't see any of the scenery. That's right. Sophelia would just convince herself! *This is the ground. You're not up high. The reason you feel like you're swaying a bit is— That's right! Just your imagination! That feeling like the trees are just dashing away behind you? It's just your imagination!* Sophelia desperately tried to convince herself that that was all it was.

But it didn't work. She was scared! It was scary! Of course it was.

Sophelia had never dabbled in hypnotism or the powers of suggestion, so her efforts to convince herself otherwise might as well have been on the same level as a toddler that made a noise when it saw a newspaper. *"Would you look at that! She's reading!"* If that was all it took to read, then there'd be no need for teachers or classes or school. If Sophelia could bid adieu to her fear of heights just like that, she'd become a professional hypnotist then and there!

Eureka! I'll show you the ultimate soldier, free of all fears! Wealth to the nation! A mighty military! You're against war? Grow a spine!

Wow, Sophelia thought in surprise. *Fear really is something, huh?* It wasn't about logic. It was violence—pure and simple violence.

I can't help but feel scared, so I guess it's like love in that way! Ha ha!

However, try as she might, Sophelia couldn't *actually* laugh.

It was no laughing matter.

Sophelia couldn't muster so much as the tiniest chuckle. Not to mention she felt bad, like she'd had too much to drink. She was horse-sick, if that was even a word. She found herself clenching the reins in her hands even tighter.

Cupping Sophelia's hands in his own, Livionis gently rubbed them. The black leather of his gloves was soft to the touch. "Lady Sophelia, are you certain you're all right?"

"I'm fine."

He really does have a nice voice, thought Sophelia. *I'm scared, and I feel sick, and if I'm being honest and I had to say one way or the other, I'm* not *all right. But still, that voice of his is nice. And it's just so warm too!*

Standing around three heads taller than Sophelia, Livionis's large frame was warm and unflinching. He smelled nice. Even

though they were traveling with considerable speed, he felt as stable as a rock. Had it not been for the swaying while they were riding, Sophelia wouldn't have even felt sick.

I wish I'd at least tried riding a horse before, Sophelia thought to herself, before she remembered that back at the manor, neither her mother nor her father would've ever permitted such a thing.

"I want to ride a horse!"

"Okay!"

If they'd been parents like *that*, Sophelia would still be tucked away in her bed, gently sleeping away.

"Ahh..." Sophelia sighed. She wished she could be free of this queasiness somehow.

For the record, closing her eyes was also a no-go. When she tried that, the swaying and floating sensation only got worse. It instantly made her feel even more terrified—and nauseous. She'd really messed up this time.

That's odd. No—actually, it's funny. No, it's not *funny. It's not funny in the slightest!*

The heroes in the stories Sophelia had read would fly through the skies and climb the highest peaks only to rejoice, "Oh, how wonderful!"

If they rode on a horse, they'd proclaim, "I'm one with the wind!"

"I'm counting on you, Mr. Horse!" they'd say and make the greatest of friends with their steed.

That's why, when Sophelia had heard they'd be taking a horse, she'd gotten just the slightest bit excited.

This isn't what I signed up for! Sophelia thought.

This wasn't some expertly crafted, meticulously plotted epic written by a knowledgeable prodigy of an author—this was Sophelia's life. This was *reality*. Of course it was different.

"Wonderful" was the last word Sophelia would use to describe heights. She'd have loved to be one with the wind if that were possible. Their horse was a fine steed, but she was too busy trying to stay in the saddle to tell the beast she was counting on it. All she could do was offer an apology for all the heavy baggage and tell it she'd try her best not to get it dirty.

"Aaahhh..." Sophelia took a long, slow, quiet sigh. *This isn't good... I feel like I could throw up.* Sophelia squeezed her hands around the reins that had now become her lifeline. She clenched

the reins, desperately trying to think of something, *anything* else.

Suddenly, the horse began to slow. Then, with a firm hoof to the ground, it finally came to a halt.

Thinking it odd, Sophelia turned around, only to find Livionis's pristine face far closer than she expected. Even in the dark, she could see his cheeks were faintly tinted with color. *He's so cute.*

"Lady Sophelia."

"Y-Yes...?" Sophelia forced herself to speak. She was lucky words were all that came out of her mouth.

"While I hoped to distance ourselves from the capital as soon as possible," Livionis began, "I hurried our pace in hopes of avoiding the need to make you sleep outdoors...but I failed to discuss the matter with you, didn't I?"

Sophelia blinked in surprise as his eyebrows fell in a remorseful droop.

Discuss it? It was Sophelia's first time traveling and both her wisdom and experience paled in comparison to his. Yet this knight in shining armor was going to *discuss* it with her. Discuss what, exactly?

"Which would you prefer, m'lady?" Livionis asked. "To spend a night camping on the road? Or to travel through the night and reach town in the morning?"

For just a moment, Sophelia forgot all about the fear and nausea out of sheer astonishment. "What?"

What? What was that he'd just said?

"Uh, ummm..."

"Neither you nor I are on our own," Livionis clarified. "We're here together, so it's inappropriate for me to just go about making decisions like that. My apologies..."

Huh...?

Wait, what? Huh??? Sophelia was more than confused—she was in shock. Why, she'd be less surprised if His Royal Scumbag suddenly became the image of nobility. *Oh, you finally gained an ounce of self-awareness? How about that.*

And now? Now, this handsome-faced knight, born of a famed house and bearing the expectations of the royal knights, the pinnacle of the kingdom—what had he said? He'd said he would discuss it—with *Sophelia*.

Everyone Sophelia knew had done nothing but try her, mock

her, scorn her, or ignore her, even though every suggestion she made took a tremendous amount of research and explanation.

Sophelia sat on that horse empty-handed and floating along. And he wanted to *discuss* things with her!

To discuss... What did that mean again? Sophelia flipped through her mental dictionary. It meant he wanted to hear her opinion, right? That was it, wasn't it?

"Well, uh..." Sophelia began nervously. "As embarrassing as it is to say, I've hardly ever been outside the manor or the castle... I don't know enough to...to actually give an opinion on it..."

Livionis smiled watching Sophelia stumble over her reply. *He's amazing...*

"There's no rule saying you can't state your preferences just because you don't have enough knowledge or experience. This isn't your job, or your responsibility, or even your duty. I simply want to learn more about you." With that, he laughed, blushing.

What a charming notion! He wants to learn about me. That's what he said—he wants to learn about me! All with that adorable face of his! Still struggling to stave off her disbelief, Sophelia blinked.

This wasn't her duty.

Sophelia followed Livionis's train of thought in her mind.

"Would you mind telling me what you're thinking now?" Livionis asked.

"That's—" Would it really be okay for her to say something so abstract? Was it really okay for her to say something so vague and irresponsible and brazen even when she had no logic or basis or definitive proof to show for it?

After all, Livionis had been kind enough to ask, but regardless of any official duties she may have had, Sophelia was both a novice and a woman. Were she to be left out here on her own, she'd just be idle baggage.

The optimal answer would have been something like "It's nothing to fret over. We should make our way to the town as quickly as we can. After all, the forest is dangerous at night."

That's right. That was the only answer. Sophelia had never been on a journey her whole life, but she knew they had to rid themselves of any pursuers.

Just when Sophelia had made up her mind and opened her mouth to speak, Livionis turned a beaming smile her way.

Oh, wow…what a wonderful smile. Whoa, that's really something. Wait, is he shining? I mean, just look at him—he's beaming! Practically sparkling. He looks like he's just bursting with anticipation waiting for me to speak!

She certainly wouldn't *lie*. But she had to give the optimal answer—the right answer. But just what *was* the right answer here? Sophelia racked her brain, thinking and then thinking some more. She thought and thought and thought until—*fzzzt*—her little brain short-circuited.

"Ngh."

"'Ngh'?" Livionis repeated.

"Waaaaaaaaaagh!" Sophelia sobbed.

"Waaaaaaaaaagh"? And just where on earth did that come from? Sophelia thought to herself. It was so funny it seemed like a joke. But there was nothing funny about her tears.

Sophelia continued sobbing away, squashing the deflated knight right when he seemed to swell in anticipation of Sophelia's words. She'd landed one hell of a counterpunch. Had they been in a boxing ring, it would've been the moment the bell rang. If it had been an argument, it would've been right when the last, biting words were spoken. But unfortunately, they were currently fleeing through a forest in the middle of the night all in the name of love. Neither of them had any intention to argue in the slightest.

Wow, guess real life isn't like the stories, Sophelia thought to herself. *Nothing goes the way you expect.*

Chapter Five: Warm and Hot

The wood burst open with a snap.

The campfire before her was as warm a sight as it was warm to be near. Watching the flames, Sophelia felt a sense of calm wash over her. One of the few things she'd enjoyed back home was watching the flames in the fireplace dance and sway. *But a campfire's even better,* Sophelia thought, narrowing her gaze and sniffing.

Livionis quietly sat on the opposite side, with his eyes focused on the campfire. With his black gloves removed, Livionis's hands were almost shockingly pale and beautiful. His long, heavy eyelashes cast prominent swaying shadows across his face. Staring into the fire in silence, he looked like a spirit of sorts.

And not long ago, it was in front of that same distressingly beautiful man that Sophelia had committed an act so disgraceful that she hoped to never recall it for the rest of her days: She'd bawled and wailed and sobbed.

It hardly seemed real. She wished it weren't, but it was. It was cold, hard reality. If there'd been a tournament for the best impression of a crying child, she would've walked away with the gold.

Watching Sophelia sob, Livionis had been beside himself, stumbling over his words. "Wh-What, wh-whatever's the matter?"

"I don't feel good! And I'm scared of heeeights!" Sophelia had exclaimed as it all flooded out.

No, I mean my answer *flooded out, not* that*! I didn't* actually *throw up! I meant I finally came clean to him! Sorry if you were eating!*

That aside…

One knockout punch from Livionis's overwhelming beauty was all it took to send all the confidence Sophelia had in her ability to endure hardships flying off into the distance…and it didn't seem likely to return.

Aside from her infancy when she couldn't eat or move on her own, as far back as she could remember, Sophelia had never cried in front of anyone, but now, before this knight, her tear ducts were

woefully inflated and overflowed. She'd been splashing around in enough tears that she could practically declare them a famous well that never ran dry. *I'll just keep the water flowing!*

"We never had a drainage pump or anything like that until yesterday, did we?" Sophelia wanted to ask the person in charge, but the person in charge was Sophelia herself, so all she could say back to herself was "I don't remember."

Sophelia stared at Livionis, hoping he might forget the shameful display he'd witnessed.

"If…I may?" Sophelia began.

"Yes?" Livionis replied, lifting his head.

Wow.

Livionis's face was even more stunning when illuminated by the campfire's flames. Those purple eyes had dashed into first place in Sophelia's list of things she liked by a wide margin, and now they were glittering before her. They gave off a warm, orangish glow in the fire's light.

Sophelia stared at him blankly, watching him blink with those radiant, dazzling eyes of his. Livionis cocked his head in curiosity, only for his black hair to sway alongside it.

"What is it?" Livionis asked.

"Oh, no, uh, it's…" Sophelia stammered. She couldn't bring herself to admit that she'd been hopelessly lost in his beauty. She clenched her fist and focused. "About earlier, I…"

"All better now?" Livionis asked when she trailed off.

"Huh?"

"The nausea."

"Oh, uh… Yes, it's fine now."

"I'm glad."

So *that's* what he was asking about. Sophelia nodded. While the unpleasant swaying sensation had lingered for a bit after she'd dismounted, it had largely subsided now. Thankfully, the tears that had cascaded down her face had subsided as well.

What a relief.

Livionis looked back at her inquisitively, his eyes narrowed in a caring yet breathtaking gaze.

Sophelia dropped her head and replied in a voice so small it could've very well belonged to a mosquito. "I'm truly sorry for all the trouble…"

“Far from it!” Livionis replied. “I’m the one who should be apologizing for failing to notice.”

“You’ve no need to apologize! I’m far too frail…and, uh…”

“Hmm?”

Was he going to make her say it?

Sophelia wanted to bury her head in her hands, but she lifted her head in a stroke of resolve, only for Livionis to look back at her with a puzzled expression like a stumped child. He was so cute she could almost cry again.

“W-Wailing on like that before, it was…” Sophelia stuttered.

“Oh.”

“Oh”? “Oh”?! And just what are you oh-ing? Sophelia felt herself tense up in surprise, only for Livionis’s gaze to narrow as his cheeks filled with color.

“You were adorable.”

“Huh?”

What gives you the right to be this ridiculously cute?! That soft, squishy smile of his was far too charming. He could buy a whole nation with one smile, but Sophelia had no nation to offer him. *Maybe I should just steal one,* she thought to herself. But that was just silly. More importantly…

He’d called her cute. Where? What was cute? And why?

Big words coming from King Cute himself!

It was all too much—so much that Sophelia couldn’t help but freeze up.

Livionis seemed to think better of his reply. “No, that was thoughtless of me, wasn’t it? You were suffering to the point of tears, after all. I’m terribly sorry.”

“Uh, no, that’s not it…” Sophelia replied. “It’s just, I’m a bit…*off* at the moment, so I’d be ever so grateful if you could forget all about that.”

Sophelia wished to never have to remember it again, but Livionis simply laughed. “Even coming from you, Lady Sophelia, there are some requests I can grant and some I cannot.”

“And…that’s one you cannot grant?” Sophelia asked.

“Of course not. It’s a day to remember,” Livionis answered. “The day you were vulnerable enough to cry in front of me.”

He’d gone and made a holiday out of it.

It wasn’t as if he were mocking her or teasing her—almost

certainly not. The proof was in that charming face of his. If that face could ever spout out nastiness, then there was nothing left in the world for Sophelia to believe in.

But that was all quite all right. Even if she were being mocked or teased, it didn't matter in the slightest so long as it was Livionis doing it. After all, that just meant another chance for her to look at that radiant face of his.

Sophelia knew that people might label her reaction as resignation or petulant indifference, but Livionis had neither mocked nor teased her, nor did he seem to have any plans to deceive her or betray her trust, so she was just fine.

I'll choose the happy life. And yes, that's my final answer. After all, if Livionis were to burst into tears in front of her, Sophelia was certain she wouldn't be able to stand it either. She'd likely make a holiday out of it as well. Sophelia felt almost embarrassed bringing herself and her pale face up in the same thought as Livionis, with his positively destructive good looks and the strength that made him one of a kind. She almost wondered if he was in his right mind. Had he even looked in a mirror to realize how absolutely charming he was?

"Will I…be able to see you cry as well someday, Sir Livionis?"

"Me?" he replied, crossing his arms and looking up to the sky. "Well…probably not. If I were to ever cry…"

"If you *were* to cry?"

Livionis chuckled. "It'd only be because you'd thrown me away."

Sophelia gasped in surprise. Smiling as he was, the look on his face said it all: *A woman who's turned her back on me will never see me cry.*

Well, that was hardly fair!

Sophelia felt the urge to shout back for some reason, jutting out her chin. "Well, if that's the case, then I'm certain to never see you cry. After all…"

After all…

After all, she'd, well, you know…

Closing her mouth with a grunt, before opening it to speak again, Sophelia finally cast her gaze to the ground. "After all…I could never let you go…"

Sophelia heard what sounded like a snap, but she couldn't lift her head.

“L-Lady Sophelia, please! I beg of you—please let me see your face!”

“N-N-No!” Sophelia stammered back. “Y-You can’t!”

Even coming from Livionis, there were some requests she could grant and some she could not.

Isn’t that right? Mwa ha ha ha!

Sophelia didn’t want Livionis to see the sort of face she was making, but Sophelia wanted to see the look on Livionis’s face as he tried to get her to raise her own. She was certain he was making a positively adorable expression. Looking up was the last thing Sophelia wanted to do, but she just *had* to see his face!

Sophelia’s complete deadlock with herself came to a sudden halt, however, when one of the logs in the fire burst open with a particularly loud pop.

Sophelia had no way of knowing if that was the campfire’s way of angrily saying, *Nuff of that, ya damn lovebirds!* but Livionis stood up from where he’d been sitting with a sheepish cough that was almost certainly intentional, only for Sophelia to hurriedly look up at his face.

Livionis took out two blankets from the bags he’d laid on the ground and handed them both to Sophelia.

Freed from all the bags that had been fastened to it earlier, the black horse was calmly chewing away at some grass nearby with a wide-open mouth. According to Livionis, the horse was as docile as it was smart, and strong enough to remain unflinching even when faced with monsters.

Impressed by what a fine horse it was, Sophelia asked Livionis its name.

“It’s Matcha,” he answered with a laugh.

“‘Matcha’?”

“That’s right,” Livionis said. “They say it’s a type of green tea from a nation far to the east. I learned about it in a book I liked at the time.”

“But…Mr. Matcha has a black coat, right?” Sophelia asked.

“Uh, yes?” Livionis replied.

Oh, it was nothing to worry about. It was cute, so what did it matter? Sophelia decided to stop thinking further.

As long as Matcha himself—*horself*?—was fine with it, that was

all that mattered.

Sophelia was practically a clueless bumpkin out in the larger world, so it would have been far too tactless of her to try and chime in on the life Livionis had led up to this point. However, she did quietly decide that moving forward, whenever they named a pet or such, they'd just be a little more cautious. That was all.

Taking the blankets—that Matcha had carried all that way—from Livionis, Sophelia tilted her head to the side.

"Best to get some rest soon," Livionis said. "If you put one of them beneath you, that should make it just a tad more comfortable. It's easier if you cast the edge of the blanket over the bag and use it for a pillow."

"Umm…" Sophelia began, watching as Livionis showed off his travel wisdom and spread out the sprawling blanket. "What about yours, Sir Livionis?"

"I'm quite all right," Livionis answered. "I won't be sleeping tonight."

"What?"

Ah, that's right. The two of them couldn't afford to just carelessly doze off in the middle of the woods. One of them would have to stay awake and tend to the fire.

Sophelia burst to her feet in a fluster. "No, I can't ask you to take on all that yourself, Sir Livionis!"

"I'll be fine. I won't be on my own. Matcha's here too."

Matcha neighed in reply, as if to chivalrously declare, *Leave it to me!*

That wasn't the point.

"But you and Mr. Matcha both need rest, do you not? You're sure to be weary from such a long journey. At the very least, take your rest first."

Sophelia wasn't so ignorant of the world as to think that she could handle anything and everything on her own.

But.

"As helpless as I might look, I can use defensive magic!" Sophelia said, gripping the blanket. "I can buy time at the very least."

A grin broke across Livionis's face. "You truly are kind, Lady Sophelia."

Matcha neighed back.

“K-Kind?” Sophelia stuttered.

If that were all it took to be considered kind, then *everyone* would be kind, and the world would be a peaceful place. In Sophelia’s opinion, “kind” was the sort of word that was reserved for describing Livionis.

“I’ll be quite all right,” he reassured her. “We’ll arrive in town tomorrow. And besides, I can go over a month without any rest or sleep.” That smile of his was as charming as ever. Livionis didn’t just have looks on his side—he could crack jokes as well. That sort of combination was bound to make him popular.

“A month? You’re trying to make me feel better about this, aren’t you?” Sophelia said.

“What?”

“Huh…?”

What? Hmm?

“Well…I might’ve stretched the truth just a tad there,” Livionis admitted.

“A-Ah.”

“Were I to go without food or water, I wouldn’t even make it three weeks.”

“What?” Sophelia asked.

“What?” Livionis echoed.

That perplexed look on his face was adorable. *Wait, how many times today have I thought that?* Staring back at Livionis, who seemed to have no idea at all what was so funny, Sophelia finally realized that he apparently hadn’t been lying.

“The Warrion family’s always been a bit hardier than most, it seems,” Livionis explained. “It was customary to try and survive without food, water, rest, or sleep during extended breaks. All of our servants can hold their own in a fight and ride on horses, so it was perfect for practicing battles where you find yourself outnumbered.”

Livionis paused for a moment, thinking back. “But if my father caught you, you were out of the game then and there. And you want to know what made it so unfair? He couldn’t chase you around the whole time since he had work to do, so he’d just appear out of nowhere every now and again. The fact that he managed to catch me no matter how hard I tried really stung, that’s for sure.”

“A bit hardier”? I must see that for myself. That’d make you the ultimate creature! Part of Sophelia wanted to just laugh it off, but looking at Livionis’s expression as he clenched his fist, she could tell that he was being serious. He’d meant every word of it.

“So really, it’s nothing to worry about!” Livionis continued. “Don’t worry about me. Please, get some rest.”

Matcha neighed in reply.

Livionis glanced at his horse. “Oh yeah, Matcha says he went through survival training with me, so he’ll be just fine.”

She finally understood.

It had taken her long enough, but now she finally understood: House Warrion had produced generation after generation of knights that struck *fear* into other nations. Sophelia couldn’t help but feel a bit fearful herself. Not of Livionis, of course. Not of stealing away this superhuman knight from the kingdom, nor of stealing the knight’s kingdom from him.

Just who *were* the Warrions? All those legends about how the first of the Warrions had cleaved through mountains or how dragon blood ran through their veins might have had some credibility after all.

Sensing a bit of distance as Livionis happily played with Matcha, Sophelia relented and squeezed the blanket in her arms.

But all their servants can fight? And their horses do survival training alongside them? There’s nothing normal about them!

In every age, it seemed there had always been those who were skeptical of the warm treatment enjoyed by the Warrions, but it was no surprise that each and every one of those skeptics had been unceremoniously silenced. After all, who could ever hope to win against such a family?

“I’ll…avail myself of your kindness and rest, then,” Sophelia declared.

Matcha neighed again.

“He says, ‘Avail to your heart’s content,’” Livionis translated.

Matcha certainly was a chivalrous steed, wasn’t he?

Sophelia gave them her thanks and lay down with a smile on her face, only to see Livionis himself smiling back contentedly. He was far too adorable.

“Sir Livionis, can you speak Animal-ese?” Sophelia asked curiously.

“Animal-ese?” Livionis repeated. “They say magicians and witches can, but certainly not I. All I understand is what Matcha’s trying to say. We’ve been together as long as I can remember, after all. It’s more of a hunch than anything, though.”

Matcha neighed in reply.

“Looks like you’re spot-on.”

Livionis beamed as he stroked Matcha’s mane, while Matcha nuzzled his nose up against Livionis’s shoulder.

It was like something out of a fairy tale—the dashing knight and his steed. He looked as if he might’ve stepped straight out of a dream. Just when had Sophelia fallen asleep?

Now there’s a silly thought, Sophelia thought to herself with a laugh.

But what if?

What if this actually *were* a dream?

What would she do if this were all a dream that would just vanish when she awoke?

“Lady Sophelia?”

How could Sophelia ever ignore that sweet voice that had called her name? How could Sophelia ever go back to her day-to-day life as if nothing had ever happened at all?

She couldn’t. There was no way she could.

Sophelia had already discovered how freeing it felt to talk and cry and smile and have someone smile back at you. She’d found out about the *fire* that came along with finding someone you liked, someone you found wholly adorable. If this were all a dream she’d just wake up from, Sophelia wouldn’t be able to go on living. Even without putting the theory to the test, Sophelia knew full well that it was far harder to endure the loss of happiness than to never know it in the first place.

“It’s just like I’m dreaming…” Sophelia said as a tear stole across her face again. Sophelia wasn’t happy about it, but her vision was blurring. “I just thought… What would I do if I woke up and I was back there, engaged to the prince again?”

“I’d come and snatch you away,” Livionis answered.

“Huh?”

Sophelia blinked, eyes wide. The tears in her eyes fell away, leaving her vision clear.

Livionis was kneeling before her, softly stroking her cheek as he

wiped away the tears. Even in her dreams, she'd never seen anything like those breathtaking, kind eyes staring up at her.

"I can't let go of you now either," Livionis continued, gently stroking Sophelia's head. "If this were all a dream, then I'd just come and snatch you away again. You've nothing to fear."

The palm of his hand was large, rough, and hard, yet his stroke was careful and deliberate.

"I won't let anyone else have you." His voice was as sweet as dripping honey, yet stinging hot at the same time, with the slightest hint of bitterness. Sophelia wasn't a fan of sweet things, but there was something about the voice that made her want to drink in even more of it, even if it would leave her with heartburn.

Sophelia's heart let out a shrill cry at this voice that tasted of love. She yearned for more of this pain, but Livionis was exuding far too much warmth as he stroked her head nonchalantly. Her eyelids soon grew heavy.

"This is the first time anyone's ever stroked the top of my head..."

"Urgh!"

"'Urgh'?" Sophelia repeated.

"P-Pardon me," Livionis stammered. "I'm just fighting back the urge to scream, that's all. Pay me no mind."

Scream? Why? It hadn't even been a day since they'd met, but Livionis occasionally said things that Sophelia didn't understand.

Oh, okay. Sophelia didn't really understand, but she closed her eyes regardless. *Okay.*

If Livionis said it, it was probably true.

He said he'd snatch me away. Said he'd take me with him. Said I didn't have to worry.

If Livionis said it, then it had to be true.

He said he wouldn't let anyone else have me.

He might as well have been the hero from some fairy tale. Sophelia was unloved and unliked, a good-for-nothing failure who'd finally cast aside her responsibilities, but Livionis treated her like a princess. It was tremendously kind of him and yet tremendously *sad* at the same time.

"Heh heh." Sophelia laughed.

"...gh!"

Sophelia could've sworn she heard Livionis moan, but the way

his hand stroked her head felt nicer, more calming than anything she’d ever felt before.

Sophelia melted away into unconsciousness.

Chapter Six: Men of the Night

From the time he was born, Livionis had spent practically all his time training. His father had been so strict that Livionis had formed an alliance with his younger brother to drive their father to tears one day. His instructor had been merciless in the grueling training he subjected his students to, almost as if to declare that doing so was his divine calling. Needless to say, the same continued even after Livionis had joined the Knights.

The older students at the Academy had apparently tried to instruct Livionis on a variety of weapons and strategies during their breaks, but compared to his father's insane regimen, training with the Knights was a picnic. After all, they had meals and breaks and tents, and there weren't any surprise overnight attacks.

He'd been on edge at first, wondering if his father or instructor would make some savage appearance. But each and every night, it had remained quiet until morning. Whether that meant that training that hard could actually get in the way of their duties, or whether Livionis's father, who'd apparently designed part of the Knight Academy training regimen, wasn't quite right in the head, Matcha the horse didn't really know.

Matcha was a horse, so he didn't really understand complex things.

He didn't understand it, but he knew that he'd been born to some high-and-mighty house, and that the humans hoped he'd work as hard as his exemplary parents. With that in mind, from the day the boy had given him the name "Matcha," Matcha had accompanied the small human—always unbending and resolute no matter how hard he was beaten or thrashed—on all of his training or quests to slay monsters.

When it came right down to it, staying awake all night in the forest to tend the fire was nothing for Livionis or his partner Matcha.

Livionis let out a long sigh. "Hey, Matcha, don't you think Lady Sophelia is just way too adorable?"

Matcha neighed back.

“What? C’mon, don’t say *that*!”

Matcha shook his head, as if to say, *Are you still on that?!*

The girl Livionis liked had been in some sort of difficult position, so from the sound of it, he couldn’t go around and declare his affection for her to just anyone. Indeed, Matcha was the only one to whom Livionis could voice his true feelings—the type of friend he could discuss those so-called “matters of the heart” with.

You’re telling me? A horse? But Matcha couldn’t go saying something like that.

Livionis knew this was a topic he couldn’t talk about with other people. But he wanted to talk about it. He had a dilemma on his hands. All Matcha could do was hear him out. Truly, their bond of friendship transcended species.

“*The* Lady Sophelia is right here, breathing! She looked at me and talked with me and permitted me to touch her, and now here she is, sleeping right in front of me! *And*—did you see that earlier? What *was* that?! To think she’d deem me worthy of such kind words…!”

“Oh, I wonder what she looked like as she said it!” Livionis went on. “It’s a shame I couldn’t see her face, but maybe it was for the best. She almost saw me melt in front of her…!”

Let her see it! Matcha thought, but since he felt a bond of friendship with Livionis that transcended species, he decided to hold his tongue. *Get some dignity, dude!* Matcha thought. But Matcha was a kind horse, so he remained silent.

And for what it was worth, Matcha didn’t understand what made a human attractive or not. He was a horse, after all. He didn’t understand, but he did like the way Sophelia had tried to be considerate of him even though she was scared of him—the way she’d call him “Mr. Matcha” with a slightly different pronunciation than Livionis. “Mr. Matcha.” That “mister” was a term of respect—that was nice.

Matcha was proud to be the steed carrying House Warrion’s eldest son. He would head off for duty with Livionis, only for his friends in the Knights’ stables to tell him “You’re one helluva horse, huh?” or “I heard you’ve got an amazing master!” He liked that a lot. Which was exactly why Matcha had been just a bit stunned when he found out that Sophelia was scared to ride on him, and to make matters worse, she’d even started to feel ill along the way.

“I’m sorry, Mr. Matcha,” the small girl had said woozily, her face drained of color. The girl’s apology had pierced Matcha’s self-esteem just a bit. Matcha was proud of his large build and his speed alike, so to think those same traits could harm this girl who mattered so much to his partner—

And speaking of that partner of his…

Livionis was dumbstruck with bliss, and now Matcha was the one who felt dumb.

It went without saying that was no act of consideration or such for Livionis. Any way you looked at it—from top to bottom, in all truth and reality, whether you turned things inside or out—Livionis was nothing more than a lovestruck fool.

“The way she said she felt like she was dreaming was just so cute! When you think about just how hard things must’ve been for her until now, it’s just… Well, what do you think, Matcha?” Livionis only briefly paused for Matcha’s response.

Hell if I know.

“Said she didn’t know what she’d do if she had to go back to being engaged to the prince! What do you think about it, huh? Just imagining it’s probably enough to make your blood boil and make you wanna murder that royal asshole the prince, huh?”

Matcha whinnied in reply.

I dunno about all that, but I do know yer better off keepin’ that to yourself.

Matcha cast an unamused glare back at Livionis, the hopelessly smitten barbarian who asked for Matcha’s thoughts even though he was really just talking to himself. Livionis’s lips curled into a bitter smile as if to say, *Yeah, yeah, I hear you.*

Most humans would make a mess of themselves if they ever saw Livionis make such an unbecoming expression, but it only irritated Matcha. Perhaps this was because he was a horse. Matcha wanted to ask Livionis’s father, or perhaps his brother, to see how they felt, but unfortunately, Livionis was the only one Matcha could converse with, so he had no way of knowing. What a shame.

“All I did was stroke her head a bit, and just look how she reacted! She’s just so absurdly cute! And it makes me so mad the way she was treated! Am I really going to be okay like this…?”

Matcha whinnied back.

“Yeah, you’re right,” Livionis said, cracking a smile. “I’m the one who feels like I’m dreaming! I still can’t believe it. But…” he trailed off, looking at Sophelia as she slept.

It seemed the day had been an eventful one.

Livionis and his father had told Matcha that they’d be on guard duty for a party that evening, so he could rest for the night as they’d be taking a carriage to attend to their duties. That night, however, a young butler had come to call for Matcha. He’d recognized the man as one of the humans who often spoke with Livionis.

No one besides Livionis could understand what Matcha said, but Matcha could understand human speech. *I’m pretty smart after all! Ha ha!*

So when the butler had asked Matcha to follow him quietly, he’d galloped through the night alongside the other horse, ridden by the butler and a woman he’d seen before somewhere. Even when they saddled him down with all of their bags, Matcha had stayed perfectly still. He was a smart horse, wasn’t he? He didn’t really understand all the details, but he could at least tell that some emergency had happened and that he was doing this for Livionis.

It was Livionis’s job to think through all those difficult details. All Matcha had to do was gallop as fast as he could when Livionis called. Nice and simple, right? But it seemed like quite a lot of work for Livionis and those other humans who *did* have to think about things.

“Lady Sophelia must still be quite shaken up from it all…” Livionis said. “I’d imagine she’s terribly tired. As much as she’s suffered, she’s been in tears the whole time.” He paused in thought. “Although I don’t know if that’s a good thing or not.”

With his shoulders slouched down, Livionis sat fixated, watching Sophelia. It looked as if he might be carefully observing her to ensure that he wouldn’t miss anything out of the ordinary. He also looked like a common pervert watching the girl he liked.

Matcha was a horse, so of course he knew nothing of human etiquette. But even as a horse, he would find it unsettling to be watched and watched like that. If it were Matcha, he might very well say, *Get yer eyes offa me!* and send the fool flying with a well-placed hoof.

So Matcha took it upon himself to poke Livionis in the back of

the head with his snout in Sophelia's stead.

"Ouch!"

Matcha neighed.

"Yeah, guess you're right. Got carried away," Livionis admitted with a sheepish grin.

While Matcha didn't know if it was out of worry or an attempt to chide himself, it seemed Livionis had a tendency to agonize over his own behavior. But happiness appeared to win out, and Livionis had been laughing to himself ever since. He was a laughing, squishy pile of mush.

Would Sophelia really be okay with a guy like this?

Don't blame me if she gets fed up with you before you know it! Matcha gave Livionis another snout blow to the back of the head.

My friend... Get yer act together!

"Ow!" Livionis groaned. "I got it, okay?"

Matcha snorted in reply. *Guess we'll see 'bout that.* His partner was far too relaxed considering they were supposed to be "running away." *And just what are ya planning on doin' if she up and leaves you for disappointin' her?* Then again, it seemed like Livionis was popular with a great number of other human females—and males as well—so perhaps there was nothing to worry about.

"You're right... Gotta keep my head on straight." Livionis looked to the sky. "It's because of everyone else's help that I'm able to be here with Lady Sophelia in the first place."

Based on the conversations he'd heard the humans having, it sounded like they were going to say that they had no idea where Livionis and Sophelia were. The butler and the woman who'd departed from the manor alongside Matcha had returned back to the manor in secret just as they'd left. From the sound of it, the role of the knight whom Matcha recognized was to say he'd lost consciousness after they had been attacked by thieves. While he was taking on a role that was far from honorable, the knight had beamed happily regardless.

"And it's thanks to you too, Matcha," Livionis said out of nowhere.

Oh? Matcha stared back at his friend.

There were things Matcha didn't *dislike* about Livionis, like how proud and forward he could be—*that* side of him.

They'd probably never be able to return to the manor. Matcha

would never be able to see his own parents, or the stable keeper family who had always taken exceptional care of them.

But Livionis hadn't apologized to Matcha. He'd thanked him.

The way he was so human and unlike other humans at once… Matcha didn't dislike that either.

Matcha neighed in reply.

"You think I'm a pain in the ass? Some pal you are!"

Livionis gave a dumb, hearty laugh, that same old laugh he'd had ever since he was just a child. Matcha was fairly, actually quite, well…*fond* of it.

"Hey, by the way, Matcha, about Lady Sophelia back there…"

Matcha grumbled unhappily.

But *this* was a bit much. Any other steed would've told Livionis to can it and stop beating a dead horse before giving him a swift hoof to the back. But Matcha was a smart and gentle horse, so he didn't. After all, he'd made up his mind a long time ago that he'd go through life with this pain in the ass of a friend.

Hey, what's a horse to do? he thought to himself. *But wait, is this going to go on till morning?*

Together with Livionis, time and time again, Matcha had endured training so severe that he'd thought they'd actually died on occasion. At times, Livionis's younger brother and his beloved steed Vall had fought to survive their training alongside them.

Whether it was survival with no sleep, no rest, no food, or no drink, even Matcha was confident that he could run his course through with both Livionis and Sophelia alike on his back. He'd dash his way over any cliff or forest and leap into a band of monsters without a speck of fear. After all, he could defeat low-level monsters on his own. Though he didn't mean to make little of the knights, he was confident he was about as capable in combat as a knight. He wasn't just any average horse. He was the steed of a man from House Warrion. He was proud—and he boasted the strength to back it up.

Livionis could doze the night away alongside Sophelia—Matcha could even watch the fire for them. He could add wood to the fire—not that he'd ever done that. He could probably do it, though. He'd always watched, after all.

But still.

Still.

"And just the look on her face then, you know?" Livionis gushed.

Matcha whinnied in disgust.

Do I actually have to put up with this till morning?

He'd never done training like this before. The question was just how much of it he could take.

Maybe I should just knock him out. I wanna try adding wood to the fire, Matcha thought, but he couldn't muster the courage to kick his friend when he seemed so happy.

Matcha let out a deep sigh.

The horse didn't realize that even he had a soft spot for Livionis.

It was early the next morning when Matcha, worn down and utterly exhausted, saw Livionis start to shake.

"Wait, no way! Lady Sophelia knew my name?! I haven't told her my name!"

Matcha felt like crying.

Question: Can horses cry?

There was only one way to find out.

Chapter Seven: Morning, or the Continuation of Yesterday and the Start of Tomorrow

Morning came.

Sophelia had never been a fan of waking up in the morning. *It's already here*, she'd think, feeling just a bit depressed. Depressed or not, she had to work. So she would solemnly call her servants, wash her face, change, and eat.

Since Sophelia's father had forbidden her from eating with the rest of the family, Sophelia forced down her breakfast in silence with an expressionless servant beside her. It was an effort, but she'd just wind up hungry if she didn't eat. If she ignored her basic needs, her health would suffer. So she had to eat.

Both the ingredients and the chefs that prepared them were first-class, but Sophelia wasn't very fond of eating. Not to mention, she'd never once felt the joy others described in a delicious meal. To Sophelia, eating was simply a task she had to complete to stay alive.

So, once her work there was done, she had a tea party or training waiting for her.

None of that was fun either, but since she carried the title of the crown prince's fiancée wherever she went, she had no choice. It was almost shocking how unbecoming her half sister's old dresses looked on her, and even Sophelia knew full well that the other noble ladies who'd seen them laughed at her behind her back.

Did she want a new dress, then? Well, actually, not so much.

She figured that no dress would ever look good on her, so she simply shrugged off any concerns.

Sophelia had no way of knowing whether the queen or her training instructor had taken pity on her or if they were irritated by her startling lack of fashion sense, but either way, they would sometimes provide her a dress to wear at evening parties, so it never really became an issue...so Sophelia shrugged off those concerns as well.

Between her tea parties and training, she would provide assistance to the ministers and the civil officials or fulfill her public duties as the prince's fiancée.

Some days she would eat lunch and some days she wouldn't.

Sophelia wasn't given a lady-in-waiting to assist her most of the time. It was only when they had to go to the castle and keep up appearances that one of Lilina's ladies-in-waiting would be assigned to her for the day. There was no way to know what the lady-in-waiting had been told either. She was merely a decoration and never made any attempts to take care of Sophelia's needs. Sophelia herself preferred to avoid having someone she wasn't even close to glued to her side all day long, so she had no issue with each of them going their separate ways so long as they met back at the carriage to make their return.

So, if they had a tea party or a meal with someone important, Sophelia would eat, and if not, well, that wasn't an issue either.

And so, night would fall. If she didn't have an evening party to attend, she would eat in her room. Surrounded by books and documents she needed to attend to, she would always fall off into a sudden sleep. And when she slept, the next morning would come…

Only for it all to start again.

As utterly exhausting as it was to repeat the same thing day after seemingly endless day, it was her duty, so that was all there was to it. Sophelia was born to fill her role, and she'd been permitted to live to fill that role, so that was just how things were.

While Sophelia had accepted that this was simply the way of things, she hated going to sleep at night, and when she woke up in the morning, she felt despair. Her emotions were all over the place. She was a girl, after all. At least that was what she wanted to say.

But when it came right down to it, Sophelia was so busy that she felt she deserved praise just for breathing. She did enjoy her vocal training quite a bit, though. It was the one and only time she didn't have to think about anything. Sometimes she would even run until she grew dizzy.

Sophelia also enjoyed her time in the carriage that took her back and forth from the manor to the castle. The inside of the carriage was covered in pillowy soft cushions, and the gentle

rocking of the carriage always made her sleepy. Even then, she only ever dozed off, so she awoke immediately when the carriage arrived, never allowing herself to look unkempt before the knights. Why, if they ever saw her drooling in her sleep, the shame would have been almost too much to recover from.

Thinking back on it now, there were many in the Knights who'd been kind to Sophelia. While Sophelia could hardly wrap her head around the idea of someone around her showing her any sort of kindness, she was almost certain it wasn't her imagination.

Just when Sophelia grew weary, the Knights would make sure to slow their pace as they walked alongside her. Sometimes as they walked, Sophelia would notice they'd made their way to the royal gardens with the flowers in full bloom. And sometimes, she'd even be lucky enough to make her return to the manor without encountering the prince. She was almost *certain* that that wasn't just her imagination.

"Were the Knights looking out for me?" Sophelia had asked.

But there was actually just a bit more in the conversation that had led up to Sophelia's question.

Sophelia awoke, startled, to the smell of soup.

Huh? I'm not drooling, am I? Sophelia thought, instantly bringing a hand to her cheek in a show of charm.

"Good morning!"

"G-Good morning!" she stammered back.

Livionis's first smile of the day was especially blinding. The smile was overwhelming, leaving no room for doubt that yesterday had, in fact, been real.

"There's a river nearby," Livionis said. "Would you like to go wash your face there?"

That smile's so bright! Sophelia thought, rubbing her eyes as Livionis beamed back at her. She contemplated the sheer joy of waking up to that smile and Livionis telling her "good morning." It only took a moment for her whole boring life up until that point to stop mattering.

Sophelia nodded, filled with the baseless confidence that, in fact, her whole life up until now had been building to this very moment.

What did he say again? That's right—a river.

“Would that be okay?” Sophelia asked.

“Of course.” Livionis rose to his feet with a grin, only for the black horse to neigh and give him a slow poke with his muzzle. “Sounds like Matcha’s going to accompany you.”

“Okay,” Sophelia replied.

Standing behind Livionis, Matcha shook his head as if to show the way.

Sophelia gave the horse a hurried nod in return. “Thanks, Mr. Matcha!”

“I’ll just be watching the soup, then,” Livionis said as he stirred the pot filled to the brim with ingredients. He was just as cute today as he had been yesterday.

After she and Matcha had walked a ways, Sophelia spoke up. “Uh, Mr. Matcha?”

Matcha trotted along, throwing his head back to look at her.

Sophelia couldn’t help but look up at Matcha in adoration at the gesture, which seemed as if he were asking her, *Well, what?*

Sophelia hadn’t had very much experience—practically none—around animals, so to be quite honest, it took courage for her to touch Matcha with his large frame and jet-black coat. While Sophelia didn’t reach out her hand to pet him since she figured it would’ve been unpleasant for the horse to have a girl he’d just met touching him, he did have a luxurious coat.

Sophelia was quite impressed. He was a terribly smart horse who seemed to understand when spoken to. Not to mention his almost-human expressions were terribly cute.

“You ran your absolute hardest back there, but I wasn’t able to thank you properly…” Sophelia began. “Instead, all I could do was complain about how scared or sick I felt. I’m terribly sorry.”

Matcha neighed back, shaking his head as if he were exasperated. It almost seemed like he was saying *Is that what it was?* and in another way, it didn’t.

“Hmm?” Sophelia said, tilting her head to the side in confusion, only for Matcha to sigh back.

She’d probably misunderstood. “Ummm…I’ll try my best today?”

Matcha whinnied in reply.

Ah, looks like that’s not right either. With her eyebrows furrowed together in thought, Sophelia looked back on what she’d said. She’d try her best…and he was saying no to that.

Huh? What could that mean?

"Are you trying to say...I don't have to try my best?"

Matcha gave an affirming neigh. It seemed she was right this time.

I don't have to try my best? Wow... That's the first time anyone's ever said that to me. Sophelia was struck by this. It was only natural for her to try her best. She had to try harder. Trying hard was just common sense, and if she couldn't do that, then the least she could do was find some helpful way to die. That was the world Sophelia had spent her whole life in, and now he was saying she didn't have to try too hard? And a *horse* was telling her that—the same horse who'd survived some sort of unimaginable training.

"Ah ha ha!" Sophelia's laugh took even her by surprise.

Matcha nodded back, as if to say, *There you go.*

The horse's master was one thing, and the horse himself was another. How could they both be so kind and warm and charming? It was astounding to think that there was a world like this out there.

Reality didn't play out like a fairy tale, but apparently fairy tales weren't flat-out lies either. Sophelia couldn't believe that this was her reality, but it was. She *was* here right now, living in this moment.

"Thank you, Mr. Matcha."

Matcha gave a satisfied neigh, looking pleased.

So that's it! Sophelia thought, looking at Matcha's long eyelashes. "Thank you for running so hard in the dark last night."

Matcha neighed back with a nod as if to say, *That's right!* Matcha lifted his nose just a bit, as if to look down on her. Sophelia couldn't help but laugh. *Good job! Want a gold star?* Matcha seemed to say, playfully condescending.

What a horse!

Just who in their right mind decided that horses weren't as smart as humans? Sophelia thought. At the very least, Matcha was far smarter than she was—not to mention far more boldhearted. If it were a competition, Matcha could leave His Royal Sleaziness in the dust with his steadfast—no, is *steed*-fast—character.

"I'm counting on you today, Mr. Matcha."

Matcha whinnied back in exasperation.

Huh? Now he's not looking at me...

Ahem. Let us return to the beginning.

It was a heartwarming morning unlike any Sophelia had ever experienced. It was a strange, somehow exciting morning. It all seemed so unreal, in fact, that Sophelia found herself looking back on her life so far. Was this her life flashing before her eyes just before her death? No, it wasn't.

"Were the Knights looking out for me?" Sophelia asked. Looking back on it, Sophelia felt like the knights had often been around in the more pleasant times that reminded her of now. That was what had prompted Sophelia to ask.

"That's right," Livionis replied with a grin. "There are many in the Knights who feel indebted to you, Lady Sophelia. Some of them even hope to repay that debt in whatever way they can."

"Repay me…?" Sophelia didn't have the slightest recollection of any debt they'd incurred to her. All she could think of was the words of the knight who'd driven their carriage. "Apparently there's some fan club…?" Sophelia asked.

"Ermph!" Livionis bit his tongue to Sophelia's alarm. The fact that he didn't spit out the soup he'd just sipped was a testimony to the manners he'd been raised with.

Sophelia watched him with strange admiration, only for Livionis to lift his gaze as his eyebrows sank down. "Just how much did you hear?"

That's way too cute of a look to be making at me!

"How much? I mean…" Sophelia started. "You're, uh, a *fan* of mine? And there's some, uh, fan club? And they're helping us…? I don't quite get it, but…that was all some sort of joke, right?"

"Well, no…not, uh, not quite." Livionis stumbled over his words, scratching his head and tilting it to the side, only for Matcha to thrust at him from behind.

"Ow!"

Matcha neighed back disapprovingly.

"Wait, seriously? No way! I mean, just hold up!" Livionis argued with his steed. "You'd think about how much you should say too! If Lady Sophelia says I'm disgusting because of you, I'll—"

Listening to the duo argue—*Can a man and a horse even be a duo?* No, that didn't matter. Listening to their conversation… *Wait, could you even call that a "conversation"?*

That didn't matter either.

Either way, Sophelia didn't understand their conversation or what they were getting at, but she couldn't bring herself to agree with Livionis's final statement.

"There's no way I could ever call you disgusting, Sir Livionis."

"Huh?" Shock was clear on Livionis's face.

"Huh?" That's my line! Just what was so shocking about what she'd said?

Livionis had a face that looked like it had been taken straight from a church's stained glass window as it dazzled in the morning sun. The knight had saved Sophelia's life, and now she'd been pushed headfirst into the ocean of love with a splash. It was almost insulting to suggest she could be disgusted by him after he'd illuminated her life with the sonorous melodies of spring!

Slightly annoyed, Sophelia stared back at Livionis's flushed, doll-like face.

"I don't know of anyone as stunning or admirable as you, Sir Livionis."

"Er, eergh!"

Oh.

Livionis made an unintelligible sound, covering his face in his hands.

That very moment, the wooden bowl that Livionis had proudly boasted about making the previous night flew through the air—with the soup still in it.

Uh-oh, Sophelia thought, only for Matcha to soundly catch the bowl on the tip of his muzzle. The soup hadn't spilled, nor had Matcha or Livionis been burned.

With the soup bowl still on his muzzle, Matcha glared at Livionis, frozen in place. Sophelia couldn't help but give the horse a round of applause.

This horse was just entirely too *cool*.

But! But still!

Livionis was just so cute and precious and lovely! It was enough to make her want to squeal and then squeal some more! He was so cute it made her want to pound the ground with her fist as she howled and rolled around uncontrollably!

What's this all about, you ask? Why, it's about ways to describe cuteness besides the word "cute," that's what.

Yes, Sophelia was quite aware that the latter half of her description had gotten a bit strange, so she hoped only to be given some grace and left alone. Ever since she was just a wee little girl, she'd been a snot-nosed brat—no, actually she'd been molded by her mother and tutor, and after becoming engaged to the prince, she'd been trained by the queen and the castle's instructor. And yet, her brain had been slacking on its duties ever since last night.

There wasn't anything to be done about it. After all, Sophelia had erected a gravestone for her brain and left it an offering of blueberry candies. Sophelia's new happy-go-lucky brain had taken over in her former, dearly departed brain's wake, but being swept up in the height of spring as it was, functioning properly was too much to ask.

If you, dear reader, are wondering just what this is all referring to, then revisiting the moment Sophelia's brain suffered a valiant death in the line of duty would serve you well—it was the same night Sophelia made her departure after witnessing her fiancé cheat on her.

And now, her happy-go-lucky brain was pleasantly singing as it searched for ways to describe "cute." Why was it searching for such? Read on to find out.

Before Sophelia's very eyes, Livionis's handsome, pale face was now a bright red, his long eyelashes resting low to reveal a glimmer of his trembling blueberry eyes beneath them.

What the—?

His cuteness defied all reason.

"You're so cu…" Sophelia clamped her mouth shut. She'd come terribly close to making a sound that was altogether unbecoming of a lady.

Since Sophelia was neither the crown prince's fiancée nor the eldest daughter of House Lotus anymore, she figured now was a great time to forget her mother's loving command (read: curse) to act as a proper lady. It was time to live her life. But this and that were two different matters entirely. There were just some sounds that a woman mustn't make in front of a lovestruck man.

Even then, Sophelia was right in the middle of experiencing that "first love" thing that she'd only heard tales of, so she had no past experience to draw from. If she were to be accused of painting

with overly broad strokes, all she could do was apologize, but Sophelia also hoped to be given some grace and left alone on that as well. It was, after all, little Sophelia's very first time being in love!

With this man who was far cuter than herself before her, something within Sophelia made her want to be as cute as she could be in return. What would you even call that *something*? Girlish sentiment? Whatever it was, it was the first time that Sophelia realized she had something like that inside her.

"Uh, well, you see..." Livionis stammered. "I've been, uh, secretly supporting you from, uh, a distance, and..." Livionis paused, covering his face with his hands again. "Oh... What am I even doing blabbering about this to her...?!"

Matcha, for what it's worth, had taken the bowl of soup that had been in Livionis's hands just a few moments ago and carried it to safety, laying it down on the ground near Livionis. He really was a smart horse.

"B-Before I even realized what was happening," Livionis continued, stumbling over his words, "they were calling me the CEO of your, um, fan club, and then the next thing I, uh, knew, there were a bunch of people calling themselves members, and, well..."

It was probably just Sophelia's imagination making her think she heard Livionis make a gasping sound like an air leak or kettle whistle.

It was also probably Sophelia's imagination making her think she heard the same sound escape from her own lips.

Sophelia pressed her hands against her piping hot cheeks. It didn't help that her hands felt entirely too cold on her skin. She had no idea if he was being sincere or not.

"All that for...*me*?"

Livionis groaned. "Please don't say anything, m'lady. I've spent the past three years devoted to you..."

Sophelia gasped.

Matcha let out a piercing neigh, as if he were watching a tragedy unfold before his eyes. While unfortunately Sophelia couldn't understand what Matcha was saying, it was probably just her imagination that made it look like Matcha's mood had been spoiled, almost as if to say, *Seriously, you guys?*

Without so much as a whinny, Matcha trotted off, away from the two of them. *Guess it wasn't my imagination after all…* Sophelia was silently thankful to Matcha for being so considerate.

Fighting back the urge to mindlessly shout at the top of her lungs, Sophelia clenched her hands tight. With all of her breathing training, Sophelia had developed a voice that could certainly hold its own, so shouting would've been a considerable mistake.

"Do you…think I'm disgusting?" Livionis asked.

"You're so cute."

They both gasped. Sophelia hadn't meant to say that.

Those glistening blueberry eyes of his peeking out from the gaps in his fingers as he covered his bloodred face had been so terribly cute that, before Sophelia even realized what had happened, the words had spilled out of her mouth. She covered her mouth with her hands, but it was too late to take the words back.

"S-Sir Livionis, it's, uh, it's not like that!" Sophelia stuttered. "I mean, it *is* like that, but that's not what I mean! Wait, don't look at me! What I mean is, you're cute— No, that's not what I mean!"

Livionis's cheeks were stained an ever brighter red as his shiny blueberry eyes trembled. It was hard to imagine him as the shining star knight who was meant to bear the legacy of the mightiest house in all the kingdom…because he was just too *adorable*!

Almost immediately after joining the Knights, Livionis had been assigned to the First Squadron, a unit whose ranks were filled with those deemed exceptionally talented, even by the Knights' standards. Having made appearances as a guard at evening parties and important ceremonies, Livionis was adored by many men and women alike.

And now that same Livionis was claiming to be a fan of Sophelia's—and making a face like that to boot! Honestly, just who could blame Sophelia's happy-go-lucky brain for madly dancing around as it tooted away on its flute?

Furrowing his brow in distress, Livionis was perfectly unaware of the chaos in Sophelia's mind as she bit down on the inside of her cheeks.

"I… I saw your tireless dedication to our kingdom and your selfless determination," Livionis said. "I only hoped to protect

that.”

Sophelia remained silent. Her entire life. Her entire life she’d always been alone. She’d always thought she’d been on her own.

She’d gone about her work in silence every day as she fulfilled the duties she’d been given. Even when her proposals had been approved under the prince’s name, and even when she’d had to step in on behalf of the prince when he’d forgotten the name of yet another foreign dignitary, she’d been desensitized to the frustration.

After all, as the prince’s fiancée, Sophelia was the only one who could be beside him, the only one who could step in in place of him at times. So Sophelia told herself that she had to carry out her duties, reminding herself that it was all for the good of the kingdom as she mechanically passed from day to day. Sophelia didn’t feel a thing when the prince would swear and call her an unbecoming swine or a dreadful bore of a woman.

Even Sophelia found herself to be a boring individual, a trait she wasn’t fond of. But now? Now, here was Livionis, recognizing all of Sophelia’s efforts. There’d been someone supporting her all along the way. How could she even begin to describe the raging sea of her emotions right?

She’d thrown herself into her studies every day and pored over all those documents, but the words escaped her nonetheless. Her emotions were desperate to find an exit, leaving Sophelia with no means to stop the tears that suddenly erupted.



“Lady…Sophelia?”

“I’m sorry, I’m so happy.” Sophelia sniffed. “And you’re just so charming, and…”

The tears continued to flow no matter how many times Sophelia tried to wipe them away. She couldn’t stop laughing either. Her chest buzzed with excitement. Sophelia’s emotions were in complete and utter chaos.

They were like a raging night, like flowers swaying in the sun—like a puddle of water after the rain had gone. Sophelia had no way of controlling her own feelings. She had no way to make sense of them.

In the past she’d been able to chew her way through even the most bitter experiences, swallowing them down and letting them pass through her. But this was too precious to even put in her mouth in the first place. She could only scoop it up in her hands, cling to it, and embrace it, never to let it go for the rest of her life.

Livionis’s eyes, softened to a caring gaze, were the most stunning purple in the world, jewels that she treasured from the bottom of her heart.

“I’m glad I’m alive,” Sophelia said.

“If you weren’t…I’d simply die,” Livionis replied.

He certainly had a knack for exaggeration.

So long as she might live, Sophelia would never forget this moment and that face that seemed to be on the verge of tears. Livionis had taken such pains (not for the kingdom nor for the king) for her. Looking into his eyes, Sophelia vowed once more to bring him happiness, no matter what.

Livionis slowly extended his hand out to Sophelia.

“Might I be permitted to touch you?”

Sophelia giggled. *He was asking* now*?*

What was he even doing saying something like that now? Out of everyone, Livionis was the only one who’d ever laid a gentle hand on Sophelia. He was the one who’d thrown her heart into complete chaos with the way he’d caressed her.

“You didn’t ask anything like that yesterday,” Sophelia said.

“Come to think of it, I didn’t, did I?” Livionis replied.

But what if Sophelia had wanted to touch Livionis? If, perhaps, her romantic feelings for Livionis, wrapped as they were in shock and fear, had driven her hand to thoughtlessly clasp his own, then

his touch could be nothing other than the pinnacle of joy.

That young, beaming smile of his—that was Sophelia's joy.

Sophelia grasped the hand Livionis had extended to her. She held it tight in her grip—as tight as she could. Drawing a stark contrast with his handsome face, Livionis's hand was thick and firm. Sophelia clasped his hand, calloused from wielding a sword, in her own hand—thin and brittle like a fallen branch—with all the strength she could muster.

"Might I be permitted to touch you as well, Sir Livionis?"

"B-But of course!" Livionis stammered.

"In that case, it's unfair that you're the only one who has to ask for permission, you know," Sophelia replied. "You're permitted to touch me every bit as much as I can touch you."

Livionis's eyes widened.

If only it were so! That alone practically summed up what Sophelia longed for.

Just how much was permitted? Just how much would he permit from her?

Rather than ask that question, Sophelia chose instead to stare into Livionis's trembling blueberry eyes. They were heartrendingly *adorable*. More beautiful than any gem she'd ever laid eyes on and sweeter than any chef-crafted dessert, his eyes were simply adorable.

"Now that's quite a bind!" Livionis laughed, his face still beaming red after wiping away Sophelia's tears. "That would mean I could do anything I wanted to you."

"I suppose it would." Sophelia was terribly shy, but for some reason, with him, she could spit out bold statements like that without batting an eye.

But even then, Livionis's mouth squinched up and his face grew even redder—the very pinnacle of redness—so red, in fact, that it would make an apple and tomato flee in shame and publicly renounce their roles as the representatives of redness from that day on. He was absolutely adorable.

He was also absolutely terrifying, a charming, needy beggar after every last bit of Sophelia he could get.

Are you sure that's okay, though? Are you sure you shouldn't be running away? he seemed to be saying, as if to make a cute little attempt at a threat. Sophelia could only laugh.

“Do you really think I would run away?”

Or perhaps he was even entertaining the idea of shaking her off somehow? *As if.* Sophelia couldn’t help but laugh through her tears. *If you’re still going to say that sort of nonsense even after all this, maybe I should just grab you by the chest and scream that you lied to me yesterday?*

“I said I wouldn’t let you go, didn’t I?” Sophelia continued.

Livionis gasped.

Deep, deep, *deep* down, Sophelia was absolutely, helplessly terrified. After all, she’d never once been loved by anyone. Even if she were praised for her plans or ideas, she couldn’t bring herself to believe them. *Sorry to make you go to all the trouble of worrying about me!* Sophelia knew she had no escape nor freedom save death, so they could save themselves the trouble of being concerned about her. Sophelia’s only worth lay in a life lived in service to her king and the citizens of the kingdom. Sophelia knew full well that even dying was an act of selfishness she would not be permitted. She’d been born to House Lotus, so she’d been raised to die as a noble of House Lotus in turn.

To *die*.

Die…?

Had Sophelia really wanted to die? Had that really been it? Sophelia wasn’t even sure of that anymore. She knew that she couldn’t die from hyperventilation, but had she really wanted to die all those times back then?

She didn’t know.

Sophelia had lived her whole life pretending her heart wasn’t there in the first place. And now, the prospect of accepting that someone actually cared about her was absolutely terrifying to her. She just couldn’t believe it.

You had to have some sort of basis to believe in something, didn’t you? You’d need some sort of logic behind it, wouldn’t you? And yet, Sophelia couldn’t find a single shred of proof that would allow her to believe the fairy tale that someone actually cared for her.

You there. Why don’t you try thinking about it, hmm?

If there were a stone or a dirty wheel or a chipped knife just lying around and you had a person stand before you and say they liked it, you’d wonder what was wrong with them, wouldn’t you? If the thought

wouldn't cross your mind, then you're a generous soul. You're a shining star in an all-too-dark world, so I do hope you'll take care of yourself.

Sophelia's soul, on the other hand, might've looked shiny enough, but in all actuality, it was shallow and cracked, like a worn porcelain bowl. She'd been taught to only fill her *soul-bowl* with something after she'd given it a thorough inspection, and since she'd continued using it far beyond its intended lifespan, she had to be extra careful that what little of herself she had didn't spill through the cracks. So, in order to consider whether or not it was safe to put something in her soul-bowl, Sophelia needed *proof*.

Oh, but still, that Livionis! With gems for eyes, one of the most capable sword arms in all the land, and a beautiful steed that could take him anywhere, that same Livionis had said that the stone, the dirty wheel, the chipped knife was *special*.

To Sophelia, the very idea of believing such a thing was overwhelmingly terrifying. It was the first time in her whole life she'd been offered something so beautiful and sweet and kind. She was terrified that, in the very next moment, Livionis might simply say he'd changed his mind and cast her aside.

"This is the only place I can be," Sophelia said.

And yet...

"So you'll permit me my joy in hearing you say that?" Livionis asked.

Seeing Livionis's handsome face light up as he spoke of his joy was enough to dissipate Sophelia's fears.

"Proof"? "Logic"? Do you even hear how stupid you sound right now? Sophelia's happy-go-lucky brain sneered from the surface of Sophelia's soul-bowl, busily singing and dancing and bouncing as it tweeted out a song on its flute.

Who needs some boring old logic anyway? My, love really is a beautiful thing!

Sophelia and Livionis laughed together, their faces still red. She hoped that her happy-go-lucky brain would end up completely shattering her soul-bowl someday soon.

She could only imagine how euphoric hearing it crack in half would be.

Sophelia would just replace her porcelain soul-bowl with a brand-new wooden one, especially large and sturdy and beautiful. It would be one that she hadn't been told to take or had forced

upon her. It would be the one and only soul-bowl that belonged to Sophelia and Sophelia alone.

Now then.

With her eyes having grown heavy from crying, Sophelia decided to wash her face. When she made her way back with Matcha, who'd accompanied her for a second time, Livionis offered her soup in a wooden bowl.

Since they'd been talking about all manner of things before they could even start their breakfast, they decided to put it back in the pot to heat it once more.

Taking the bowl in her hands a second time, Sophelia noticed the smooth feel of the wood against her hand. Jam-packed with ingredients, the soup smelled magnificent.

"You're quite skillful, aren't you, Sir Livionis?"

"You think so?" Livionis replied. "My mother and younger brother say I'm just like my father, rough and barbaric—just as a man of House Warrion ought to be."

"They say *you're* just like him?" Sophelia asked.

"Yes. It's rather insulting, isn't it? Calling me the same as that old dirtbag!"

I think your father's the one being insulted here, Sophelia thought to herself with a laugh.

Livionis looked less than pleased with the comparison, but he was just as cute even then. The fact that he could say things like "that old dirtbag" with such an elegant, beautiful face—the spitting image of his mother, Adealyde, the brilliant flower of the highest social circle—bore its own cute charm as well. It was a thing of beauty even watching him bring a spoonful of soup to his lips. One might mistake this for the royal dining table, not some forest in the middle of nowhere.

"Bon appétit!" Livionis said.

"Likewise!" Sophelia replied.

Following Livionis's lead, Sophelia brought the soup to her mouth. The bowl's matching spoon—matching in the sense that Livionis had fashioned them both from the same tree—was light and smooth to the touch. It carried just the faintest hint of a woody scent. Could an item of this quality really have been crafted in just a single night?

Sophelia had been confronted with oddity after oddity, but she'd given up on trying to hold the Warrions to the standard of common sense, so it was all just fine. Fretting over all the minor details would have been a waste. The only truth was the one sitting right before her eyes.

The fragrant smell of the soup filled Sophelia's nostrils as she put it into her mouth, only for her eyes to snap wide open.

What? What is this? Huh??? Sophelia froze in place, completely befuddled. It was like she'd been struck by lightning—or perhaps like she'd been thrown into the raging currents?

How could she even begin to put it into words? She wanted to burst into tears and laughter in equal measure, but she couldn't even bring herself to close her eyes to process the shock of it all.

"It's…amazing…!" Sophelia said, lifting her head from the soup bowl.

Livionis smiled back. "Glad to hear it."

He was just so cute with that blush on his cheeks, and the soup was just so delicious.

That's right, delicious. It *was* delicious. It was truly, unbearably delicious! The soup was filled with sweet and mellow onions and tantalizing spices. It was warm and rich and…delicious!

"I've never eaten something this delicious in all my life…" Sophelia declared.

"Surely that's, uh…" Livionis trailed off. "That's being a bit too generous, Lady Sophelia…" Livionis shook his head, his face growing bright red. Sophelia, however, hadn't been joking or trying to flatter him.

For the first time in all her life, Sophelia was *dining*.

It was the first time she'd ever thought that eating could be fun, delightful…and *delicious*. It was as if she were *alive*.

Sophelia laughed, only for him to give a sheepish laugh back with his eyebrows drooped. Sophelia was so overjoyed at how delicious it was that she wanted to cry, but if she cried now, the soup would just go to waste. Sophelia secretly took a calming breath and put another spoonful of soup in her mouth.

"It really is delicious, Sir Livionis."

"Y-Yes, we can just leave it at that…!" Livionis replied.

Livionis probably couldn't imagine the emotions—the joy—she was feeling right now. How could he? After all, to most people,

meals were just time spent enjoying delicious food. Livionis likely had no way of knowing that Sophelia had known nothing of such joys. Sophelia was the only one who knew that what was just a matter of fact to her wasn't the same to others, and what was commonplace to them was the stuff of fairy tales to her.

While it was frustrating, she knew she might very well burst into tears again trying to explain it, so instead Sophelia opted to give the biggest smile she could, hoping that Livionis might understand even a fraction of the joy the soup gave her.

"No, it really is exceptionally delicious, Sir Livionis!"

"Urk!" Livionis replied.

Just what was "urk" even supposed to mean?

"By the way, Sir Livionis," Sophelia began.

"Yes?"

After they'd finished their meal, Livionis had produced a wooden cup from somewhere and filled it with tea. Sophelia gave him her heartfelt thanks, only for Livionis to beam as his cheeks flushed with color. His reaction was absolutely adorable, so Sophelia had decided against asking him if he'd really made all of it in one night. *Details, schmetails.*

Sophelia had made up her mind that she wouldn't be startled by anything that came from this man.

"Whereabouts are we now?" Sophelia asked.

"Yes, it was quite dark, wasn't it?" Livionis replied. "Come to think of it, I didn't even tell you where we were going." He apologized, his brow sinking down. Sophelia shook her head, as if to say no apologies were necessary.

"Well, last night we took the service road from the west of the capital," Livionis explained. "The road itself is in between the Lotus manor and the castle, but travelers on it are few and far between. Not to mention you can hardly see your surroundings on the path. I figured it was just what we were looking for."

"After that," Livionis continued, "Matcha ran full speed ahead, and we've cut through the forest. We'll soon be in Hardale."

When asked if she'd like to look at it on a map, Sophelia shook her head again. Even her happy-go-lucky brain had enough of a recollection of the kingdom's surroundings.

"It's quite a distance from the capital," Sophelia noted. "Mr. Matcha's certainly a speedy steed, isn't he?"

Matcha gave a hearty neigh in agreement.

It was as if he were saying, *Right?* or *I guess so!* so Sophelia couldn't help but laugh.

"You've got a point," Livionis replied. "Not only is he fast, but he's got the guts to climb up anywhere, even a cliff. He can take the shortest way there—straight up."

"Mr. Matcha really is as amazing as they come!" Sophelia said.

Wait, cliffs? Guts?

Sophelia had once read of a people who lived alongside the mountain goats that dwelled in the cliffs. But could horses climb up cliffs too? Perhaps she'd heard of a horse like that…or perhaps not.

Sophelia wasn't well-versed in horses, so after thinking about it for a moment, she decided that it didn't matter and gave up thinking about it. It would have been a real bother if she ended up inviting a certain gentleman to give her a lecture on what horses were all about. If he said Matcha could climb up cliffs, then he could climb up cliffs, end of story. *Details, schmetails.*

"I ended up letting him run at his normal speed without even realizing it," Livionis replied. "So I'm terribly sorry to have put you under such strain, Lady Sophelia."

Matcha gave a guilty neigh in reply.

"Please, don't worry yourself with such things! I've got a feeling I'll be just fine today!" While going up cliffs would be just a bit too much, if they were just riding along, Sophelia felt like she could better handle the ride today.

Sophelia had put enough pep in her reply, but Livionis and Matcha simply exchanged looks.

"No, it's not that far to town from here," Livionis replied. "Let's walk. We'll arrive by sundown."

Matcha gave a hearty neigh, nodding in agreement.

That explained it. So that was why Matcha hadn't given a very enthusiastic response when Sophelia had told him that she was counting on him at the riverside. Sophelia couldn't help but feel guilty for making the two of them worry about her so much.

They would've already been in town by now if Sophelia hadn't been with them, so to suggest they walk instead seemed absurd. She couldn't bring them any more trouble than she already had.

"But if we rode on Mr. Matcha, we'd be there in the blink of an

eye," Sophelia objected. "It would be a shame to ask such of you."

"Well then. What about this?" Livionis pushed himself to his feet, stroking Matcha's mane. "Try riding on Matcha. We'll check to see if you're actually fine to ride first. How's that sound?"

Sophelia rose to her feet and nodded, her hands clenched with the confidence that it'd be just fine. After all, with how smart and gentle Matcha was, what was there to even be afraid of? It would be a stain on her reputation and honor as a woman if she stood down now. Whether or not she had enough of a reputation to get stained in the first place was a matter for another time.

"Yes, please!" Sophelia replied.

"Very well then. Pardon me."

No sooner had the words "pardon me" left his mouth than Sophelia felt her body being lifted up weightlessly in Livionis's arms, only to be plopped down on Matcha's back a moment later.

Sophelia nearly gasped in shock—and it was indeed a shock. It'd been dark yesterday, and they'd been dashing along at an incredible speed. Most importantly, it had been her first time ever riding on a horse. It was bound to be scary!

But today? Today Sophelia was different. She'd had a good night's sleep and woken up full of energy. She'd seen just how cute and cool Matcha was. And now, sitting atop Matcha's back as the steed remained calm in place, Sophelia realized just how stunningly beautiful the scenery that surrounded her was.

Trees bursting with life. Sunlight spilling through the treetops. A gentle wind caressing her cheek. The sound of birdsong in the air. She'd never experienced anything like the beauty and tranquility of the nature surrounding her. It was, well, um, uh...yeah.

It was terrifying.

Now that was a real surprise, as surprising as it gets. She was absolutely, positively, ridiculously *scared*. The breathtaking scenery around her, the calming touch of nature... Sophelia couldn't give even the slightest figment of a damn about any of that. None of that nonsense mattered; she was *scared*.

She was so high up. She was seeing things from on high. Sophelia glanced at her feet and felt like vomiting. *This is terrifying!*

She was floating, after all! Her feet weren't on the ground, so that meant she was floating. *Do you hear me? Floa-ting!* Sophelia

was in no mind to hear any arguments to the contrary.

"Perhaps we should get you down now?" Livionis suggested.

Sophelia, however, couldn't bring herself to look at Livionis's face. And it was her favorite face to look at too! She couldn't even allow herself so much as a glance at him.

Because if she looked down, she would die.

Sophelia needed no more convincing. She was afraid of heights. What she'd felt yesterday hadn't been some misunderstanding. It wasn't a matter of whether it was a horse or whether she was used to it. Instead, the moment her brain realized she was somewhere high up, she was overrun with terror. There was no logic to it. While she'd thought she'd lived her life with logic up until now, Sophelia's brain was now functioning purely on instinct. Not that that was particularly shocking. It hadn't been very long at all since her brain had started the job, after all. She'd give it some time and see where things went.

That was why the only thing Sophelia could spit out was "I'm *fine*."

"There's absolutely no way you're fine," Livionis replied.

Well, she wasn't fine, but she didn't want to slow him down either. Sophelia hated causing problems for people. She hated causing problems for Livionis and Matcha. She resented *herself* for causing problems.

Sophelia shook her head, quivering in place.

"Lady Sophelia," Livionis began, his tone especially kind and gentle, "both Matcha and I want only to enjoy our time with you, you know. This isn't some duty of yours, and we're not just marching off somewhere. This is a journey for you, Matcha, and me. We're the only ones."

When she didn't reply, he spoke to her gently again. "Lady Sophelia? Would you favor me with your gaze?"

She wanted to look at Livionis, but she couldn't. She couldn't look down. Livionis probably knew that too. It was Livionis's own gentle way of dissuading her. She couldn't even look at him, so riding Matcha into town was almost certainly out of the question.

Mustering every bit of willpower she had, Sophelia grunted and looked down to see Livionis awaiting her with open arms.

"Okay," she managed to say.

But the way he beamed back at her was— Oh, how to put it?

Ah, that's right. *Utterly unbearable.*

So this is what it feels like to be disappointed in yourself, huh?

Sophelia had made her way through life resigning herself to her circumstances and accepting whatever was tossed her way. Even when the prince had given her a stack of papers (that *he* was supposed to read) and told her to memorize them in five minutes, and even when he'd made the impossible request to sort out all the documents by the next day, Sophelia had managed to handle it all. But this was her first time ever being faced with a problem she could do absolutely nothing about that made her want to howl and yank her hair out.

Sophelia let out a small groan and extended her hands. Same as when he'd lifted her the first time, Livionis plucked Sophelia up and put her back on the ground. She was intensely disappointed in herself—in the fact that she felt relieved, the fact that even the very ground beneath her feet felt precious to her.

"Lady Sophelia," Livionis said. "Let's slow down to enjoy our adventure together. You and me and Matcha."

"I…wanted to ride on Mr. Matcha too…" Sophelia replied. She'd find no other steed as fine in all the land, and yet she couldn't even enjoy sitting atop his back, let alone riding on it. Sophelia's shoulders slumped down in defeat only for Matcha to whinny in response.

"He said, 'Don't look so sad,' Lady Sophelia," Livionis explained.

"Sad…?" Sophelia tossed the word around in her mouth.

Ah, of course. This was what sadness felt like.

It was an uneasy feeling, like she'd just been abandoned, all on her own. It was a cold sensation in her chest that made her clench up in defense, like it was all just such a shame. It was that sort of feeling. This one wasn't a nice feeling either.

Sophelia wished she hadn't discovered this feeling. It was like that feeling from long, long ago, when Sophelia was still a child—when she'd found out about the world beyond her manor's walls.

That's right. Back then…

Back then, when Sophelia had been stunned by the sight of adults, on the street corner or at tea parties, embracing their children and patting them lovingly on the head.

"I'm sad. And I'm disappointed," she admitted. Sophelia was sure she'd been sad and disappointed back then too. She couldn't

say it then. She hadn't known the words.

To Sophelia, any sort of backward, negative emotion wasn't just meaningless—it was something that would only make the situation worse. It was far quicker to just give up than fret over something like that. It was far easier to live if she just gulped down her own emotions and pretended they didn't exist.

But now, Livionis stood before her, lowering his brows sympathetically. "Yes, you must be."

Acknowledging her feelings, telling them to someone else, and having them listen—Sophelia hadn't had even the slightest idea that it could be so buoyantly liberating to be able to do just that.

Sadness and disappointment weren't good things. But actually, on second thought, they *were* good things. It was fine. After all, it just seemed like that was life. The world was brimming with things Sophelia didn't know.

"Lady Sophelia?"

"Thank you, Sir Livionis," Sophelia replied.

Being able to thank someone—someone you love—from the bottom of your heart, rather than apologizing... Having someone who would shine a smile right back at you when you smiled at them... For the first time in her life, Sophelia realized just how soul-soothingly reassuring and joyful those very things could be.

Chapter Eight: Declaring You Can’t Say No

“So it’s Livio and Sophie, hmm?” the innkeeper said with a welcoming, hearty laugh as she beamed at the two of them. “Did you two just get hitched?”

Sophelia and Livionis grew bright red.

“Oh, you two just make the most adorable little couple!” the innkeeper went on.

Ms. Innkeeper? I beg of you. Please…say no more.

Now, where were we?

Livio? Sophie? Worry not—this is no error on their part or yours. Indeed, the names referred to Livionis and Sophelia.

After eating a late breakfast that morning, they had set out for town on foot. Matcha, the clever, black-coated steed, had trotted alongside them, carrying their bags even without Livionis at the reins. Livionis had walked beside him, and Sophelia, in turn, beside Livionis.

Livionis encouraged Sophelia with a smile to slow down and enjoy their journey together, and true to his word, he walked beside her, matching Sophelia’s measured pace. Her first step? Ladylike. Her second step? Ladylike. Whether it was her third or fourth or fifth step, her gait was unfalteringly ladylike. It was how her mother had taught her to walk, and while she wasn’t used to trekking about, it seemed all her training hadn’t just been for show.

It helped that the lace-up boots Livionis and his servants had prepared for her were surprisingly light and easy to walk in. With both Matcha and Livionis walking slowly to accommodate her, she had been able to make her way on foot without pushing herself.

Their conversation on the way to town was, to put it frankly, nothing of importance. They talked about how Sophelia didn’t have a sweet tooth, but Livionis did; how Sophelia was deathly afraid of heights and Livionis loved climbing up to reach high places; how Sophelia liked reading books, but Livionis wasn’t very fond of following the letters with his eyes.

In other words, the two were complete opposites.

From Sophelia's perspective, it didn't matter whether you looked at him from the front or the back, Livionis was beautiful. Though she'd never looked at him from above or below or diagonally, he was (probably, surely) beautiful from every single angle. Sophelia, on the other hand, was plain and lacking in presence whether you squinted at her or tried looking at her in the dark. Sophelia had never considered the two of them the same sort of creature. She was all smiles, absolutely delighted to learn more about Livionis, but for some reason, he had seemed a bit down.

Huh? You'd get sad over me? That was the core of it. *That's way too cute of you!*

"So, um, by the way, Lady Sophelia…" Livionis said.

Sophelia tilted her head, not quite sure what he was trying to get at addressing her so suddenly. "Yes?"

Matcha swished his tail and neighed.

"Well, it's just…" he began. "Nobles tend to have longer names, right?"

"Yes, that's true," Sophelia replied.

Livionis had a point. Their names might prove unsuitable for making their escape. "Sophelia" and "Livionis"—while their names weren't terribly long, they were unusual names for common folk or adventurers.

Sophelia nodded. "What about taking up false names?"

"Yes, that's just it," Livionis replied. "But, if the names are too different from our real ones, then we may run the risk of responding to them too slowly. Unfamiliar names could be a risk."

"That's true," Sophelia agreed.

While Sophelia nodded in agreement, Matcha gave a small whinny.

"Can it, you," Livionis replied, blushing.

Sophelia wasn't sure what the two were saying to each other, but she certainly thought Livionis had a point. Were Livionis to address her as "Chocolat," Sophelia's response was sure to be slow since being called so would've left her staring in confusion. At the very least, call her Pancetta!

Wait, that's not what all this is about?

"So, uh… I thought you might call me 'Livio' instead," Livionis offered with a flushed face and a nervous laugh.

Sophelia nodded back in reply. There went Livionis being far too adorable again.

"So 'Sir Livio,' then?"

Livionis gasped, his face suddenly growing even redder—so red you could practically hear it.

Huh? Is that normal? The red now flushing across Livionis's face went far beyond "cute." It was extreme enough to make her worry.

"Well, I mean, it's, uh…not that different, but…" Livionis stammered, "i-it's just, 'Livvy' was a pet name my mother had for me, so I just figured it was a little… You know?"

Sophelia blinked wide in surprise, watching him nervously laugh with his face flushed bright red.

A "pet name"?

Hmm? A pet name? What was a pet name again? Sophelia paged through her mental dictionary. After a moment, her second-generation brain played a triumphant fanfare on its horn as it shot confetti into the air.

Attention, everyone! A "pet name" is a nickname used by those you're particularly close with!

"Erk!" Fizzling, Sophelia's face had probably made something of a noise too. She placed her hands on her cheeks, which were almost certainly just as red as Livionis's—no, Livio's.

"I-Is it okay if I, uh, call you that…?" She pushed the words out, practically moaning.

Noticing Sophelia's voice trail off, Livio realized that Sophelia had understood what "pet name" meant, that she'd found her answer for why Livionis had struggled to bring himself to say it.

He'd realized what was going on. Livionis inhaled and gave a firm nod a moment later, his face painted red. "Please, call me 'Livio.' Although, if possible, perhaps you might refrain from the 'sir' bit…"

Hmm… Well, he did have a point. They were traveling together, after all, so calling each other "Lady Sophelia" and "Sir Livionis" was sure to draw suspicion. Sophelia figured there was likely no deep reason behind his request to forgo such formalities, but if that were the case, there wouldn't be any need to hesitate and blush in front of each other, would there? Sophelia found herself at a loss for words.

Matcha gave a small neigh. Despite not having any idea what

Matcha was saying, for some reason Sophelia found herself wanting to nod back in agreement and tell him he had a point. Behind that neigh were signs of his—Livio's—feelings toward Sophelia. She couldn't help but read between the lines...or get her hopes up.

Sophelia clenched her bag's shoulder strap. It was the bag Livionis had readied for her, light and sturdy. And it wasn't just the bag that was light. The dress she wore now wasn't just cute—it was incredibly lightweight, a night and day difference between the heavy, lavish dresses she used to wear. The lace-up boots were the same. This lightness she felt wasn't just in those things that Livionis had given Sophelia to sweep her away—it was his words, his smile.

Sophelia wanted to believe it all, but the thought of it was terrifying. It was like climbing a staircase one step at a time toward some great height. The terror of plunging down from up high clung to her without any hint of peeling away.

But if Sophelia merely said the word, Livionis—*Livio*—was sure to beam at her with that adorable smile of his. He could have the whole world in the palm of his hand any time he wanted with that gorgeous face of his, but he still chose to smile at *Sophelia* of all people! At that point, it didn't matter whether it were stairs or a ladder—her only choice was to climb up and jump straight down!

Sophelia stared into Livionis's purple eyes, which glistened if they'd been inlaid with stars. "W-Well, if you're going to do that, then call me 'Sophie'!"

"Huh?" Livionis replied. "Soph...!" Livionis gave her a blank stare back before muttering something and finally bursting in two.

No, not like that. *Metaphorically*.

If Livionis had *actually* burst in two before Sophelia's very eyes, there was no doubt this would transform into the most bizarre trauma-guaranteed-or-your-money-back incident. If that had happened, Sophelia's journey would have ended right there. Dream or not, that's just way too depressing a resolution. So calm down—it was just a metaphor.

Livio grew so red you could say he'd burst in two and no one would complain. He stiffened up and probably even floated a bit off the ground with a bounce.

"I'm Sophie."

“Lady S-S-S-S-S-S-Soooophieeeee.” Livionis called her name as if he were singing a song.

Sophelia—no, Sophie—giggled. “Would you call me that again?”

“Lady S-S-Sophieeee.”

Almost.

It was the S’s. There were too many S’s. It was like he was trying to carve out some rhythm with her name.

“Sir Livio—no, uh, *Livio*—don’t you think my name would be better without the ‘Lady’ part too?”

Livionis paused for a moment…and then another. Finally he stuttered, “Th-That’s not happening!”



Livio made his declaration. The former knight and former Livionis Warrion shook his head with all his might, his face bright red. Sophelia's happy-go-lucky brain was ringing its handbell back and forth at just how absurdly cute he was.

"But Livio, I've never had a pet name before," Sophelia replied. "I want you to call me 'Sophie.'"

"That's just way too cute...!" Livionis's voice trembled as he buried his face in his hands. "I caaaaan't!" he wailed.

Are you sure you're not just putting me on some pedestal? Sophelia-now-Sophie had her doubts about Livio's sanity, but if he snapped out of it, it was all over for her. Love was all about being an idiot—a fact that Sophie, in the trenches of her first love, agreed with as she joined hands with her happy-go-lucky brain.

Which brings us back to that evening, when they arrived at the inn beneath a dazzling twilight sky, only for them to be startled by their new names and grow bright red.

"And the room?" the innkeeper said. "Just one, right?"

From the corner of her eye, Sophelia saw Livionis turn bright red as he stammered out his reply. "T-Two rooms, please!"

This was like just a bit earlier.

If, yesterday afternoon, for example, her father or the prince had asked for separate rooms the same way, she would've simply given an ironic laugh and apologized for being with them. She would've been as crestfallen or as hurt as you might expect. For their part, they probably would've been shocked she still felt such things after all this time.

She'd only met Livionis last night at the evening party, and even if he was the one asking for separate rooms, when she realized that *he* was embarrassed, it was somehow just as embarrassing for her. It was a strange thing. Her happy-go-lucky brain had been doing a splendid job.

"We don't have enough rooms open for that, I'm afraid," the innkeeper said. "Just a minute ago, we had a brother and sister who did *not* want to room together at all, but they gave up and went for the same room."

Livionis's eyes widened.

"By the way," the innkeeper continued, "we're the only inn in town. It's a small place, you see."

Trembling with his face bright red as Sophelia tugged at his

sleeve and looked up at him, Livionis was a small creature of a massive man…which begs the question of what "a small creature of a massive man" even means. After all, with that handsome face of his and the way his eyes seemed to quiver with his face stained red, he was altogether just too adorable. That was the part that was like some small creature. His *body* was massive though.

"I'm fine with the same room, Livio," Sophelia offered.

"B-But…"

"Well now! So it's a bit of a complicated situation for you two?" the innkeeper replied. "How charming! I've got a soft spot for that sort of thing, you know. That settles it! I'll let you two stay for free, so you just settle in and relax!"

The innkeeper's face made it clear she wouldn't take no for an answer. Livionis tried to mutter out an excuse before giving up and accepting the room.

Sophie tried imagining what the two of them must look like to the good-natured innkeeper.

But even then…no matter how hard or how many times he tried, Livio couldn't call her "Sophie." Not to mention he couldn't shake off the air of formality he adopted when speaking with her.

"My apologies," Livio told her privately, speaking to her as if she were some innocent little girl. Sophie felt as if she were on the brink of unlocking some door she must never open, so she forced herself to ignore it with everything she had. She'd tried to seal it up tightly by nailing a board over it, but when she was with Livio, she was terrified that it might burst open at some point.

For what it was worth, Sophie couldn't shake off her formalities either, no matter how infatuated she might have been. Or perhaps that was precisely why she couldn't. She couldn't just address the successor of House Warrion with a "Hiii, sweetie!" Despite appearances, *Sophelia* was a proper lady.

Looking like he might collapse from the strain of it all at any moment, Livio had a breakthrough.

"Let's just give up."

"What?" Sophie searched for more words to answer him with. *You're saying you're ready to just give up? With that nice face and voice of yours…?*

"L-Lady Sophie," Livio went on. "Poor acting and lying on our part will only bring trouble. It would be strange if you and I were

saying two different things, L-L-Lady Sophie."

What's strange here is how you're addressing me. But Sophie neither said nor thought that.

He's just so adorable… Sophie thought instead as she nodded back.

"Let us speak in the way that's least burdensome for us," Livionis replied. "We can do that and then let those around us imagine that we're whatever they please, be it a noble lady and her servant or a princess and her knight. We'll just go on with a smile, without confirming or denying any of it. Don't you agree?" he asked, looking weary. It sounded as if he were addressing himself, but Sophie was just as guilty as he was. She had no defense.

In other words, all Sophie could hope to say back was *"Sir, yes, sir!"*

Not to mention that when the innkeeper had asked them if they were in a "complicated situation" with a smile, it was almost a bit fun to imagine how they must've looked to her. If it had been Sophie, seeing a boundlessly handsome man and a deeply plain and forgettable woman traveling together, her imagination was sure to run wild. It seemed like it'd be fun to be the one doing the imagining.

But unfortunately, the one who was having the most fun was, without a doubt, Sophie herself. Sophie couldn't hold back the giggle that escaped her lips.

It was at that very moment when a scream and the bloodthirsty cry of a beast rang out in tandem.

"*O azure wind, devote thyself to the twin-headed song of thine encounter ages past!*"

"*O devastating breath of solitude, sink your claws into my foe!*"

"You've gotta be kidding me! I can't cut through the damn thing!"

"Here it comes! Get outta the way!"

A beast roared alongside the sound of people's screams.

Startled, Sophie and Livio rushed out of the inn, only to see a gargantuan monster surrounded by adventurers desperately swinging their swords and mages chanting incantations.

The monster looked like a bird, so massive that it could easily look down upon the second story of a building. None of the attacks seemed to faze it as it let out an angry squawk. With a

mighty flap of its wings, the monster made a gust of wind so strong it sent street stalls and the roofs of buildings flying. Screams pierced the air as people hid themselves from the falling rubble.

Sophie, however, found herself shielded in Livio's embrace. Thanks to him, she hadn't been hurt in the slightest. Far from any harm, he was so warm and smelled so nice that Sophie felt like she might make some sort of odd squeal. She wished that happy-go-lucky brain of hers would take a step back.

As the gust settled, Livio removed himself from Sophie and stepped forward, only for her to rush after him.

"Livio!"

"Lady Sophie, please stay inside." His voice was as sharp as a blade, but Sophie shook her head right back.

"I told you, didn't I? I can use defensive magic," she replied with her fists clenched. "I promise I won't slow you down, so please let me go with you!"

Livio's stunning eyes opened wide as he blinked at her, only to gently laugh a moment later. A prideful knight he was indeed. Even before a monster, he didn't show even a hint of distress, instead giving a smile so beautiful it felt out of place. Looking so enraptured he might almost forget the situation at hand, Livio gave an unbothered reply. "You won't have time to slow me down. I'll finish this in the blink of an eye. But just to be safe, cast a defensive spell on me before I go." His black hair swayed in the wake of his declaration.

Livio took a step forward as Sophie clenched her fists against his broad back.

He's just too cool*! Even his back looks cool!*

Indeed, under normal circumstances, Livionis Warrion was *incredibly* cool. But between his overwhelming beauty and bright red cheeks, he was so unbelievably cute one might be forgiven for forgetting that he was a knight set to inherit the title of strongest in all the land. It was only natural that he was cooler than anyone else.

Get your head out of the clouds! Sophelia thought as she snapped back to her senses and cast a wide-ranging defensive spell that fell across all the bystanders who'd failed to make their escape.

Livionis dashed out as a blue light wrapped around his body. The very next moment, he held a greatsword nearly as long as himself. He really was a heavenly messenger or some sort of fairy! Or not. It was only natural for him.

"That's...!"

The knights of the castle kept guard at evening parties or official events, but it certainly wasn't the case that they each wielded an elegant, svelte sword. While they probably could use it if they wanted to, a sword wasn't always the weapon most suited to helping them demonstrate a knight's power, noble and refined though it was. They might've wielded a bow and arrow, or a lance, or—as was the case with Livionis—even a greatsword. People's affinities for weapons varied as much as the wielders themselves.

And yet, it was hard to imagine that Livio could attend to his guard duties equipped with the greatsword he wielded. Their weapons for guard duty could only be so imposing, after all. Had he wielded such a weapon on guard duty, he might as well have been shouting, "*The castle's a terribly dangerous place, you know!*" or *"I don't trust a one of you slimy oafs!*"

The solution to this issue was the use of magic gems—gems that had, as their name implied, been imbued with magic and could store weapons within them. While saying they "stored" the weapon made it sound simple, needless to say, the process was anything but.

Given that magic had to be circulated through the weapon itself before making adjustments to allow it to adapt to the magic gem, it was a difficult task for knights who didn't have the best control of magic. What was more, magic gems were far from inexpensive, so they certainly weren't given out like candy. With that in mind, only a fraction of the knights were able to use them in the first place.

In other words, they were rare luxury items. They were reserved only for those who were assigned to keep guard at special locations, and only those who were permitted to use them at that. At least that was how it was *supposed* to work...

"He ended up taking it with him..." Sophelia said to herself.

He'd almost certainly forgotten to return his magic gem, no doubt about it. After all, they'd been traveling ever since the night of the evening party. *Guess that sort of thing can happen.*

Sophie decided to stop thinking and instead focused on upholding her spell. She took a deep breath and checked the flow of the magic. That was the first time she'd ever put up a defensive wall large enough to block off a road, but it seemed quite solid. She didn't feel the magic cutting off anywhere either.

All set! Sophelia lifted her gaze up.

"Out of the way!" Livio shouted into the crowd. "Step aside!"

Stunned, the adventurers turned in surprise at Livio's voice, only to hurriedly rush away when they noticed his greatsword. While it was unlikely they were aware of Livio's identity, they almost certainly felt his drive as he rushed into battle.

As tall and well-built as he was, Livio seemed small in comparison to the massive bird monster casting a piercing glare down at him.

Bracing himself, Livio brought his greatsword over his head and swung it down. His black hair swayed alongside his body's graceful movements. His robe spread out in his wake, like the cape of a dancing knight. Sophelia gasped at the sheer beauty of it, so stunning it was hard to imagine he was wielding a greatsword nearly as long as he was tall.

At that very moment, a mighty gust of wind tore across the scene.

"I-I've never seen such a mighty blow...!" Sophie heard someone say.

Almost at the same time, she heard a loud thud as the massive monster gave a single cry. With only that single cry, the monster that all of those adults had been fighting so desperately twisted and began to fall over.

"Hey, it's going to land over there, so watch out."

"Huh? What? Aaaaaaagh!"

Livio spoke to the stunned adventurers looking up at the monster as he cast his sword over his shoulder, as if he were warning them to watch their step on slippery ground. The tone and energy were deeply misaligned with the gravity of the situation.

Despite Livio's nonchalant tone, the men realized that a massive shadow was falling over them and hurried away.

Just a moment later, the monster collapsed to the ground with a deafening thump.

“Sorry about that!” Livio called after the men. “It was bigger than I thought. I should’ve had it land a little bit farther that way. You’re not hurt, are you?”

“N-Not one bit, no…” one of the men replied.

“Sorry again. I was trying to make sure it wouldn’t collapse on the buildings.”

“No, don’t— Wait, what? Huh?” The man looked back and forth from Livio to the monster, eyes wide. Sophie wanted to give the man an understanding nod in reply. *And just how do you even adjust the direction it collapses in?* Sophie didn’t have the slightest clue.

Guess that’s normal, she thought, accepting what she’d seen. All of the well-built, iron-muscled adventurers, however, seemed to live up to their titles as adventurers and practically screamed, *I’m as tough as they come! I’ve been through hell and back!*

And yet, all of them were deeply shaken by this turn of events. *Guess it’s not normal, then…*

Well, normal or not, that didn’t matter; it wasn’t out of the question for Livio. He *was* the next head of House Warrion. He could do that and then some—he could defeat a massive monster and have it land in the direction he wanted with only a single blow, or rather, the sheer force that accompanied his blade. He could do that all without causing screams or spilling blood. It was simple, really. All Sophie could do was laugh it off.

“Now to hurry up and finish it off…” Livio said with his sword in the air, only to suddenly spin around. “Lady Sophie, this way!”

“Huh?”

Sophie turned around in shock. “There’s another one?!”

A second monster let out a bellowing squawk as the people around screamed and the scene plunged into chaos once more. *Just* how *does a monster that big appear out of nowhere?!*

Taken aback at this unpredictable turn of events, Sophie was just about to set up another defensive wall when she felt a disturbance against her magic.

“Huh?”

She felt a massive wave of concentrated magical energy cover the area, and realized that a transparent magical shield had been cast. Shocked, Sophie turned around to see Livio just as surprised, his eyes wide. This was no time to think about how beautiful his

trembling blueberry eyes were.

The crack of lightning rang out twice, followed by two shrieks from the monsters in turn. The lightning fell in front of Sophie and behind her at the same time, tearing through both massive monsters. Sophie couldn't help but cover her ears. The sound was so loud she thought the world might have been ending, but when all finally fell silent, Sophie found well-roasted birds in its wake, sending up wisps of smoke into the air.

"It's like f-fried chicken…" someone stammered.

"Doesn't look too appetizing," someone else replied with a laugh. "The feathers are still on, and it ain't even been prepped."

Were they going to *eat* it?

"Lady Sophie!"

Distracted, Sophelia's body began to sway, only for Livio to immediately rush behind her to hold her up. Emergency or not, she'd cast her magic far too wide as a novice, and without a staff to assist her. She'd pushed herself too hard, but Sophie let out a sigh of relief at the sense of peace that now enveloped her.

"You're not hurt, are you?" Livio asked.

"How could I be?" Sophie replied with a laugh. "Thanks to you, I didn't even have the time to get injured!"

Turning her face away, Sophelia looked up at Livio. With the top of her head pressed against him, she could hear the sound of his heartbeat. His pale cheeks were flushed red. This was the charming side of Livio that only Sophie knew.

"Welcome back," she said.

"G-G-Good to be, uh, back," Livio replied. He was cute…just way too *cute*.

His cuteness could very well have been a national treasure—so cute, in fact, that one could never imagine he was the same man who'd wielded an absurdly large sword to fell a gargantuan monster with a single strike.

"'Welcome back' has a nice ring to it," Sophie went on. "That was the first time I'd ever said that to anyone."

Sophie vowed in her heart that she'd say the same thousands and thousands of times if it meant she could lay eyes on that adorable face of his. Livio turned his head up, almost as if looking into the heavens.

The fact that she'd heard Livio reply, "You're just so cute…" had

likely been neither mishearing nor a product of her vanity. Sophie felt her cheeks grow warm.

Now then.

Lost in a carefree smile, Sophie returned to her senses when she heard a man bark out, “Lunetta!”

Sophie felt Livio flinch as he held her up.

“Livio…”

“We’d best run.”

“Okay.” Livio’s reaction confirmed that it wasn’t just her imagination after all. This wasn’t good. This wasn’t good at all. While she’d imagined that she might one day find herself in a situation like this, it had happened far too soon.

“Can you move?” Livio asked.

“Yes, I can.” She was a bit tired, but it wasn’t enough to keep her from walking.

Sophie nodded, only for Livio to set out walking while still supporting her.

We just have to get away for now, Sophie thought. But then—

“Hey! And just where do you think you’re going, huh?”

Livio froze in place as a black glove grabbed the hood of his robe.

“If you’re Livionis Warrion like I think you are, ya really shouldn’t let people sneak up on you that easily.” As the man gripped Livio’s hood, his lips bent into a grin. “Mind tellin’ me just what the eldest son of the mighty House Warrion’s doing in a small town like this with the daughter of House Lotus?”

Sophie felt her shoulders tense under the man’s piercing gaze.

Livio squeezed her shoulder with his hand as he spoke. “I think you may be mistaking us for someone else.”

“And just how am I supposed to mistake that dazzling mug of yours, huh?”

Livio remained silent.

Well, the man did have a point. In fact, the only other person Sophie could think of with such a stunning face was Livio’s mother, Adealyde Warrion. In other words, the only man with a face that beautiful was Livio himself. People with such otherworldly good looks were anything but common. The man was right—there was no mistaking him.

Almost ready to nod in agreement herself, Sophie felt another

pair of eyes on her and looked around.

A young girl with long, black hair wearing a matching black dress was staring at the hand gripping Livio's hood. She had large, single-lidded eyes and her eyebrows drooped down in a way that made her seem vaguely melancholic.

The girl tilted her head to the side. "Are you trying to extort him?"

"Like hell I am!" the man bit back, his voice as piercing as a bell. He wrinkled his brow in displeasure before releasing Livo's hood.

The man bore a stubbly beard and had a rough-and-rowdy air of vulgarity about him. Looking at the man alongside the young girl, you could practically smell some sort of crime brewing. The pair seemed like they were together—a middle-aged man and a little girl. Despite having stopped Livio and Sophie, they started talking to each other as if they weren't there at all.

"Lunetta, just how many times do I gotta tell ya to think about where you are before you go shooting off some big-ass spell, huh?!"

"I cast a defensive spell on everything besides the monsters," the girl replied.

"That's not the point! You try to defeat monsters without destroying them so you can get ingredients from them. And now look what you've done!"

"*Ingredients,*" the girl echoed.

"That's the first thing you learn about getting rid of monsters, and don't you forget it!"

The girl remained silent.

"How many times do I gotta tell you to speak up if you've got something to say? Don't you get all mopey on me! I can see you're sulkin' clear as day!"

The girl, however, remained expressionless, despite the man firmly planting his hand on her head. Glancing at the two, Sophie and Livio locked eyes. Livio gave a quick nod.

Now was their chance.

Just as the two started to sneak away...

"Ggh!" The man grabbed Livio's hood again.

"Hey now, no need to get goin' in such a hurry, right? Let's sit an' talk for a minute, eh, big guy?"

Livio's eyebrows twitched, making no attempt to hide the

displeasure on his face.

"If you've got a complaint too," the man said, furrowing his brow, "then let's hear it, huh?"

Livio shook the man's hand off him, only to produce a radiant smile instead. It was a truly beautiful smile, entirely pure and unclouded—a smile that no one could find fault with.

But behind that smile was an intense, overwhelming pressure.

Sophie was used to Livio's beaming smile directed at her, but she realized that the smile she was seeing now was the type of professional, plastered-on smile he reserved for making threats. Sophie couldn't help but feel she'd gotten a special privilege.

Livio turned to face the man, as he put his hand on his chest and bent down. "Complaints?" he repeated. "Why, I haven't a one, Varroyce Elsarte Athkylos… *Your Majesty*."

"Just as nasty as ever, aren't ya…?" the man replied with a scowl. "You know I don't wanna be called *that* around here. You're doing it on purpose."

"Who's to say?" Livio said with a shrug.

Lifting himself back up and tilting his head to the side with a smile, Livio was positively stunning. The way his black hair swayed seemed almost sarcastic as his gaze fell across Varroyce—who was shorter than Livio—from above. Despite his words, Livio's body language spoke eloquently for him, making it clear that he didn't have so much as a shred of reverence for Varroyce.



Varroyce Elsarte Athkylos, the king who ruled over the neighboring country, breathed a heavy sigh and ran his fingers through his shoulder-length hair.

"My name's Vyce. And this here's Lunetta," the man replied sternly. "Well? And just what am I supposed to call you two?"

"Pleasure to meet you. I'm Livio, and this is Sophie."

The man snorted and addressed the girl. "Lunetta, can't you do anything about *that*?"

"About what?"

"Those monsters you burned to a crisp!" he bit back. "They'd be in the way if we just left them in the middle of town. Don't you have a spell for a time like this? Something that could just make them go poof?" Varroyce—no, *Vyce*—pointed to the fried bird monsters with his thumb, making a difficult task sound as easy as pie, only for Lunetta to tilt her head back at him in confusion as her hair swayed alongside her.

"I could, but…"

So she could do it, then! The girl, who'd unleashed such incredible magic without even using a staff or incantation, gave her response as if it were nothing.

"By the way," the girl continued, glancing at the monsters. "What are those monsters called?"

"They're Kick Fitchers," Vyce explained. "You didn't even give them the chance to show off their bread-and-butter kick, though."

Lunetta froze at Vyce's remark. While she remained expressionless, the way she froze up as if she'd been struck by lightning was—at the risk of sounding insensitive—almost funny.

Vyce stared at the monsters the same as Lunetta. The adventurers and magicians who'd been locked in combat with the first creature had now formed a circle around it.

"I've never seen them get so large before, but…" Vyce went on, "you can make their feathers into a high-end bed and make their organs into medicine. Those claws and beaks could make weapons and armor too. Not to mention their meat's got a bite, but it's still tender and savory."

As Sophie watched over the girl, Lunetta began to tremble.

"K-Kick Fitchers…!" Lunetta stammered. "Their organs can be used as ingredients in all manner of potions!"

"That's what I've been tryin' to tell ya!"

“Th-Those were Kick Fitchers…” Lunetta spun around, staring at the monsters—the Kick Fitchers—that she herself had fried. Her expression didn’t change in the slightest, but a tremendous sadness weighed down on her small shoulders, threatening to crush her flat any moment.

“I could’ve made that, and then that, and…” Lunetta went on. “I wanted to make all that…!”

“Which is why I told ya not to go just leapin’ into things!”

“But I came up with a way to summon lightning at minimum cost,” Lunetta explained. “Rather than summoning it from above, I opted to eliminate the gap by having it pulled to the ground with earth magic. I just wanted to try it.” Lunetta continued her explanation in detail, growing more and more depressed. Even though she knew about the monsters, it seemed she hadn’t known what they actually looked like. Rather than thinking about how they could be used for ingredients, she’d likely had nothing more on her mind than how it had been a wonderful chance to try out her idea. It was a common personality type among scholars—the type that would wind up in heaps of trouble unless they had someone keeping an eye on them.

So, I guess Lunetta’s watchdog is Vyce, then. It seemed like she tore past him when she cast that spell, though. She had at least been conscious of making sure there was no harm to the surroundings, not to mention that Vyce probably would’ve stopped her if it actually looked serious. *Probably*.

“Didn’t you know what sort of monster it was?” Vyce asked.

“*Back there*, we never have the chance to see them before they get dissected,” Lunetta replied. “The witch who wrote the book likely thought it needless…”

As she listened to the two of them talk, Sophie had a number of pressing questions tumbling around and spilling out of her mind, like if her identity had been uncovered, or what they’d do after this, or just what on earth the king of the neighboring country was doing here. But watching Lunetta look like she might sit down on the ground and make a puddle of dark matter beneath her—or rather, look so depressed she could collapse on the spot—Sophie couldn’t help but feel terribly sorry for her.

It was just a fact that everyone there had made it through the commotion without so much as a scratch thanks to the massive

spell she'd cast. Not to mention the fact that Sophie had been just a little bit excited by the biggest spell she'd ever seen in her whole life.

And yet, in doing so, Lunetta had somehow wasted an incredible opportunity—and now she was *miserable* for it. Sophie wasn't a fan of the word "pitiful," but looking at Lunetta, "pitiful" was the only word that came to mind.

Sophie felt something akin to a protective urge to help rise up within her. But Sophie couldn't do a thing. No matter how much she flipped through her mental dictionary, Sophie couldn't find a single good idea. Her mental dictionary lacked the words to talk about monsters or to address a magician who was far more powerful than herself. She felt terribly powerless, sadness pressing in on her. Looking at Lunetta who seemed to sink before her very eyes, Sophie couldn't help but sink into sadness herself.

Just as they were both sinking into their misery, Livio spoke up. "Uh...shall I dissect them then? Why don't we take a look together to see if there's anything of use?"

Lunetta spun around, her jet-black eyes beginning to glisten somehow. "Huh?"

"You know how to dissect monsters?" Vyce asked.

"It's rather surprising that you can't, Sir Vyce."

"I normally have specialists take care of it."

Livio blinked in surprise. It was likely a matter of common sense in House Warrion that you would be the one to dissect a monster you defeated. For the men of House Warrion, cooking and monster dissection might have very well been parts of their general education. While Sophelia certainly had her doubts as to whether or not those two subjects were of similar difficulty, it was all probably covered in some book titled *Surviving in the Forest*. Probably.

"Either way, let us take a look, Lady Lunetta," Livio said.

"Is that all right...?" Lunetta asked. She was even smaller than Sophelia, but she looked up at Livio—far larger than she was—with an unwavering gaze.

"Of course it is," Livio replied with a nod, giving her a kind smile. "After all, if I don't try to cheer you up, Lady Sophie might wind up just as downtrodden herself."

Sophie gasped, her chest practically screaming in delight. *Oh.*

My. Gods. I like him. I like him so *much!* That kindness of his, those lines of his…they really weren't doing her heart any favors. *And just look at how cute he is when he smiles like that! I can't stand it!*

Hardly aware of herself, Sophie clutched her chest, only for Vyce to laugh in surprise beside her. "Oh, so *that's* what it is."

"A-Apologies for such a shameful display…" she stuttered, her cheeks growing red at the fact Vyce had seen all that.

Vyce lifted his eyebrows in curiosity. "What's there to be ashamed of? That's a good thing, y'know."

That right there. That was the part of Vyce that made Sophie relax her guard around him before she even realized it. It was likely the same for Livio. Had he really wanted to run away when Vyce grabbed his hood, he surely could have. But the reason he hadn't turned around until Vyce had directly told him to voice his complaints was likely because he hadn't sensed that Vyce bore them any ill will.

"Your Majesty?" Lunetta asked.

"Go on," Vyce shouted (slightly awkwardly) before waving his hand in the air. Lunetta's eyes widened and lit up. *She's so cute!*

Seeing Lunetta gave Sophie a different feeling than the party her heart and happy-go-lucky brain put on in face of Livio's overwhelming cuteness; it was more of a warm, sweet sort of feeling in her chest. Sophie had never felt such warmth toward Lunetta when they'd met in *official* capacities, but now it brought an effortless smile to her face.

"Very well, Sir Vyce," Livio said. "I shall entrust the matter of Lady Sophie to you, then."

"I'm just gonna ask you straight up," Vyce replied. "You're not worried I'm craftin' up some nasty plan?"

"Someone so conniving wouldn't ask that question in the first place."

When Livio laughed, Lunetta looked up at him and then at Vyce, before tilting her head to the side in confusion. "*Are* you crafting up some nasty plan?"

"Like hell I am!" Vyce bit back. "You've gotta be kidding me!"

"Oh."

Vyce fell silent.

Sophie felt herself loosen up as she watched their banter, breaking into an unexpected smile. It was odd; even Vyce, with his

brow furrowed in seeming discontent, seemed charming somehow. Her first impression when she'd met him at the castle years ago had been quite the opposite: *What a terrifying king!*

Indeed, Varroyce Elsarte Athkylos was the terrifying king of the neighboring kingdom. After staging an insurrection against his father and plunging the surrounding kingdoms into war before uniting them all under his rule with sheer military might, he had come to be known as the "Usurper King."

He'd earned the name after single-handedly cutting down the vanguard. Then, covered in their blood, he'd left a trail of generals—each of name and note in their own right—beheaded in his wake.

Sophie didn't have a shred of battle experience, but the fact that he had easily been able to sneak up on Livio proved his true strength. Had a gang of neighborhood thugs approached him with bared blades and said, "Why, Yer Majesty, just what's a king like you doin' round here, hmmm?" they would've been well on their way to the afterlife in only a moment.

And now that very same king was wearing light garb and laughing in a place like this. Sophie had never heard of him yielding to anyone. And yet…

"Be that as it may, if you were to lay one finger on Lady Sophie…" Livio started with a bright, beaming grin. Those beautiful purple eyes of his glistened like crystals as he gave a venomous smile. The expression was like a messenger from the dark, immensely terrifying and yet frighteningly beautiful at once. "No matter what I might have to do, nor what foe I might make along the way…I will make you rue the day until death seems a merciful escape."

Sophie found herself breathless. That smile was enough to send a shiver down her spine.

Just as she felt her throat tightening up, she felt a large hand land lightly across her back.

"I'm only joking. No need to get so up in arms about it." Sophie looked up to find Vyce smiling as if nothing had happened, his brow furrowed. Apparently, the expression was a habit of his. After lightly patting Sophie's back, the hand immediately pulled away.

"I've no interest in your jokes, so I'd appreciate it if you refrained from making them," Livio replied.

Vyce lifted both hands in the air in surrender. “Sorry ’bout that.” It seemed Livio hadn’t noticed that Vyce had touched Sophie’s back.

“We’ll be back,” Livio said with a shrug and smiled at Sophie before turning and setting off with Lunetta.

Sophie stared up at Vyce, who was somehow skillful enough to furrow his brow while he watched the two walk away with the hint of a smile on his face.

Vyce gave a small laugh. “So young.”

“How old are you, Sir Vyce?”

“Thirty-one.”

It was hard to say either way. He certainly wasn’t old enough to point at Livio and call him “young,” but he was certainly older than both Livio and Sophie. Not to mention that he lived as a king, so he had a level of life experience that neither Livio nor Sophie could ever hope to match.

The one thing Sophie knew was that when she had been overwhelmed by Livio’s stare, Vyce had urged her to calm down before Livio could notice and grow disheartened. In light of all that, Vyce was quite the gentleman.

Sophie looked up intently at Vyce, only for him to tilt his head to the side. “On that note… Let’s head inside. The innkeep’s been watching us for a while now.”

“Huh?” Sophie had forgotten in all the hubbub, but the inn had been where she and Livio had started out. They’d come outside after they’d heard a loud noise. The entrance to the inn was right behind her, and sure enough, the innkeeper was watching them with concern.

“You finally noticed me, did you?” she asked. “Your husband’s a strong one, isn’t he?”

“My h-husba…?” Sophie’s face flushed red as the innkeeper chuckled.

“Not to worry—your belongings are safe and sound. It looks like your friends still have some work to do though. What about you? Fancy some tea perhaps?” she offered with a bright smile.

Sophie looked up at Vyce. She hesitated for a moment, feeling that she couldn’t just spontaneously reply. While she was certainly curious about monster dissection, she was less than confident that she could keep her cool from up close. She hoped to do it

alongside Livio someday, and she wanted to be able to tell him to leave it to her. But for now, she wanted to save all the blood and guts for another day. Today, she simply hoped to watch Livio and Lunetta work from a safe distance.

But no matter how honestly she might try to voice such, the man beside her was still the king of the neighboring kingdom. She couldn't just leave him standing here. Just when Sophie was about to agree to the innkeeper's suggestion—

"No, that's fine. More importantly, think we could borrow a chair?" Vyce spoke first.

"Coming right up!"

A *chair*? Sophie tilted her head in confusion as the innkeeper brought out a chair and handed it to Vyce.

"Much obliged," Vyce said.

The innkeeper gave a hearty wink. "Least I can do for the town's heroes! Just let me know when you're done," she said, before vanishing inside.

Vyce took the chair the innkeeper had brought and placed it on the ground.

"Sit," he said, looking at Sophie.

"Huh?" Sophelia stuttered back.

"You were one gust from collapsin' back there, weren't you?" Vyce answered. "Besides, you're worried about him, aren't ya? Sit down for a spell and let's talk." His face twisted in a way that seemed sinister when he smiled, but Sophie couldn't deny how well he carried himself. *Talk about a tricky combination!* Sophie thought, her eyebrows drooping.

"I can't just have a seat and leave you standing!" Sophie replied.

"We don't need any of those formalities now, ya hear? It's just 'Vyce' and 'Sophie' now. Only common sense for a man to escort a lady, isn't it?"

While Sophie was terribly sorry to say so, she was unfamiliar with any "common sense" like that. After all, she couldn't remember her father or her former fiancé doing a halfway decent job escorting her around.

And what of the other men around her? Being treated as the crown prince's fiancée was likely a different beast altogether, and it seemed that most of the people were only concerned with the crown prince or Sophie's half sister in the first place.

But of course, it wouldn't do for her to go through all the trouble of actually saying that.

"Don't group me in with those other idiots, got it?" Vyce demanded with a sneer.

Sophie couldn't bring herself to ask which idiots he was referring to specifically.

Sophie's eyebrows fell as she sank into the chair. It was stiff and wooden, and it made her posterior ache—not to mention the fact that it felt so odd sitting in a chair in front of the inn that she couldn't really relax.

That's what she *thought*, at least. But the moment her tired frame sank into the chair, she felt what strength she had left exit her body. It seemed she'd been more exhausted than she realized. Leaning against the chair's backrest in an unladylike manner, Sophie was shocked by how marvelously relaxing it felt. Sophie had made a new discovery: Backrests were for resting your back.

"You and her both are a real chore, you know that?" Vyce said with a small laugh.

Looking up, Sophie saw the soft expression on his face as he watched Lunetta—though his brow was furrowed, as always.

"You mean Lady Lunetta?"

"You can drop the 'sir' and 'lady' business for me and her both," Vyce replied. "Doesn't feel natural. And I never was a fan of all that stiff and stuffy nonsense."

"I'll do what I must…"

Vyce crossed his arms with a laugh as his long hair swayed in the breeze. "You really helped out Lunetta at the party last evening."

"Huh?"

Helped her out? Sophie tilted her head to the side, curious as to what he meant. Vyce laughed again. For a man with such a scary-looking face, he laughed more than one would expect.

"My fiancée has practically no experience in the outside world—certainly not at evening parties. She was pretty worried about coming with me on this trip too. But she seemed really happy—said you'd been really kind to her."

For what it was worth, Varroyce Elsarte Athkylos had been unwed and unbetrothed for a long while. Before he came to be known as the "Usurper King," his title had apparently been the

“Foolish Prince.” At that time, Sophie had been young enough to count her years on one hand, so she hadn’t seen or heard all the details for herself; she had only encountered materials that mentioned him.

In his youth, Prince Varroyce had seldom made appearances in the castle, instead opting to venture down into the town to do business or make the town his playground. It was far from uncommon for him to start brawls, and he always had a new wound to show for it.

A number of reasons had been given as to why that same Varroyce had killed his father to claim the throne: He acted on behalf of the people who suffered beneath the weight of the government; he’d gotten greedy for more power; he’d gone into a fit of madness after his father had cursed him. Varroyce himself hadn’t denied any of the motives given, instead simply maintaining that sneer of his.

Any woman who would seek to be the bride of one whose smile seemed to drip blood was either tremendously brave, tremendously odd, or indeed, tremendously hungry for power. The king held the power to crush any such ambitious plots, never encountering anyone brave or odd enough. Indeed, he had grown somewhat famous for being an unwed king.

“Apparently he’s still single!”

“Figures.”

That was usually how the gossip went.

But then one day…

After firmly establishing his reputation as an unwed king, Varroyce had announced that he was engaged, sparking a frenzy from north to south. The ground itself had cracked open in shock somewhere—metaphorically. Regardless, that was the magnitude of the news of his engagement. It was *massive* news. By year’s end, it had become the story of the year that everyone had discussed countless times.

After all, the woman he’d presented was a mage from Magyck, land of mages…none other than the kingdom’s sixteen-year-old second princess. Between them was a gap of fourteen years.

The fact that the two of them together looked like a kidnapper and the young girl he’d swept away really got people talking.

And yet…

“Is her inexperience tied to the fact that no one had ever heard of a second princess in Magyck?” Sophie asked.

Indeed, not a single soul had heard of the second princess Lunatietta Dearbless.

“Clever as always, aren’t ya?” Vyce replied, furrowing his brow in seeming discomfort. “Don’t think I’m just gonna prattle on about her past. I won’t get into the details, but that’s about the gist of it.”

“The gist of it”? The gist of *what*? Well, whatever it was, it was probably enough to make anyone sick to their stomach. A princess—who no one even knew existed—who apparently knew nothing of the outside world, and certainly nothing of evening parties. Who in their right mind could believe such nonsense? Any normal person would simply say, “Who the hell could ever believe that?” and laugh it all off. Done. It would’ve been more entertaining for the listeners if the storyteller simply declared, “I’m actually a ghooooost!”

But Sophie didn’t laugh—*couldn’t*. After all, she knew full well that parents didn’t always love their children. Those who found the story unbelievable were the lucky ones who’d been raised properly. They were the ones living in the wholesome world where it was common sense for parents to love their children.

Yes, but even then—as terrifying and vexing as it might have been—a parent could kill their child, and a child could kill their parent.

Such tragedies were a matter of fact. If they weren’t, then Sophie wouldn’t have been sitting in an uncomfortable chair talking to the king of the neighboring kingdom, nor would Varroyce have ever been called the Usurper King and carved his way through the battlefield.

“Lady Lunetta’s quite fortunate, isn’t she?” Sophie asked.

“What?”

Sophie watched Lunetta cast a defensive spell in the distance. It was a massive barrier that completely covered the people and buildings while evading the Kick Fitcher carcasses. Following this, she cast a spell on Livio’s greatsword. The way her black hair glowed red and swayed each time she used magic was a thing of beauty. The bright red light of her magic fell across Livio’s blade as a sparkling white light—likely purification magic. The magic now covering Livio’s blade was designed to drive away corruption and

impurity.

At once, Livio gave a mighty swing of his blade, as a thunderous gust sent the Kick Fitchers' scorched feathers flying.

"Feathers" might have been too generous of a term. They were scorched black—practically ash. Even with the mighty gust howling and the scorched black shreds flying through the air, thanks to Lunetta's defensive magic, the surrounding houses and people were entirely unaffected. Lunetta herself, of course, was staring at the Kick Fitchers with an air of unknowing innocence. The ashes dancing through the air grew transparent before finally disappearing altogether.

"I enjoy being with Livio," Sophie explained. "There are all sorts of things I want to learn about and see and eat!"

As the gust settled down, the Kick Fitchers were left in a pitiful state—completely naked, in fact. It was an imposing sight; the monsters had now transformed into monstrously large roasted birds. The blackened feathers that had covered them had now been neatly peeled away and scattered to the wind, leaving behind a delightfully appetizing aroma in their wake.

Emotionless, Lunetta gave a round of applause.

"I know how lucky I am to be able to think so," Sophie continued. "I know just how much of a miracle it is that I was able to meet someone who would make me feel that way."

Lunetta calmly took out a knife and stabbed it into a Kick Fitcher. Perhaps that was what she was trying to use to dissect the creature. While the knife went in easily enough, it quickly got stuck. Lunetta gripped the knife, leaping up and down, but it wouldn't budge. After a moment, her shoulders sank in defeat. The sight of it was so cute that Sophie couldn't contain a small laugh.

"I'm quite fortunate too, after all," Sophie said.

After a moment's consideration, Vyce replied, "If you say so, then I believe you."

There was something ticklish about how kind, soft, and upending Vyce's laugh was.

"Yeah," Sophie said, watching Livio say something to Lunetta from the edge of her vision. Lunetta nodded in response, only for Livio to leap into the air.

Though Sophie realized quickly that "leap" might not have been

the correct word. More than anything, he leaped *far* into the air—*too* far. He leaped over a two-story building, so high that she could have called it flying. As he descended, he swung his sword down.

Though he stayed in the air so long he could've been flying, Livio's blade moved so quickly that Sophie's eyes could hardly keep up.

"Just as reckless as ever," Vyce said, casting an entertained glance up at Livio. "Just where on earth are you ever gonna find another idiot who can land thirty cuts with a blade that massive that quickly, huh? That house of his is making monsters to this day..."

Doesn't being able to see and *count each strike make you a monster yourself?* Sophie didn't say that, however, instead watching Livio land without so much as a sound as his robe fluttered dazzlingly behind him.

Sophie gasped.

"He really is a monster..." Vyce said.

Sure enough, the Kick Fitcher's meat floated in the air, cut into clean cubes just like a diced steak. Each chunk of meat fell down to the ground with a plop, spraying the surroundings with warm, steaming juices.

"Th-That looks delicious...!" a bystander said, wiping away their drool.

Now that Sophie thought about it, the meat of a Kick Fitcher was said to be quite appetizing.

"Um... Is it normal to eat monster meat?" she asked.

"Some of 'em are poisonous, but it's pretty normal fare for adventurers. Hell, there are even restaurants specializing in monster meat in my country," Vyce explained.

Well now. There was a big world out there. Sophie had again learned something new.

Looking back to the dissection duo, Lunetta was practically burying herself inside the Kick Fitcher—many times, no, *hundreds* of times larger than she was—as she examined its remains. She was likely searching for any organs she might be able to make use of. Part of Sophie was curious about just what sort of concoctions could be made from them. The other part didn't want to know.

It was an appetizing chicken fillet now, but it had been a menacing bird monster not long ago. And she was going for its

innards—its *organs*. How would she turn organs into potions? The thought of it made Sophie a little bit uneasy. But she *was* curious.

"Well?" A low voice addressed Sophie as she furrowed her brow in thought. "Just how did you get away in the first place?"

"Huh?"

"You're eloping, aren't you?"

"W-Well, um..."

It would have been just a bit too much feigned ignorance to ask him how he knew. But just how *was* she supposed to answer that?

Sophie cast her glance aside nervously, racking her mind. As the prince's fiancée, she had been able to expertly dodge any such question no matter who asked it or where they were, but now the only thought her happy-go-lucky brain could muster was *Eloping? Uh, maybe like the start of a romance?* as it bounced up and down excitedly. *Hey, settle down, you!*

"I figured something was off last night, but this explains it. So that scream of yours was a fake."

"It's, uh..." Startled, Sophie realized that Vyce had been at the evening party. He'd heard that scream she'd given her all to produce.

It was embarrassing. Sophie was ashamed of herself, like she'd been dancing around in the nude, but there had actually been someone watching. She was a proper lady, so she'd never done anything so brazen as dancing in the nude, but she was so ashamed of herself she felt like joining Lunetta and burrowing inside the Kick Fitcher.

"Th-That scream back there, it was..." Sophie stuttered. She *had* screamed—that was no lie. However, it hadn't been a scream of legitimate shock. But if she could lie about that part of it, she certainly would.

"Doesn't really matter. The prince never deserved you in the first place. That young man back there should be just fine for you, though."

Sophie unconsciously looked up at Vyce. "What?"

"Well, what's the matter?" Vyce asked back, tilting his head to the side.

"D-Did I, um, make a mess of things somehow?"

"The hell?" Vyce gave a wide-eyed stare back at Sophie as she clenched the fists she rested on her knees. She knew full well that

she wasn't fit to be the crown prince's fiancée or the next queen. She'd *always* known that, but it was the role Sophelia was meant to play. That was why she was alive. There was no way she could say it had been too scary and that she just couldn't do it—which was exactly why she'd always been so terrified of how those around her would perceive her.

If one day someone were to look her straight on and tell her she wasn't good enough, she'd—

"Don't be silly."

Sophelia looked up, lifting her gaze which had sunk to the ground. Vyce had made a tremendous furrow in his brow, now glaring at Sophie.

"You've got it all backward," Vyce went on. "I'm saying you were *too good* for that brat. I don't think choosing you for the job was a bad idea in theory. Unless you've got the ambition to manipulate your husband and rule the nation, you're just asking for misery."

Rule…the nation? Sophie blinked slowly.

"The thought never occurred to me…" Sophie answered honestly.

"The king would've set you on the path for that soon enough, wouldn't he?"

Sophie thought it impossible, but even then, the reason that she couldn't simply laugh off the idea was because she couldn't even begin to imagine what was running through the king's mind. The king, His Majesty King Leonell Fons Alvaeiu Rosehaste, was always an enigma to Sophelia.

After all, he'd seemed delighted when Sophelia would speak to him with documents in hand. While the other adults would mock her for being a child or a woman, Leonell had been the only one to ask, "And what've you to tell me today?" as he leaned forward to listen.

The number of adults who would listen in earnest to what Sophelia had to say were few and far between, so if she had to say, she didn't dislike the time she'd spent talking with the king. Even if he were only using her, that was just fine. That was why Sophelia existed in the first place, after all. He would listen to her and smile. That alone was all she needed. Sophelia had no need to know what Leonell was thinking underneath that smile of his.

"When I first took the throne there were several kingdoms that

tried to strike while I was weak," Vyce explained. "But King Rosehaste didn't get involved until the very end." Vyce paused, in thought. "To be honest, it would've been a bloody mess if the Warrions had taken to the battlefield, but when I met the king for the first time, he told me he dislikes war because it harms national interests. He was probably serious too. I was scared all right." Vyce's face transformed into that of a king's as he laughed at the memory—the face of a king who tore apart people and things, separated them, lined them up, and moved them.

"He probably meant that if he were powerful enough to wage a war without subjecting his kingdom's people or finances to harm, he'd wage as many wars as he liked so long as it furthered the nation's interests," Vyce said with another laugh. "I'd much rather he put it nicely and just say he dislikes war."

Sophie didn't have a single word to counter Vyce's claim, most of all because she herself thought that was probably the case. She'd never had the slightest idea what Leonell had been thinking, but all those near the king knew that the reason he protected and valued his subjects and their livelihoods wasn't out of love or kindness or any other "nice" reason. It was because that was how a king ought to be—because he hated loss of any kind.

That was the unwritten law that governed the actions of His Majesty King Leonell Fons Alvaeiu Rosehaste.

"So if you don't have any plans like that and you're happy now, then what's the problem?" Vyce went on. "It's nothing for me to butt in about."

"You'll cast a blind eye, then...?" Sophie asked.

Vyce cocked his head to the side. "What would I even gain from selling you out, huh?"

There's nothing but *gain in it for you*, Sophie thought, blinking. Sophelia knew many things about the kingdom and the royal family. Now, with King Leonell likely aware of her escape, Sophie wouldn't be surprised if he sent men after her. That was why Sophie and Livio and Matcha had opted to take that path through the forest at night. In short, to Vyce, Sophelia's whereabouts would have been a weighty enough trump card to put him in a position of power when engaging with her kingdom.

Clasping her trembling hand, Sophelia stared back at Vyce. "You're the one who said I'm valuable, sir."

Vyce cast a sharp-eyed glance down on Sophie. The younger Sophie couldn't even hope to read the depths of his dark blue eyes.

Sophie hardly knew enough about Vyce to speak about him in the first place. She'd only met him a few times over the course of her official duties. While she thought he was trustworthy, even if he were to burst out in song before her, Sophelia's only reaction would be to think, *Oh, so that's the kind of person he is!* While she might have impressions about whether or not he was good at something and she might run away if she thought him too dangerous, her reaction would still be to think, *Who would've thought that's the kind of person he is! That* was how little she knew of the man.

However, no matter how he tried to chip away at her guard by showing himself as a proper man, Sophie knew that this man was a king—a king who ruled and moved nations. Kings didn't weigh emotions—they weighed what their kingdom stood to gain or lose. Kings were creatures Sophie knew well.

"You're right," Vyce answered.

Now just how am I going to get away from this king? Sophie thought, clenching her fists.

Just then, a spark flicked onto her with a snap. It was a hot, stinging sensation. Not even realizing she'd put her hands on her forehead, Sophie realized too late that what she'd felt was pain.

"Wh-When…?!"

"Who do you think you're talking to, twerp?"



Before her very own eyes, Vyce stood with his hand in front of Sophie's face, his thumb bent back.

Simply put, she'd been *flicked*. A forehead flick. Sophie blinked, finally understanding what had happened. *Wow, that really hurt.* It was the first time in Sophie's life she'd ever experienced such a thing.

"Forcing a little girl to do something she doesn't want to for *politics*?" Vyce asked. "How much of a low-down, filthy dog do you think I am? Is this really how you're gonna act after I told you that you helped out my fiancée? Don't be dumb!"

Vyce looked terrifying, sending Sophie into a panic. Not to mention she'd just implied that the king before her was a low-down, filthy dog. Insulting wasn't even the half of it. *And* her forehead still hurt.

Despite it all, Sophie couldn't hold back a smile from forming on her trembling lips. *What?* He was a good guy after all, this king!

"I am most grateful for your kindness," she said.

"Shut it, you!" Vyce bit back. "I don't wanna hear none of it!"

He did have a rather foul way of speaking, though.

"Um—"

"Sir Vyce?"

The voice that interrupted Sophie's own was so low it seemed to emerge from the ground itself. It was the sort of voice that sounded tremendously heavy and mired in grime, as if it were being forced from a strangled throat.

Spinning around in surprise, Sophie found Livio standing there with a terribly dark smile plastered on his face. *Wow, that's scary. Like* really *scary.*

He was handsome but scary. Scary but handsome. Sophie's happy-go-lucky brain raised the white flag of surrender as Sophie felt herself being pulled away, then landed on Livio's chest with a soft thump.

"And just *what* do you think you're doing to my dear Lady Sophie?" Livio demanded. "I'll slice you up, grind you down, and scatter whatever's left across your tombstone."

"That's a lot of big talk from you," Vyce replied, then looked to Sophie. "You sure you're okay there?"

Sophie nodded several times at Vyce's calm retort.

He said "my"! "My dear Lady Sophie"! Say it again! Say "My Sophie"

again! Whoa, I can't believe I'm not hallucinating! Sophie watched as a flurry of pink flower petals danced through the air before her. *Oh, wait! Now* that's *a hallucination.*

"I made myself clear, did I not? Lay a finger on Sophie, and you'll pay the price."

"It was my finger. *Just* my finger!"

"I don't recall agreeing to that. Why don't I just go ahead and make mincemeat out of you to start?"

To start? After that he'd already be dead.

This is no time to be dancing in the clouds! Sophie thought to herself as she rushed to look up at Livio's handsome face, stained with a murky darkness.

"Livio! Vyce was kind enough to compliment me! Please, you mustn't get angry!" Sophie pleaded.

"I wasn't complimentin' you."

Would it kill him to show a little bit of tact and just go along with it? No, that wasn't what they needed now. Sophie was trying her best to calm things down, but Vyce was unbothered. *Now I see! So this is what it means to be an unfazed adult!* Sophie, however, was entirely *too* fazed by the situation to laugh. *My bad for being a child!*

"Your Majesty."

"Hmm?" Vyce said.

Lunetta walked in and tugged at Vyce's clothes, her heels clicking across the ground. She brought her hands to her mouth. Vyce squatted down and drew close.

She was probably sharing some bad news. Vyce further furrowed his brow. Livio had calmed down. Going from nerve-racking anxiety to breathing a sigh of relief, Sophie found herself terribly busy.

"Lunetta," Vyce began. "Can you make a magic barrier to cover the town?"

"I already have," she replied. "I formulated the spell to use my magic as a base but to slowly draw on the magical energy in the air afterward. The barrier would hold even if I were to sleep or die."

"Die? Don't bring us bad luck spouting off that sort of nonsense!"

Lunetta also found herself on the receiving end of a sharp flick to the forehead from Vyce, trembling in place as she clutched her

forehead. Remembering the pain herself, Sophie put her hand on her own forehead only for a forlorn voice to address her.

"Lady Sophie?"

Sophie looked up to find a handsome face looking back at her sadly with drooped eyebrows.

"What did you say to him?" Livio asked.

"Well, I, um..."

The reason Vyce had laid a hand—more precisely, a finger—on her in the first place was likely because she'd misspoken. It seemed Livio had realized this. He was probably just worried that she'd said something unfortunate like Lunetta.

Livio's beauty ran all the way to his heart, leaving Sophie in quite the bind. After all, she'd gotten that forehead flick for disparaging Vyce, but she certainly couldn't go saying that in front of him.

"Well, I..." Sophie started, muddling her words.

"Hey!" Vyce said, looking up. "She asked me if I was goin' to sell you two out to your kingdom, so I told her to can it with that nonsense, that's all. Now, can we take this inside and talk?"

Sophie stuck her head out in surprise as Livio loosened his grip on her.

The massive chunks of roasted bird that had been there just moments before had now vanished without a trace, as if nothing had ever been there at all.

What was more, Sophie got the feeling that the buildings were in neater condition than before—even all the fallen bricks had vanished. Just what had happened in the brief span she wasn't watching? It was unlikely some massive glutton had just demolished the meat in the blink of an eye. After all, there were a number of men who'd fallen to the ground in tears.

"The K-Kick Fitcher meat...!"

"And it looked so good too...!"

"The meat...!"

"My meat!"

Watching muscled men weep was—to put it bluntly—a strange sight. *Is the meat really* that *good?*

Sophie glanced at Livio. "What happened to the monsters?"

"It's just that, you see—" Livio stopped his response midsentence, squatting down just like Vyce had, his handsome

face now terribly close to hers.

H-His eyelashes are so l-long! Those blueberry eyes of his are like candies—no, gemstones! No, not gemstones—like a starry sky! No, not a starry sky—they are a miracle! Positively sublime. A masterpiece of the gods!

But that face truly was *stunning*. As Livio nimbly approached her ears, the nape of his neck enveloped Sophie's gaze, a sight so seductive she might very well—

Hey, c'mon! Sophie barked at her brain as her thoughts crashed to a halt.

"What actually happened was…"

How many times had she told Livio not to whisper into her ear like that? Well…none. *You haven't told him that, Sophelia!*

As if I could! Sophelia wanted to bite back. *His voice is so nice and I can feel his breath brush against my skin!* Sophie's dear happy-go-lucky brain was gasping for breath. *Hold up, I'm not planning on making a grave for you!*

"…So I told Lady Lunetta that she ought to speak with Sir Vyce before trying to leave town as she did, but I think it best if we accompany them. Would that be all right? I'm worried about how it might go after they leave town as well…"

"Uh, um…yes."

Sophie didn't have the slightest idea what, exactly, she was agreeing to, but she decided to nod along for the time being.

"In other words, something strange had suddenly fallen over those monsters."

After thanking the innkeeper for watching over their belongings, the group returned to their rooms. The brother and sister that the innkeeper had mentioned were apparently Vyce and Lunetta.

It made sense—after all, this was the only inn in town.

But calling them brother and sister? Siblings? Then again, they were just a bit too far apart in age to assume they were husband and wife. Vyce had more than enough presence, and Lunetta was small all the way around. They were complete opposites, so the misunderstanding was hardly surprising.

With that, after leaving their things in their rooms, the ragtag bunch made their way to Sophie and Livio's. Vyce and Lunetta had

borrowed a chair from the neighboring room, as there hadn't been enough.

For what it was worth, the oversized desk in their room was covered with a mountain of food. The innkeeper had prepared a feast for the four who'd just made their way into town.

"Least I can do for the town heroes!" the innkeeper had said with a radiantly warm smile as she brought in the food. If there were a list of the hundred best inns, Sophie would vouch for this one's place on the list.

"Those Kick Fitchers' organs were practically nonfunctional," Lunetta explained. "And what's more, I felt something besides my own magic—something bad, so I cast my strongest purification spell, only for the Kick Fitchers to completely vanish without a trace." The girl sank, crestfallen, her shoulders dropping. It seemed she was disheartened once more after having lost the materials that had seemed within her grasp. To Sophie, Lunetta appeared to be wearing the same emotionless expression as always, but it was like there was no fight in her eyes. Though Sophie couldn't imagine the reserved girl being bursting with energy in the first place.

Sophie stared vaguely at the meat that had been prepared before them. "Purification magic is high-level magic that removes corruption and impurity, right?" she asked the dark-eyed girl. "In other words, that means that those bird monsters were so corrupted that they vanished away entirely." Sophie finally understood what had happened—she'd listened to the details and put it all together. Lunetta nodded.

"The 'corruption' that purification magic targets can change alongside the spell itself, but at the fundamental level, it differs based on the way the caster imagines it," Lunetta elaborated. "Magic's far too complex to obtain the same results by simply following the same steps each time. I believe that a good deal of it revolves around how the caster defines the spell's target. To the best of my knowledge, there are actually thousands of combinations of spells and conditions they are activated under, even for magic bearing the same effect. Compared to the results, the methodology behind them can vary based on both tribe and nation. I believe everyone has their own interpretation—a way of understanding it, perhaps—of just what magic is in the first place.

For this very same reason, it's only natural that the phenomena it can cause can vary so based on how it is imagined."

"Lunetta, that's interesting and all, but save it for after our meal," Vyce said.

It *was* an interesting topic to Sophie, but it had already made its getaway. It had gotten so far away from the scope of her knowledge, it might've just set out on a journey to another country, sailing away across the ocean on a boat.

Lunetta seemed to catch herself, stopping in her tracks as she wrapped her lips around the words. "Our meal..."

"Eat up. And clean your plate!" Vyce demanded.

"Okay," Lunetta replied with a small nod, opening her mouth wide for a bite of salad. Munching loudly, she looked up at Vyce.

"If you're gonna look so proud of yourself, then do it after you clean your plate!"

"Mm-hmm."

She looked proud of herself? To Sophie, Lunetta appeared completely expressionless, but apparently she was making some smug look. Just how on earth could he even tell?

Just what was this sensation? The fact that Vyce could understand all the differences on her expressionless face left Sophie feeling fidgety and excited. Her own romance was plenty of fun, but others' romance was even more so. She had made a massive discovery.

"And?" Vyce urged.

Lunetta continued, "Okay, the magic I used was for removing poison or destruction. I cast the purification magic with the intention of returning it to its original form, but when I did so, both Kick Fitchers vanished. In other words, their bodies had been so ravaged by some evil magical force that they couldn't go on existing once it was removed."

After again being urged to eat by Vyce, Lunetta looked down and sank her fork into the potato garnishing her plate. Just how many people out there in the world could look so sorrowful when they were eating a potato? But come to think of it, those muscle-bound men who'd been sobbing earlier might have been eating right now, still sobbing away. In that case, the only ones rejoicing in the wake of the Kick Fitchers' onslaught were probably those who'd had their houses restored with Lunetta's purification magic.

Livio sat across from Lunetta, who was sinking into her seat as she ate the potato. “If you ask me,” Livio began, crossing his arms, “their size alone is an oddity. Out of all the monsters I’ve seen, the largest was the size of a one-story house at most.”

Didn’t that qualify as “massive” in its own right?

Hmm... Sophie thought back to Livio’s showdown with the Kick Fitcher. The Kick Fitcher that had screamed then had been tall enough to look down on a two-story house, and almost just as large across. It had certainly been far larger than a one-story house, so “oddity” was an apt description.

“Not to mention that the Kick Fitchers that roam in these parts should be small,” Livio went on. “It’s strange any way you look at it.”

Gulping down his ale, Vyce called Lunetta’s name as she busily munched away at her vegetables like a small animal. “That evil magic energy you were mentioning...can you follow it?”

“You mean trailing a foe, correct...? I’ve never done it before, but...I know how. It seems interesting, so I’d like to try.”

“Well that settles it, then!” Vyce said, placing his glass on the desk as he ran his fingers through his hair. “Me and Lunetta’ll take a look around town tomorrow. I don’t plan on sticking around here forever, but it’d be a pain if freaks like that showed up all the time. Even if we can’t figure out what caused them to transform like that, I at least wanna get a clear idea if we’ve got more of ’em nearby or not.”

“Good idea,” Livio said, nodding in agreement.

The three of them seemed like they’d be perfectly fine even if they did run into such a beast, but Sophie was too powerless to say anything. She tried to vaguely imagine the three of them surrounding a massive monster in combat, but she dropped her attempt since she’d imagined them fighting on different terrain than the town.

“We made our way here with the bare minimum, so would it be all right if we got our equipment in order as we look around town?” Livio explained. “I’m terribly sorry we can’t be of too much help...”

“Don’t sweat it,” Vyce replied. “I can’t use magic. All I do is just keep an eye on Lunetta so she doesn’t run wild.”

“‘Run wild’?” Lunetta echoed.

“You do, don’t you?”

“I’m quite confident in my control over magic.”

“That ain’t what I’m talkin’ about!”

The prodigious mage—with her expressionless, youthful face—tilted her head to the side in confusion.

Vyce sank his head into his hands.

Chapter Nine: Good Night

The weather was wonderful.

With his black hair swaying in the breeze, Livio adjusted the load he'd been carrying in his arms. It felt like it had been a tremendously long time since he had last walked around with his hair down and unstyled. He'd been working away without a break. After all, for the past three years, Livionis Warrion had done nothing but work and train every single day.

Indeed, the princess Livionis had offered up his heart to, the one he'd vowed to keep safe no matter what it took, had been betrothed to the crown prince. It had been a matter of fact to Livionis that he couldn't risk a single day or even a few hours at her side.

All that was in the past now, though.

Livionis Warrion had cast his name aside, and now he'd won his place beside the person who meant more to him than anyone else in the world. The crown prince's former fiancée was not simply a girl named "Sophie."

The prince's fiancée? That's all in the past. Old news, see? It was just a fleeting nightmare they'd awoken from two nights ago. *Forget about all that now!*

Now, Sophelia von Lotus, the sad and lonesome queen-to-be, was nowhere to be found in all the land. Naturally, the woman he'd pledged his love to still lived within his heart as a queen-to-be. No matter what had transpired in those days, it was a part of what had made Sophie who she was, so Livio thought tenderly of the person she had been.

Livionis stared at the profile of Sophelia's face from a distance. It was like the bright beaming sun. It was like the full moon that lit up the darkness. It illuminated Livio's heart—scorched it with its searing light—as he fell in love over and over again.

Man, I love her. This is the best. I just love her so much. It doesn't get any better than this.

Livio let out a long sigh and readjusted the load he was carrying, but there was still so much stuff. He'd been going to the

stable and leaving the supplies with Matcha, but he didn't feel like he'd made so much as a dent in the mountain of bags and boxes.

But paper bags were nothing compared to the stones he'd been made to carry on his back while running or the boulder he'd been forced to lug around. Far from it, even wooden boxes filled to the brim felt light to him. He was, after all, a knight. A *former* knight, that is.

"Former," huh? That's got a nice ring to it.

"Wow, that's a lot you're carrying there!" the innkeeper exclaimed in surprise when he returned to the inn. "You're certainly stocked up, aren't you?"

"They gave us plenty of free stuff in town," Livio explained. "They're all good-hearted souls."

"Is that so?" The innkeeper laughed as Livio beamed. "They probably saw all the commotion yesterday. Not t' mention you're quite the looker, young man."

Indeed, with each "Thanks for yesterday!" or "Wow, you're so handsome!" his load had grown larger and larger. The paper bags had become burlap sacks and the burlap sacks had become wooden boxes.

While Livio could understand these gifts as simple thanks for defeating the monsters, he didn't really understand why he was getting things for "being so handsome." He knew that his face was the spitting image of his mother's, but he didn't have any idea why his face got him so much free stuff.

Because I'm handsome? You'd do better giving those bonuses to children out on errands, Livio thought, furrowing his brow. *It's our job as a society to build children up when they do a good job.*

But Livio was a firm believer in taking whatever was offered, so he simply smiled, thanked them, and accepted the gifts. But after getting bonus gift after bonus gift, he'd begun questioning what a "bonus" was in the first place. Even after off-loading some of it on the young boy beside him who'd been sent to buy goods for his family, Livio still had more than enough.

On a sidenote, after sharing some of his gifts with the boys and girls he saw running errands throughout the town, Livio had told them that "angels will bring fortune to good boys and girls," thus sparking a movement wherein children would happily offer their assistance to others. It had gone precisely as Livio had hoped, but

that was a story for another day.

Livio, however, knew nothing of the future that lay in wait for the town. “If you’d like, why don’t you take this?” Livio said to the innkeeper, dropping the wooden box and handing her the bag he’d carried on his shoulder.

Inside, the bag was practically overflowing with apples. “Oh, I can’t take all that!”

“There’s so many I hardly know where to start,” Livio explained. “This is just a bit too much to be traveling with… Please, take them.”

Livio was neither the sort of apple fanatic who would eat an apple a day nor the odd eater with an appetite for apples exclusively. He liked apples as much as the next person, but first and foremost traveling with so many would have been too burdensome.

Simply put, the bag filled with nothing but apples had been yet another bonus gift he’d received. The innkeeper laughed, holding in her arms the bag so full that it seemed to upend the very concept of a bonus gift.

“Well in that case, I’ll just bake you an apple pie or something!” the innkeeper replied. “Your companion’s still asleep, right?”

“Thank you kindly,” Livio said with a nod and a cheerful grin.

Indeed, Sophie had been absent from the breakfast table that morning. Livio had been pale as a ghost with worry at the thought she might be ill, but Lunetta had shaken her head back and forth.

“She’s only sleeping,” Lunetta had explained. “After she wished me a good morning, she was right back asleep. She doesn’t seem to have a fever, so I think she’s just tired.”

Lunetta had paused for a moment. “I was the same way at first too.”

“Let her sleep,” Vyce had said as he stirred his soup. “You left in the dead of night and camped out, didn’t you? And it sounds like they were up late talking last night. It’d be stranger if a noble lady *wasn’t* exhausted after all that.”

Lunetta had nodded in agreement. “I cast a healing spell on her just in case. So even if something were amiss, she’s perfectly fine now.”

That’s right, Livio thought, remembering the morning’s conversation as he dropped off the bags in his room and placed

the wooden crate at his bedside with a thump. Livio looked at the twisted sheets on his unmade bed.

Would it be okay if he went to see her face? Or would such a thing be out of the question for a gentleman? Not to mention he'd feel terribly guilty if he woke her up.

Livio stared at the empty bed as he racked his brain for answers.

That was right—Sophie was sleeping in the next room over. The two had used separate rooms.

Last night, they had split the accommodations between the lowlifes and the ladies, with Vyce and Livio in one room and Lunetta and Sophie in the other.

Livio and Vyce were stricken with disbelief when they saw the two beds in the room, meant for a married couple, had been affectionately joined together. Livio was likely the only knight to have spent the night in the company of a king. *You're jealous, right?*

Even under such intimate circumstances, neither of them had the courage to disrupt the girls' lively conversation about magic. After all, the two of them just seemed like they were having so much fun.

Livio didn't have the skills to tell the variations in Lunetta's expressionless face apart, but he could tell that her black eyes were glittering...and that she was an unstoppable chatterbox.

He'd seen the same sort of thing in his time with the Knights. One of his seniors was normally quite reserved, speaking only the very bare minimum when required. When the topic shifted to magic rifles, however, he could go on and on and on. *"There's no stopping a nerd when they're nerding out about what they like."* That was how the knight had put it himself before he finally went on to make a living for himself as a magic rifle specialist. *Bravo!*

With Lunetta herself likely something of a magic nerd, Sophie beamed from ear to ear as Lunetta spoke, nodding and smiling and occasionally tossing in a comment over her own—which only encouraged Lunetta to go on. They seemed like they were having a good time—a blast, even.

Livio had never seen Sophelia speak to another person, let alone another girl, with such a broad smile. *She looks like she's having a better time than when she's with me...* Livio stopped the thought in its tracks as—oh, how to put it—some sort of *unsettled*

feeling sunk into his chest.

"Looks like we don't have a choice…" Vyce began. "Come with me to our room."

"What? But that's…"

"You got a problem with that?"

"No, I don't, it's just…!"

If he had to say one way or another, he *did* have a problem with it. *How could it go from the heavenly opportunity to share a room with my first love to the lowly prospect of sharing a room with this old man?* That was one hell of a fall. So far of a fall, in fact, that he might suffer compound fractures across his body—no, far enough for him to die on impact. *No, no—that's not what this is about!*

It was about sharing a room with a king.

"It would be too, uh, brazen of me to impose like that…"

Too *awkward*, more like.

"Don't sweat it," Vyce replied. "Let's go. I wanna get some shut-eye."

Vyce turned to Lunetta. "Hey, Lunetta! Don't forget to lock the door right after we leave, got it?"

"Huh? But I…" Livio stammered.

Indeed, Vyce hadn't asked if Livio wanted to come to his room. He'd *told* him to come to their room. It wasn't a question or a suggestion. It was an order. He wasn't asking for Livio's opinion or agreement. All Livio could do was nod.

There was nothing to be done now. Usurper King though he was, if he said he was no match for the sparkle in his fiancée's eyes, then there was simply no way Livio could hope to win against Sophie as she happily waved the two off.

And *now* Livio stood worried in front of the room Sophie was sleeping in. According to Lunetta, the magical barrier that she had set for Sophie as she slept was designed to allow Livio and Vyce to enter the room unhindered, in case there was an emergency.

Livio furrowed his brow in deep thought.

According to the innkeeper, Sophie hadn't been downstairs once, which would mean she'd been fast asleep the whole time. He was worried about her, but the two of them still weren't so familiar with each other that he could simply march into a maiden's room without a second thought.

After all their fumbling antics, Livio was finally able to call her by her pet name: “Sophie.” *But isn’t that just an alias?* In actuality, Livio hadn’t been pressed on the matter, but since he knew her real name and shortened it with love, that made it a pet name.

Maybe I should try knocking?

Just when Livio lifted his right hand—

The door slammed open.

Sophie came bursting out of the room in a panic, only for Livio to impulsively catch her in his arms.

“Livio!”

“Did something happen?” he asked in shock.

Sophie looked back up at him, her face flushed bright red.

Uh-oh. He’d looked at her up close.

She’s cute! So cuuuute! He’d never encountered such power. Accident though it was, Livio’s hands now rested on Sophie’s back—slender, soft, cute.

Livio clenched his teeth.

“I, uh, really overslept and…!”

“I see.” *That* was what it was? Livio smiled back at her. “You must’ve been exhausted. Hardly surprising. Did you rest well?”

“Like a baby…” Sophie trailed off. “But that’s not the point!”

Livio was certain Sophie didn’t know just how nice it could feel to fall back asleep for a second or even a third time. However, they’d talked about their plan to have Vyce and Lunetta investigate the outskirts of town while Livio and Sophie took a look around town as they shopped. Given Sophie’s strong sense of responsibility, Livio wasn’t surprised she was fretting so.

“Why don’t we go back inside, Sophie?” Livio said, tilting his head to the side.

“Ah, um, yes, that’s fine,” she replied with a nod so fast he was scared her slender neck might very well snap in two.

He felt a bit sad—just the tiniest bit sad—as Sophie slipped out of his arms. He followed her into the room. Just like the one Livio had slept in, this one also had two beds pushed together.

“Well then, I’ll, uh, put on some tea,” Sophie said.

Sophie’s pale green hair, the color of a fresh sprout, swayed behind her. It was unusual to see Sophie with her hiplength hair let down like that. On one hand, it was just as it had been that day in the garden, and on the other, it was completely new. Livio

clasped Sophie's hand, feeling a bit strange.

Sophie looked at her own slender fingers, now resting in Livio's hands, and blushed. *She's too cute.*

"Is this your bed, Lady Sophie?"

"Huh? Yes, it is."

Livio sank down, gently pulling Sophie's hand with him, only for Sophie to weightlessly fall onto the bed.

The bed's cheap springs creaked as they sank down, but Sophie's eyes grew wide nonetheless. With those caramel brown eyes right before him, Livio's heart leaped in excitement.

If Livio had been the sort of gentleman who could remain perfectly calm falling on a bed alongside the woman he yearned for, he would've never run away with her in the first place. Being the barbarian that he was, however, Livio's heart was in utter disarray, stomping upon the ground as it lifted its hands to the heavens and offered up a celebratory dance to the gods for the miracle before him.

On the outside, though, Livio simply smiled. "It'd be a good idea to get used to not doing anything, Lady Sophie."

Sophie's eyes—those perfectly round eyes he'd fallen in love with—seemed to shake.

"You've worked so hard until now. You don't need to do anything more, you see? Take your time and rest. All you have to do is be here, eating well, laughing, and sleeping like a baby every day. That's enough."

Who cared if she overslept? She could sleep as much as she liked. And who cared about making tea? He could do that much on his own. If Sophie were to make tea herself, he was certain it would be delicious, and it would certainly be fun to walk around town together. But they could do that any time. If they didn't do it today, there was always tomorrow. If it wasn't tomorrow, there was always the day after that. After all, their journey together had just begun.

That was precisely why Livio wanted Sophie to live a life unburdened. And then, if possible, he hoped to see her live that life by his side. Livio only hoped that she might make his enduring wish a reality.

"B-But that's absurd!" Sophie replied. "As long as you live, you have responsibilities and duties to fulfill. If you never accomplish

anything, you'll never gain anything either!"

"I see," Livio replied with a nod, looking at Sophie's small face now painted with confusion.

She certainly wasn't wrong. In exchange for letting guests stay, inns collected money from them. Once they'd paid, those customers would seek a good night's rest. It just made sense.

"In that case, that means that I have to pay the price for having someone as cute as you by my side," Livio said.

There was no way that a girl as adorable as Sophie would ever stay at Livio's side if he simply lazed about. If he wanted her to smile at his side, then he would have to pay a price worthy of such an honor. If that were the case, then he'd just have to make sure Sophie never had to lift a finger.

That's my Sophie all right! Livio thought with a smile. The way Sophie opened and closed her mouth as she desperately tried to argue her point was absolutely adorable. *I'm bound to be the only one to ever see her like this.* The thought alone was enough to drive Livio wild with joy. *She's so cute! And I'm so happy! She's just too cute!*

"You're just so cute." With how sloppy he looked when he laughed, Livionis's face had to look even more distorted now. *You've gotta get it together!* Livio scolded himself without much luck. *But she might be disappointed if she thinks I'm a mess. What'll I do if I get on her bad side?*

But even then, the way Sophie's face had grown bright red as she tried to swallow something down was entirely too cute, so Livio could only wish she'd say something—*anything*—back to him.

If she thought he was a poor excuse for a handsome knight, he'd rein himself in, and if she said she liked the cold, unaffected type who never smiled, then he'd never smile again. He'd do anything for her. He'd give anything for her.

He'd been prepared to do that for a long, *long* time.

"You don't have to endure anything anymore," Livio said in a wishful whisper. "Please, just tell me what you want."

Sophie's caramel eyes trembled captivatingly, as tantalizingly sweet as honey. Livio couldn't help but want to draw his lips close for a taste of their sweetness. Instead, he wrapped his arms around Sophie. Watching him cry had to be the last thing she wanted to see. Livio closed his eyes in spite of the fact that his heart was leaping at the sweet force squeezing at his chest.

“I’m feeling sleepy.” It went without saying that this was an outright lie. Could he even sleep? At a time like this? As if!

He couldn’t sense so much as a trace of the sandman’s presence. Even if he were to try to call the sandman to his side, the sandman would likely just pretend not to be there or like he hadn’t heard anything at all—just as Livionis had whenever his father had called for him. Livionis’s heart was making such a racket that the sandman would probably refuse to come anywhere near Livionis, instead opting to go to bed himself.

After all, Livionis was a man. His face was the spitting image of his mother’s and he’d often been reminded of the femininity of his face, but he was a man. He was a respectable young man from House Warrion, using the massive frame he’d inherited from his father to swing his blade.

Livio was neither kind nor purehearted enough to simply turn over and fall asleep beside the girl he liked, which was precisely why he had to wrestle his urges to the ground with the holy, barbaric strength he’d inherited from both his mother and father.

“You’re not allowed to get up,” Livio announced. “Your job now is to just stay still until I wake up.”

That was one hell of an act he’d be putting on! As if he could sleep like this! There was. Absolutely. No. Way.

Just when are you getting up?! And just when are you going to sleep? The thought was certain to have crossed Sophie’s mind as well.

Pressed against Livio’s chest as she was, Sophie had likely noticed Livio’s heart thumping around as it danced in his chest. *Oh man, how embarrassing!* The thought that she’d caught on to his farce of exhaustion was too much for him. His face was burning with embarrassment, flames radiating from his face with such force that they might’ve engulfed the whole inn.

But by this point, Sophie had to have a sense of what was going on. Livio’s princess, so kindhearted it almost stung, wasn’t the type to just coldly ignore another’s feelings. He wished she could live just a bit more freely—to follow her heart wherever it led her. But despite wishing such, Livio had his reservations about making use of Sophie’s disposition in such a way.

But even then, Sophie gave a pleasant, lighthearted laugh.

A tear had almost made its way down Livio’s face, but he

decided to keep that a secret.

“Good night.”



Side Story I: The Magic Words

“Oh no, whatever will I do?”

Those were the magic words.

Magic though they might be, Merlina was no mage. Swords and magic and whatnot were just too scary. In Merlina’s opinion, it wasn’t good to rely on violence. Fighting meant nothing but scary things.

Wouldn’t everyone be far better off if they considered peace instead? I don’t really know why they haven’t… Maybe I just haven’t thought about it enough. It’d be ever so nice if they could just talk out their problems. That was what Merlina thought every time she saw adventurers, or soldiers, or knights out and about in town.

After all, for Merlina it was always a matter of saying, “Whatever will I do?”

“I’m thirsty—whatever will I do?” “I don’t have the money for this dress—whatever will I do?”

“Whatever will I do?” “Oh, whatever will I do?”

That was all it took for her every wish to be granted. If she so much as muttered those words to herself, she got it all: tea from the royal family’s appointed tea maker, stunning dresses, and even her wonderful husband and adorable daughter. All of her wishes came true.

Someone always came to Merlina’s aid.

People were kind, noble creatures. And Merlina loved living in a world filled with kind people. It was peaceful every day. She was happy every day. Every single day was filled with nothing but fun! If Merlina let out a lighthearted laugh and smiled, everyone would always smile right back at her. Everyone loved Merlina.

But her husband’s daughter *wasn’t* kind to her—not the least little bit.

Merlina had been shocked. It was the first time she’d ever encountered someone who *hadn’t* treated her kindly. It was impossible. There was just no way. *Maybe it was a misunderstanding? Maybe she wasn’t feeling well? Or perhaps she just happened to be in a bad mood?*

While Merlina was hurt each and every time his daughter had looked at her with those cavernous eyes or cast an empty, entirely unfelt smile at her, Merlina had tried her best to remind herself: *Oh, it's just a matter of time. She'll come around. It's just a matter of time.*

But no matter how much time passed, her husband's daughter Sophelia never once showed Merlina any kindness at all. Not a bit. Not even a smidge. She'd put up an iron wall against Merlina. *How is that even possible?*

Whether Merlina invited Sophelia for a cup of tea or to go out shopping, the girl would always refuse with a faint smile, saying she had her studies or her work to attend to. Just what on earth was that plastered-on smile anyway? It was terrifying. But more importantly, studies aside, she said she had *work* to attend to? *Work?* Where did she come up with such a lie?

After all, Sophelia was just a ten-year-old girl, not even a year older than Merlina's own daughter. Merlina's precious little Lilina detested her lessons and studies and needlework. It took a mountain of treats like candy and stuffed animals just to get Lilina to sit down in her chair, yet Sophelia said she had *work* of all things! Merlina didn't know if it was charming or cheeky, but Sophelia had told her an obvious lie, a sign of such contempt that it brought tears to Merlina's eyes.

It was a terribly shocking affair to Merlina, who'd never once been hated by anyone. But even then, children made mistakes—that was just in their nature.

Even Lilina would sometimes look away or hide her assignments from her tutor behind her back and claim she'd already done them. It was so terribly cute that Merlina couldn't help but want to nuzzle her and give her a kiss on the cheek. But lying was no good. Her daughter was cute, though.

"Oh, whatever will I do with you?" Merlina had said with a sigh, tilting her head to the side.

Seeing her mother's distress, Lilina had immediately apologized. "I'm sorry for telling a lie, mother!" she'd said, as a tear fell down her cheek.

Oh dear! That cute face of hers!

Without so much as a moment's delay, Merlina had embraced Lilina, stroking the girl's head lovingly. "Oh, you're such a good girl,

doing the right thing and apologizing!”

Lilina might get into a bit of mischief, but she really was a good girl who knew how important it was to reflect on what you’d done and apologize. That was how children learned right from wrong and grew to become responsible adults.

So Merlina simply smiled, sure that Sophelia would also apologize right away, and if she did, Merlina would hug her and stroke her head and take her out shopping. Sophelia was pitiful, always wearing dresses that were out of style. Through the tears in her eyes, Merlina saw Sophelia looking up at her.

That’s right. She’s just a pitiful little child. Merlina was certain Sophelia was trying to get her attention by telling lies like that. She was no doubt jealous of her sister, Lilina, and how well she got along with her parents.

Thinking about it that way made even Sophelia’s plain face look cuter. Sophelia was, at the end of the day, Merlina’s daughter.

Reassuring herself, Merlina wiped away her tears and knelt in front of Sophelia, before looking the girl in the eyes. “Sophelia, my dear? You know that liars wind up all alone, don’t you?”

And yet—

“What?”

That was her response.

“What?” What? Is “what” all I get now? Merlina was paralyzed with shock. The mere thought of it! That words could fail her so!

The girl was still only ten years old, but it appeared she’d already been warped. “What?” That was the only word that had come out of her mouth. *What sort of attitude is that to take when an adult’s trying to have a serious conversation with you?!*

“Sophelia, you’re—”

“Um, I’m terribly sorry, but I have an audience with His Majesty the King. I mustn’t be late, so might we continue this afterward? If you could inform me of your plans for tea or shopping in advance, I would be happy to make room in my schedule.”

“Dear me…!”

What nonsense! The king! The girl claimed she had an audience with the *king*! Merlina knew that Sophelia was engaged to His Highness the Crown Prince, so had she said she were meeting him, Merlina would’ve been able to believe her. But to think she’d bring out His Highness’s father! How irreverent!

Merlina was so shaken she could've fallen over, but she steeled her resolve and locked eyes with Sophelia again.

"Sophelia," she began, "you're lonely too, aren't you?"

"Huh...?" Sophelia's eyes opened wide. Those perfectly round eyes of hers now looked up at Merlina in disbelief. Sophelia always put on a quiet, grown-up smile, but now her childish face seemed just the tiniest bit charming. She was probably shocked that Merlina had seen right through her.

It's all right, dear! I know just what it is. You're so lonely you can't bring yourself to be honest about it. You wanted someone to notice, so that's why you were being bad! Merlina wasn't about to cast a blind eye to her daughter. Merlina was her *mother*, after all.

"It's okay, my dear! I love you too!" Merlina said.

"I, uh, um—"

Merlina tightly wrapped her arms around Sophelia, only for Sophelia to frantically squirm in her embrace. Perhaps she wasn't used to being held. Merlina's heart ached with pity for the poor girl.

Her husband, Wilson, had said that Sophelia's mother had been the difficult type: cold and proud without the slightest hint of charm. "She's quite the opposite from you," Wilson had said with a smile.

At the time, Merlina had thought he'd been exaggerating, but perhaps it wasn't entirely untrue. Merlina was certain Sophelia's mother had acted with such coldness toward Sophelia herself.

In that case, it's my job to raise Sophelia into a proper *good girl!*

Merlina felt herself burn with a sense of duty as the lady of House Lotus—only to be pushed off a moment later.

Huh? Just as the thought crossed her mind, Merlina fell on her backside with a thud. Merlina looked up, only to find Sophelia staring back at her in shock.

It went without saying that Merlina was startled. She hadn't dreamed she'd be pushed away like that! To think that such a thing could even happen! But more than any of that, Merlina was stricken with grief.

To think the girl's been hurt so gravely! Merlina's chest grew tight with anguish at the thought.

"I'm, uh, truly sorr—"

"It's fine, my dear," Merlina replied. "I startled you, didn't I?"

“No, it’s just—” Sophelia said, her gaze wandering away.

Sophelia looked about as Merlina extended her hand once more in an effort to tell her to think nothing of it. But Sophelia took a quick step back, leaving Merlina’s hand waving in the air.

Perhaps she thinks I’m mad at her? Merlina thought with a blink as Sophelia began rustling through her satchel. *A girl of nobility, carrying around a satchel like that? How unbecoming! Come to think of it, where are her ladies-in-waiting? Has she left them behind to just wander around? I’ll have to scold her about it later.*

Merlina blinked, only to be shown a bundle of papers. She blinked once more.

“I’m, uh, truly sorry,” Sophelia began. “I do apologize for being in such a rush and pushing you away, even though it wasn’t my intention. But I am set to show His Majesty these documents, so might I please ask that you allow me to pass?”

“Y-You…!”

It was a thick bundle of papers bearing the title “Three Proposals for the Meeting with the Neighboring Kingdom” on its cover. Having spent each and every day with her adorable little Lilina, Merlina could tell right away that the writing on the cover wasn’t a child’s. After all, Lilina’s own writing could best be described as an earthworm squirming about to escape some terrible fate.

Why, if that writing isn’t neater than my own! And to think that had been written by a ten-year-old child? Absurd. And that wasn’t all—just what was that business about a meeting with the neighboring kingdom? And proposals?

“What sort of daughter are you, stealing documents from your father to support your lies, hmm?” Merlina demanded, instinctively snatching and flipping through the papers.

“Give those back!” Sophelia exclaimed, reaching out with both hands. “They’re important!”

“Yes, they are. Which is why I’ll be returning these to your father. It’s all right, dear—if you apologize, I’ll keep this our little secret. Come now, dear, say it,” Merlina continued, pouring her heart into her words. “Say ‘I’m sorry.’ You can do that, can’t you, Sophelia? You’re a smart young girl, aren’t you?”

She wholeheartedly wanted Sophelia to understand her—to trust her.

Sophelia fell silent and cast her gaze to the ground before finally looking up at Merlina.

Her eyes. Her brown eyes looked back at Merlina with nothing at all out of the ordinary, but for some reason, a terrifying chill raced its way down Merlina's spine. Was this how she looked at her parents? At all adults?

"I'm…truly sorry for what I've done, mother."

Though she'd been taken by an unease of unknown origin, Merlina felt a wave of relief when she saw Sophelia hang her head in apology. *Oh, good! I've finally gotten through to her! No matter who it is, so long as you pour your heart out talking to them, you can always come to understand each other!*

"As long as you understand, that's all that counts." Merlina gave Sophelia a heartfelt smile as Sophelia slowly lifted her head. The girl's brown eyes had returned to their usual quiet shade.

Just what was that back there? Merlina thought, tilting her head to the side. Sophelia had called her "mother." Regardless, Merlina felt relieved.

"What's wrong, dear?" she asked out of the kindness of her heart.

"I'll return those documents to father's study," Sophelia replied. "If they're returned to the wrong location, it'll cause problems for him, and I'm sure he'll find out that I took them. You'll keep it a secret, won't you, mother?"

"Yes… I suppose I will."

What was the word…? Merlina thought for a moment. It was like Sophelia was, oh…*impertinent*, that was it. She felt guilty for thinking such, but the girl's attitude wasn't cute at all. But no, she'd certainly put that little head of hers to use. Merlina didn't feel anything childlike at all from Sophelia. If she had to say one way or another, it was more like Sophelia was playing at being a child instead.

No, no, that's no good. I can't go thinking something like that, Merlina thought, shaking her head.

"All right, very well then," she replied. "Put them back right away. And would you call Lilina? We can all go shopping together."

"Of course!"

Yes, now *that* was a good answer. *That's right. That's how answers should be. You can't just say, "What?" back to someone! Ah, I'm so glad*

you've had a change of heart!

That was what Merlina thought, at least. But shaking off her misgivings and breathing a sigh of relief at Sophelia's energetic answer turned out to be a mistake, because the next moment, the second Sophelia held the documents, she sped away.

How unbecoming of her! Sophelia raced past Merlina before she could even be scolded. *Hey, wait! Wait up! Hey, she's so…far! How'd she get so far?!*

Flustered, Merlina tried to chase after Sophelia but couldn't gain so much as a step of ground on her. No matter how poor her family had been, Merlina was still of noble birth. She'd never needed to do something as barbaric as run around, so it took every bit of her effort to keep from tumbling over—not to mention the expensive dress and high heels she wore weren't suited for running about. *I just can't do it! I'm at my limit!*

Merlina hadn't even made it to the hallway before she collapsed to the ground in exhaustion.

"Mother?!"

Passing through, Lilina noticed her mother sitting on the ground before hurriedly running to her aid.

"What happened, m'lady?" the lady-in-waiting with Lilina asked Merlina with a worried expression. Merlina's own lady-in-waiting, who'd desperately rushed after her, also lent her a helping hand, huffing and puffing with sweat on her brow.

Merlina burst into tears at their kindness.

What a terrible child!

Merlina couldn't stop crying.

That evening, after having exhausted herself from crying, Merlina was resting in bed when her beloved Wilson returned home.

"Are you okay?" Wilson asked kindly, only for Merlina to burst into tears again at his kindness.

"It seems Sophelia just outright hates me!"

"Don't worry me like that," Wilson said, gently caressing Merlina's cheek. "The girl's a poor excuse for a daughter. She's just like her wench of a mother. The way she looks, the way she talks, the way she carries herself—just catching a glimpse of her is enough to make my skin crawl, but since she's engaged to the crown prince…I can't very well throw her out either."

“Dear, don’t say such terrible things!” Merlina replied. “She’s your daughter too, isn’t she?”

Wilson gave an unpleasant laugh. “My daughter?”

Whenever he’d speak about Sophelia’s deceased mother, Wilson always made this sort of face. Merlina didn’t like that face. That face made her wonder just where her kind and sweet Wilson had vanished off to—it was the face he made when he was thinking of someone other than himself.

“I hardly consider the girl my daughter,” Wilson said with a scoff. “She’s just here, that’s all. But she *does* have her uses. That’s why, Merlina—and I’m sorry to ask you to endure such—I hope you’ll put up with her.”

“Oh dear, *endure*?” Merlina asked, blinking.

Endure? Merlina had never done such a thing in her life. Wilson had always been kind to her, always showing her heartfelt consideration.

While the fact that he’d been someone else’s husband when they first met had been the tiniest bit unpleasant, he was a noble, after all. All nobles fell into their fair share of marriage traps. Seeing Wilson struggle beneath the weight of his house and a marriage he never wanted, Merlina had always thought he was pitiful. All she wanted to do was grant him just a bit of relief.

“While it was hard seeing you go back to *her*, you came back here for me, didn’t you? I’m so happy it’s almost frightening,” Merlina said.

“Merlina…”

Sophelia’s mother’s death had been an accident, apparently—a tragedy on her way back from a tea party. Word had it that the horse had suddenly gone wild as she was trying to climb aboard the carriage. *What on earth had she been doing for a tame horse to go wild like that?* As a proper lady, Merlina had her own reservations about the situation. *And that’s why Sophelia grew up as she did. Oh dear, how terribly pitiful!*

“Say, Wil… I want to raise Sophelia up to be a proper lady, but I just can’t get through to her. Whatever will I do…?” Merlina sniffled as a tear stole down her cheek.

“You truly are a magnificent woman,” Wilson said as if in a trance, color filling his cheeks.

“Dearie…” Merlina replied, gripping the audacious hands

caressing her face. Merlina loved his hands—the rugged, hardened hands of the man who upheld the weight of his family's name.

"I'm the one in the wrong here," Wilson went on. "I'll do my part with the girl as well… Even then, she won't listen to a word I tell her, so it won't do much good. I'll just have to be more forceful with her."

"Oh dearie, I'm not a fan of anything painful like that!"

"It's for her own good. Don't you think?"

Did she think so? *Maybe it* is *for her own good. It has to be.*

Merlina nodded. After all, she had never encountered a child so unwilling to listen to others, so cunningly clever—a child that would even resort to violence. A gentle hand wouldn't be enough to mend such a child's warped ways. Merlina was the lady of House Lotus—she *had* to do it.

"Challenging as it may be, I'll give it my best."

"Thank you, Merlina."

And yet…Merlina's resolution was all for nought.

Sophelia didn't change in the slightest—not one bit. She didn't change a bit, an ounce, or a fleck. Each and every time Merlina invited her out, she continued to plaster on that doll-like smile and tell lies about how she had her studies or her work or her training day in and day out.

There was just no way she had to study every single day like that. And what was her "job" even supposed to be? And *training*? Indeed, apparently Sophelia had been "training" by running about the courtyard. *No wonder she's so fast.* Merlina found herself unsurprised to learn such. *But that's not ladylike at all! And just how will she ever serve as the crown prince's fiancée with such a habit?* Merlina was sick with worry.

With the situation being what it was, Merlina scolded Sophelia, but she always felt as if she were too late. Even when she invited Sophelia out shopping, the girl's response was "If you could've given me prior notice of your invitation, I would've been happy to make arrangements in my schedule." Her words were barbed—not cute at all.

And more importantly, Merlina had felt like going out *now*. How was she supposed to know how she'd be feeling tomorrow until it actually *was* tomorrow?

But even then, that wasn't really the root of Merlina's frustration. She was upset by Sophelia's lies and less than ladylike behavior. And so, at Wilson's urging, Merlina hardened her heart toward the girl. It had to be done—it was for Sophelia's education.

So when Lilina declared that "His Highness said he likes me!" in a rose-colored trance with her cheeks filling with color ever so charmingly, Merlina wasn't surprised in the slightest.

After all, her daughter *was* cuter.

Lilina had truly grown into a wonderful, proper lady. She was charming, refined, and kind to all she met. When she accompanied Merlina to tea parties, she always drew a crowd of men and women, both young and old. What a splendidly charming, wonderful daughter she was! Merlina had never seen such a stunning lady in all her days. *She took after her mother, you see!*

It all felt wonderful—absolutely magnificent. Merlina was beside herself with happiness.

Compared to the likes of Sophelia, who could barely get through her monthly tea parties with the prince, Lilina proved quite the opposite! If His Highness longed for Lilina, who could possibly blame him? *Oh, but it's just so terribly disheartening!* Marriage was no simple matter for nobles or the royal family.

"I want to make her wish come true, my dear," Merlina said, tearfully confiding in Wilson. "I want her to feel the same happiness that I feel when I'm with you, Wil. Whatever will I do…?"

"I understand, dear," Wilson replied. "I'll try talking with His Highness. If he takes Lilina as his betrothed, we can finally rid ourselves of the girl. But you must understand, Merlina, it won't be easy. You do understand, don't you?"

"Yes, of course I understand, Wil."

"I'll do something about this, so just wait until the time comes."

"Thank you, Wil."

Oh, Wil! I knew I could count on my beloved!

As Wilson embraced Merlina, she didn't doubt him in the slightest. *And why would I? Wilson's always loved me and me alone, and he's given me a treasure in Lilina. And he really did make me his wife!*

The three of them laughed together every day, surrounded by kind ladies-in-waiting, with a crowd of maids and butlers taking

care of them. Merlina was truly happy.

She *had been* happy…at least, up until just a bit ago… Until just a few moments ago.

“You fool, what’ve you done…?!”

She *had been* happy. She’d never heard Wilson shout nor seen him look at her in anger.

They’d all been invited to a party held by the royal family. Wilson and Merlina had danced together through a number of songs. Many had confessed their jealousy of Merlina and Wilson’s relationship. She had been happy…

…until Lilina had been found entangled with His Highness the Crown Prince.

“W-Wil, you—!”

“Silence, you brazen whore!”

Merlina heard a smack. And then a thump. Her legs gave way beneath her as she collapsed onto the sofa in utter astonishment.

Huh? A smack? Did I…? Did I just get…hit? Hey, no, wait. Hold on. Wait. That would be just like—

“I told you to *wait*, did I not?!” Wilson barked. “We have the king from the neighboring country here at this party tonight! And just look—just look what you’ve done! How am I supposed to sweep this under the rug with so many witnesses?!”

“I-I… I didn’t…!”

“Stop it, father, please! I’m sorry!” Lilina pleaded. “I just couldn’t say no to His Highness! We love each other! *We’re in love*!”

“Love?! Listen to yourself! You couldn’t even spare a thought for the time or place without going into heat like some mare, could you?!” Wilson said, cursing Lilina as she stood between him and Merlina. He looked down at her and snorted. “Only fitting for the daughter of a whore.” Wilson—her kindhearted, dignified, beloved Wilson—curled his lips in the twisted grin Merlina hated.

“Wil…?” Merlina started, staring blankly up at Wilson. “I thought you loved me…?”

“I *did* love you,” he replied. “How beautiful you and Lilina are, how adorable you are—how foolish you are—I love you both from the bottom of my heart…so long as things are going according to my plan.” Wilson clenched his fist.

Instinctively, Merlina closed her eyes as if to brace herself.

“I won’t hit you,” Wilson said with a laugh. “My hand just slipped

back there."

Ah, that was it. Of course it was. There was just no way Wilson would ever intentionally do something so horrible.

"This is the room they sent us to so we could calm Lilina down," Wilson explained. "I can't lay a finger on either of you in the castle."

Huh?

What? Why, it almost sounds like he's saying he can do whatever he wants to us once we're back in the manor! The thought was absurd. Wilson could never do such a thing.

No, she had to have misheard him. Merlina's beloved Wilson would never say something so horrid.

As if he'd grown bored of her, Wilson gave a long, weary sigh and cast his gaze away from Merlina as she held herself, trembling. "Our only option now is to work toward making Lilina His Highness's fiancée. His Majesty the King knows how important House Lotus is. We can still come back from this."

"B-But father, why?" Lilina stammered. "Don't you want me to be engaged to His Highness? I thought you hated my sister!"

Wilson sneered. "Oh, my precious, *stupid* little Lilina. You really didn't understand what I meant when I told you to wait, did you? You really are too foolish for your own good." Wilson laughed, but try as Merlina might, she couldn't find a trace of humor anywhere on his face.

Even after Wilson violently slammed the door to the other room behind him, Merlina couldn't move so much as a step. *But why? Why? Why is this happening?* That was the only thought that circled her head.

She wondered what Wilson was angry at her for. Just what would happen after this? What would happen to her? She didn't have the answer for any of that.

Still weeping, Merlina's beloved daughter quietly turned back to face her. Her amber eyes matched Merlina's own. Her cheeks were like two ripe peaches, glistening as tears slid down them like strings of pearls. Her rose-colored lips slowly curved upward into an arc.

"It's all going to work out," Lilina said. "Father—His Highness—they'll make it okay. They always tell me how cute I am or how they'd do anything for me, so I'm sure of it."

“But…” Merlina’s daughter and the cutest girl in all the world went on, “I apologized, so why didn’t father tell me what a good girl I was? Why, mother?” Lilina laughed with tears in her eyes. It was as if Merlina were staring into a mirror.

Lilina was terribly adorable…so why did Merlina feel so awful?

“Whatever will we do?”

Lilina’s smile struck fear into the depths of Merlina’s heart.

Side Story II: See You Around

Oznil Warrion could still remember the day he became a father.

“What’re you doing, dear…?”

Holding his child, Oznil found himself staring at his beloved wife’s back, only for her to return a puzzled look.

“It’s just, I thought you might have wings on your back that I never noticed, so…”

“You’ve finally lost your mind, haven’t you? That’s what too much training will do…”

Her words were biting, but still.

But still—!

My, what a surprise! I thought she was an angel for a moment! Oznil looked back down at his child, now casting a round-eyed gaze back up at him.

Oznil’s thoughts ground to a halt. *Huh? The little one’s entirely too cute, though.*

After all, there was no mistaking it: He held a beautiful baby girl in his arms. It had the sort of face that could only grow up to be a beautiful girl. No, that wasn’t it—the child was his *son*. *Whew!* Oznil breathed a sigh of relief. If it were a girl, he was sure he would never allow her to take so much as a step out of the manor.

He’d heard that newborns looked like little monkeys, but that wasn’t the case here. If his child was supposed to look like a little monkey but was already this cute, then what would happen when the little one grew up? It went without saying there’d be throngs of suitors and perverts after her. And then one day, someone from who-knows-where would sweep her away and she’d leave Oznil behind.

It was bound to happen with such a beautiful little girl. After all, it had taken three days and three nights of Oznil prostrating himself before his wife to finally court her. Was this just retribution for his own folly?

“Are you crying, dear?”

“I won’t let them have my daughter…!”

“The child’s a boy, dear.”

They named their child Livionis, and given that he was a baby boy and not, in fact, an angel, he neither flew out of Oznil's arms nor ran off with some stranger. Instead, the child grew up healthy and strong. *Whew!*

But his son was indeed terribly cute. What part of him, you ask? That face of his.

Every part of his son was cute, from his cheeky personality, to the fact that he didn't cry even at the startled faces and shouts of even their oldest servants when they came upon him in the night.

He was clever for his years as well. It was more like *everything about him* was cute. Everything about Oznil's beloved son was cute. After all, he'd been born to Oznil and his wife, the most charming woman in all the world.

In fact, if there were any reason at all for his son *not* to be cute, he'd sure have loved to hear it. The fool who would point out such a thing would rue the day they were born.

Their second son was born right around the time when three-year-old Livionis had suddenly unleashed a burst of fire magic and burned their garden to ashes. The second child resembled Oznil so much it was almost pitiful. Even then, Oznil found his second son so cute he couldn't stand it.

But even then, Livionis's face was so well shaped that even Oznil couldn't help but worry if his son was *too* cute. Had Livionis lacked his father's purple eyes and black hair, Oznil would've had no problem believing that his wife had conceived Livionis entirely on her own. *I just knew she was some goddess or angel!* He would've had a far easier time believing that.

You think I'm being too partial because he's my son? No, far from it. No, my son is so cute it's terrifying. Oznil had *plenty* of stories to go around that demonstrated such.

"Father, when I went to the tea party today, I was given another love letter for my older brother..."

"And just which young lady gave you this letter?"

"It's from the *son* of House Robins."

"Burn it."

Oznil found himself relieved that he had a son more often than once. He was vehemently relieved, in fact. No, truly—he was relieved.

His second son was relieved in his own right. "Good thing I took

after you, father…" His face was unchildlike, as if he were a wolf or some vicious hound. It made him look almost too dignified, a fact that left Oznil feeling rather fortunate. He felt like "good thing" meant something different in this context, but considering that he himself had often been likened to the beastly half of *Beauty and the Beast*, he was glad to hear his son's gratitude, so that was all that mattered.

But now…

Oznil and his absolutely beautiful wife, Adealyde, had grown ever so slightly worried about their astonishingly cute Livionis.

Livionis looked like someone had taken Adealyde, shrunken her down, and changed some of her colors. Their son was entirely too cute—so wickedly cute that he was bound to steal away the hearts of boys and girls alike—so was it really okay to just toss him into the Knight Academy?

No, it wasn't okay at all! That was what they immediately decided without a second thought. Why? Just think about it!

The Knight Academy was an unkempt place filled to the brim with boys living together with nothing in the way of recreation. And just what would happen if an angel descended upon such a place? The results wouldn't be good.

Adealyde, Oznil's absolutely adorable wife, laughed. "We'll have a real issue if he's ever attacked."

Oznil, however, couldn't bring himself to laugh.

With that in mind, Oznil set about putting Livionis through the mill every way he could. He put him through the mill and then some. Still, since the Warrions were the sort of deranged family that taught their children to hold a blade before a fork, it *was* business as usual—though Oznil subjected Livionis to triple the hardships he himself had endured in boyhood.

Oznil had been worried at first, knowing that he would've fallen into delinquency had he been on the receiving end of such treatment. However, their sons had truly inherited all the worst parts of Oznil and Adealyde in all the best ways; their stubborn sons had banded together to form the "We're Gonna Make That Bastard Dad of Ours Cry Someday" Alliance. Together, they stood valiantly against their father—much to Oznil's delight. *Good thing they're so strong-willed!*

So without so much as an ounce of restraint, Oznil gave his

boys thrashing after thrashing, sending them flying through the air with a punch, kick, or throw. *Be strong, my sons!*

As a result, his sons developed their skills at an extremely rapid pace, so much so that those around them anticipated they would be the mightiest knights in all of history. Meanwhile, the Captain of the Knights was eagerly counting down the days until Livionis would graduate from the Knight Academy.

And then, one day in the middle of all that, Livionis fell in love—his first love.

Oznil didn't have the slightest idea about his son's romantic history, so he had no way of knowing whether or not it actually was Livionis's first love, but it was probably the first time he'd ever been so serious about someone else. His love was so fierce it bordered on foolishly naive, so pure it was almost haughty. *I remember when I felt like that!* But Oznil couldn't simply laugh off the crush because the target of his son's affections was none other than the crown prince's fiancée—Sophelia von Lotus.

Livionis was a good boy. And that was the problem.

Why was that a problem, you ask? It was a problem because Sophelia was graceful, refined, and clever far beyond her twelve years of age, always putting on a quiet smile as she expertly handled whatever task fell upon her—traits which, in Oznil's eyes, made her the perfect match for Livionis.

The girl had been educated to bear the burden of the whole kingdom on her shoulders; merely being the lady at the helm of her house would've been a waste. And what was more, the men of House Warrion were all impulsive—short-tempered, for lack of a better term. Either way, they were of a *rougher* disposition. A girl lacking in childish nature such as Sophelia might be able to loosen up a bit for the better, while a boy like Livionis who knew nothing but charging recklessly ahead might learn something of caution if he had someone to protect.

The thought had occurred to Oznil, but he had the wisdom not to voice it. After all, she was the crown prince's fiancée. There was simply no way that such a love could ever become a reality.

Whenever he saw Sophelia with her family Oznil had an indescribable sense that something wasn't quite right. When he discovered the true source of this feeling, he was completely and utterly disgusted, and for his part, he wished he could do

something to help the poor girl. But at the end of the day, she was the crown prince's fiancée.

Even for Oznil, known as the "Peerless Halberd," there were things he could do and things he couldn't. Come to think of it, there were more things he couldn't do, unfortunately. Being an adult was far more boring than he'd imagined—and that was no laughing matter.

Instead, he'd only grown more and more skilled at giving up.

Warning Livionis against pursuing his love alongside his wife, Oznil was just a bit disheartened that he'd turned into such a boring adult.

But, then again, if Livionis were the sort of good little boy who'd just give up after being warned, he would've broken under the pressure a long time ago. By the time Oznil realized this, however, it was already too late.

Livionis was passing his exams left and right at a frightening pace. And somewhere along the way he'd come to be whispered of as the "Chief Excessive Officer of the Next Crown Princess Fan Club."

The hell?

Oznil sank his head into his hands while Adealyde exploded in laughter. "That's our son all right!" she said. "He certainly goes all in!"

Oznil couldn't say a word back to her. Having been pressured, pressured again, and then pressured more yet by a woman so stunning she might've very well come from another planet, Oznil melted beneath her grasp as he found himself at the pinnacle of bliss day in and day out.

After all, House Warrion as it was now had been built upon the way Adealyde herself "went all in," as well as Oznil's own bold and shameless disposition and his unbending refusal to give up on something he'd decided so long as he might live.

Indeed, Livionis was their son through and through.

With the situation as it was, Oznil realized it would likely be far better for his mental health to watch over his son rather than force him to abandon his feelings. Oznil made his decision in an instant. *Don't worry—adults are used to giving up. Ha ha!*

And so, as Oznil was resting after he'd been summoned for guard duty at an evening party, he heard a voice. "It's His Highness

the Crown Prince…and the daughter of House Lotus…!" The voice, carried to him through his magic gem, trailed off in a way that almost seemed intentional. The moment Oznil heard that voice, he figured that tonight was finally the night.

Sophelia von Lotus, who'd always smiled so quietly before, had screamed at the top of her lungs, and yet Oznil heard neither Livionis's voice nor even a mention of his name. This was no *normal* emergency.

After all, if Sophelia had been attacked by someone, by now, Livionis would've already transformed into some terribly ferocious creature that only Oznil could stop. The fact that Oznil could merely issue orders to his subordinates before sitting back and leisurely having a cup of tea was proof enough that there'd been no such attack.

In other words, after finally having her fill of that idiot of a prince, Sophelia had devised a plan. And if that were the case, there was simply no way that Livionis Warrion would ever let the chance pass him by.

The one to confirm that Oznil's prediction had been spot-on was none other than Oznil's younger son, Arthur, who'd been invited to the party as a guest. Currently enrolled in the Knight Academy, Arthur had come to the castle as his mother's escort in place of his father and elder brother, who had their duties to attend to.

"What of Adealyde?"

"She made her rounds and promptly returned home," Arthur explained matter-of-factly. "I'm here as her escort, so I hoped to return with her, but she told me she wouldn't let me back in the manor if I didn't dance to at least one song. It was an absurd request, so I was merely killing time, but then I heard a scream, so I've been gathering information."

Quite unlike Livionis, who captivated both men and women alike, Arthur found himself so barren of romantic interest from others it was almost tragic. *Sorry you had to turn out looking just like me.* Oznil couldn't bring himself to say that though.

Arthur was still just thirteen years old, and while Oznil could understand why Adealyde might worry about Arthur after focusing on the big picture for her son, Oznil understood Arthur's feelings better than anyone else—painfully so. The feelings were

so real to him that he could cry.

Oznil made up his mind to plead with Adealyde to cut the poor boy some slack when he'd made his way home.

"By the way," Arthur began, pulling up a chair. "It seems Livionis will be taking his leave of us."

"Will he now?"

Joining the Knights for their military exercises whenever he had a break, Arthur had a natural hardiness to his character that allowed him to blend right in with the Knights. Arthur seemed to know nothing of making himself unintrusive or showing tactful hesitancy, instead filling his cup with tea with an air of self-importance.

"Did you see him?" Oznil asked.

"Certainly not. My brother would never be that reckless," Arthur replied. "He's taken the back way to escort her to the mansion, making sure that no one notices. From the sound of it, the rest of House Lotus will be staying in the castle until their daughter calms down. Any movement now would be sure to stand out, after all."

"That's not it..." Even as he sat there blankly, figuring he wouldn't have a role in any of this, Oznil was listening carefully to his magic gem to gather information on the facade that was being constructed. Or, perhaps put another way, that was precisely why he was taking a break and sipping at his tea.

Arthur stared back at his father, casting a look of blank ignorance back at him. Oznil glared at him, only for Arthur to finally nod. "Oh," he said. "I'm a member of the fan club, so I think I may have a better understanding of the situation than you, father."

That was the first Oznil had heard of this.

"Or, to be a bit more precise, I'm actually a member of the Livionis Support Brigade."

"Huh...? You're a part of what now?" Oznil didn't have the slightest clue what his son was talking about.

"It's the Livionis Support Brigade. There are some members of the Next Crown Princess Fan Club who want to see Livionis and Lady Sophelia together. They think he'd be able to make Lady Sophelia far happier, or perhaps they just want to see Livionis's efforts pay off...? It's hard to say, but it's sort of like a fan club for my brother in a way. It goes without saying no one's breathed a

word of it to Livionis, though. The men running about now are all from that brigade."

Oznil's head was hurting just a bit.

What?

Oznil always made a cool and calm assessment of a situation before slicing his way out of it, such as when he'd rushed headfirst to help one of his subordinates when they were surrounded by a throng of beasts or that time when he'd encountered a massive monster. But now, his brain had frozen in its tracks. There was so much information to keep track of he could hardly keep up.

"You…care about your brother that much?" For what it was worth, Oznil was impressed by his sons' brotherly connection. When he'd had the two of them spar, they'd beaten each other to a pulp—so much so that even Oznil himself couldn't help but feel uncomfortable. But look at how they'd grown! They didn't give a rat's ass about keeping up the crown prince's engagement. While Oznil had his reservations about the absurdity of the situation, this was the first he'd heard of these schemes, so it was all fine. And really, there was apparently a fan club for his son, so he was sure they'd thought things through.

"Care about him?" Arthur replied. "As if! I'm just the type who wants to be a part of the party instead of watching from the sidelines!"

Now, now, there's nothing to be ashamed of in helping out your brother! Oznil reached out to pat his son on the head but froze.

"By the way, this means I'm officially the heir to the family fortune, right?" It was the first time Arthur had smiled in a long time.

Livionis was so expressive that one might wonder if he and Arthur were really brothers. Anyone would've been shocked to see the two side by side, but one look at Oznil would be all it took for them to nod in understanding—that was how little Oznil and Arthur moved their facial muscles. Oznil had built all the muscles he needed to fight, so he didn't know what the problem was. He didn't have the first clue about how to train his facial muscles.

But when he found himself in combat, the corners of his lips had an odd way of curling up. Oznil thought that he was smiling, but an old friend of his refused to recognize it as a smile, instead telling him, "You're just making a threat."

But was what he saw on his son's face a smile? Or was that a threat as well?

That night, Oznil sat with his head in his hands.

The carriage transporting the daughter of House Lotus had been attacked by bandits and burned to the ground. Of the two knights keeping guard over it, the one who'd been acting as the coach had been suddenly dragged from the carriage to the ground, having apparently been knocked out.

The safety of the other knight and the lady herself was unclear.

And yet, from the wreckage of the carriage, they'd apparently found a button from the Knights' uniform that had survived the flames, as well as the noble lady's hairpin. Their chances of having survived the attack were dismal.

For a week, the search for the knight and the noble lady continued, but there wasn't so much as a clue to be found. Oznil, the missing knight's father and the head of House Warrion, brought the world to tears with his proclamation: "I have no doubt my son remains alive somewhere. Even now, I have faith that he shall continue to uphold his honor and protect Lady Sophelia."

And on the polar opposite end of the reaction from the public?

"He is actually alive, though," Arthur said, deadpan.

"Our son's out there making us proud, sweetie! Don't you think?" Adealyde cooed.

"Hey, not in front of the boy!" Oznil replied.

House Warrion was secretly bursting with celebration and merriment—secretly, of course. *Secretly*.

In the eyes of the public, they were "a resilient family that continued to hold out hope that their eldest was still alive as they went about life as usual," but if one were to peek beyond their threshold, they'd see that those inside were all smiles. Even the servants were pleasantly humming away.

After all, there'd been no way it ever could've worked out between Livionis and Lady Sophelia. But they'd hoped it would. They'd wished for Livionis's happiness; he'd finally found his beloved princess. When else could they celebrate? The time was *now*.

Oznil caught Adealyde as she sprung into his lap. Smothering him with kisses on his cheek, she seemed as stunningly precious as a young girl, so much so that one would never imagine she was

the mother of two. Oznil found himself twice as happy as ever.

The day after all the commotion, he was tremendously satisfied by how the situation had developed just as he'd hoped. He was glad that he'd gone ahead and threatened the royal family. Incidentally, being the barbarian that he was, Oznil had no awareness that his actions betrayed the fact that he himself didn't have a rat's ass to give either.

He might have been a barbarian, but he was a barbarian with *heart*.

Oznil hadn't forgotten to show his gratitude for the secret actions of his servants and his son's fan club. Under the premise of showing his thanks for "their tireless search efforts," he'd treated the knights to expensive spirits. In turn, he was lauded—by both the members of that same fan club as well as those who knew nothing of the situation—as a "truly spectacular father," though the emotions behind this proclamation differed between the two groups. Oznil's reputation had improved, and now the intense looks of respect he garnered from his subordinates almost made him feel a bit sheepish.

For their part, the servants had apparently formed something of a "Young Master Support Squad" long ago. Each year they'd made new clothes for Lady Sophelia to wear should the time ever come. Likewise, they'd apparently relied on the network of servants to obtain all sorts of information from House Lotus. After learning of this, Oznil gave them all a bonus. Though, according to the servants, both Adealyde and Arthur knew of their plans, so Oznil couldn't help but feel just the slightest bit hurt.

But even then, he felt *glorious*.

His son, who knew nothing of giving up, had set out on his journey in a way fitting of a man of House Warrion. More than anything, knowing that his son's life was surrounded by care and compassion from all directions made his heart swell with pride.

It was as if Oznil's son had been born all over again.

As the feelings rose in his chest, Oznil embraced his beloved wife.

Oznil Warrion could still remember the day he became a father.

His son looked like an angel, enough to make him doubt his own eyes. But his son was neither an angel nor a girl. He was a

knight of House Warrion, and as he clutched the ultimate love he'd been shown, he leaped from Oznil's arms. He would go on wielding his blade for what mattered—just as Oznil had.

"Mother, look!" Arthur said. "The 'We're Gonna Make That Bastard Dad of Ours Cry Someday' Alliance won!"

"Oh my!" Adealyde said.

"I'm not crying...not one bit...!" Oznil sniffed.

Side Story III: Farewell

“Now what’ll we do?!” Plunging his elbows down on the low table in front of him, the boy clutched his head in his small hands in defeat.

“My, you’re a cute one,” Viviana said, staring at him.

The way he acted like a full-fledged adult despite his child-sized frame was cheeky in all the right ways. Her child, who’d given her such pain in birth, now ruffled his golden blond hair with small hands like fallen leaves. On second thought, perhaps comparing his hands to fallen leaves was a bit much. It was strange how children always looked small no matter what. *Maybe they’re around the size of those buns we have for breakfast*, Viviana thought to herself as she watched her son, Laeverion, while sipping at her tea. *Delicious.*

“You’re going to go bald from getting so upset, Rion,” Leonell warned.

“If I go bald, it’ll be all your fault, Your Majesty!” Laeverion bit back, “I’ll curse you till the end of my days!”

With his son of only eleven years glaring back at him, His Majesty King Leonell Fons Alvaeiu Rosehaste literally shrunk in on himself as he clenched his fists and drew himself into a ball—the perfect posture to irritate their son. Viviana snorted. *Are you trying to be cute, you lout?*

“Hey, that got a laugh out of you, now didn’t it, Vivi!”

“And just how old do you think you are, dear? You’re too old to be thinking you’re cute, that’s for sure.”

“I’m not old!” Leonell retorted. “I’m only forty-eight years old, you know!”

“Sounds old to me.”

“Well, from where I’m standing, you’re *both* over the hill, so would you can it, please?” Laeverion said. “And would you mind not getting off track like that?”

Laeverion slammed his little hands down on the table, only for Leonell to put on a show of feigned surprise. “Whoa there!”

That’s the sort of thing that just sets me off! Viviana thought to

herself, casting her short hair over her ear as the furrow in Laeverion's brow grew ever deeper. *My, for only being eleven, he's got quite the gorge forming on his forehead. Nicely done, my dear. That deserves a round of applause!*

As his parents, they'd done a fine job showing him everything *not* to be. With his father always snickering and his mother's coarseness, Laeverion was quite the contrast from his parents who were considered the outcasts of the royal family. He was the serious type, not to mention he was quick to anger.

Of course he is! Just look at how you two act! None had dared to voice such criticism, but after hearing it all the same, the king and queen continued down on their own path, leisurely watching the flowers blossom and blazing new trails along the way.

"Hey, stop fooling around! Hurry it up and come on!" Laeverion would always say.

The fact that Viviana always looked forward to seeing her son's face as he came calling for her was probably no secret to the boy. But that was a good thing. There was nothing Viviana liked more than seeing the face her son made when something was bothering him.

"Oh, don't get so upset, dear!"

"I'm not upset!" Laeverion bit back. "I'm just pissed!"

What's the difference? The thought occurred to Viviana, but she kept her lips sealed tight. *My, just look how* spirited *he is when he opens his eyes wide like that!* She just wanted to pet him left and right and every way over, running her hands through his hair and patting his cheeks. She wanted to see his bristling threats directed at her.

Viviana gave a satisfied laugh.

"This is hardly the time to be laughing!" Laeverion said, looking annoyed.

But if it's cute, it's cute, isn't it? Viviana knew full well that the part of her that wanted to see that cheeky little face of his twist up even more wasn't good, just as she knew that her son was wise.

"My older brother's just as much of a fool as he's always been, but it had to be Lady Sophelia's intention to have the situation escalate so. The fact that she's fled the kingdom is proof enough of that."

"She *fled*?" Viviana asked. "That's no way to speak of a lady when

we don't even know if she's alive or dead!"

"If there's actually a band of thieves strong enough to defeat the eldest of House Warrion, I'd love to recruit them for our kingdom's militia."

He's got a point, Viviana thought, watching Laeverion spit at the ground.

House Warrion had given birth to generation after generation of absurdly powerful warriors. They were a terrifying house of knights that required sons to fight against their fathers in order to succeed them as the head of the house.

Their eldest, who had been presently expected to inherit both the headship of the family and the title of "the Peerless Halberd," had apparently been assailed by thieves on his way to send off the crown prince's fiancée, with their carriage going up in flames.

A knight of House Warrion? Losing? To thieves or brigands? The mere thought of it was absurd.

Did those lowlifes have a dragon with them? Just what sort of bandits are they?

Those who knew of the crown prince's unruliness were clutching their heads, while those who didn't were trembling in terror.

"That's why we should've done something with my older brother right away!"

"We should've done what, exactly? We couldn't just throw him away," Leonell snickered.

"Well you should have!" Laeverion spat back.

Not only was the boy merciless—he was crass as well. *Just who did he get that from?*

"I told you time and time again, did I not, Your Majesty?" Laeverion continued, "I told you that there was no way things would work well between my brother and Lady Sophelia! I told you that he wasn't fit for her, so their engagement should've been called off!"

"While it's easy enough to say that, actually breaking off their engagement would have wounded Lady Sophelia's reputation," Leonell replied. "And besides, your dear old dad doesn't want to give up either Lady Sophelia or House Lotus for that matter."

"And *that's* why Lady Sophelia ran away in the first place, so I don't know what to tell you!" Laeverion snapped. "How dare you

talk about wounding her name when you wounded her left and right?! And yet you're just as brazenly calm about it as ever! Have you no shame at all?"

"That's quite a scorching tongue your son's got there, Viviana."

"Are we sure he didn't get that from you?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" Leonell replied, tilting his head to the side.

But the fact that Viviana didn't bite back and tell him, "*That's* what I mean," wasn't out of kindness. It was because it would've been a chore. He didn't have an ounce of self-awareness so it would only have been wasted breath. Viviana wasn't a fan of waste, and she didn't want to bother using up her energy. Viviana softly stroked her belly and sighed.

Even breathing had become arduous as of late, so she had to conserve her strength.

"You're starting to swell up again, aren't you?" Leonell said.

"I suppose so."

"Odd to think it's sticking to your insides, huh?" he replied, sounding as innocent as a child as he laughed.

You really are a disgusting one, aren't you? Viviana thought to herself hopelessly with her husband the king before her. *What the hell did he mean by "it's sticking to me"?! It's not like I've got clay inside me!*

He'd called it "odd," looking at Viviana as if he were watching fish swim around in a fishbowl. He was a grown man saying something like that, so of course it was unsettling. Perhaps the pure hatred she felt was just a type of defensive instinct warning her to run away from such a deranged creature. However, Viviana couldn't run away. She could only laugh.

"Can we stay on topic please, father?"

"Why, I am staying on topic!" Leonell replied. "Well, in that case, what do you think we should do, Laeverion? We needed Lady Sophelia to put Leophel on the throne. If we were to break off their engagement, would *you* take my place on the throne?"

"What are you talking about?" Laeverion said back. "Why me? I'm not the crown prince. You're the one who made the concubine's child crown prince before I was even born."

"I didn't know you'd be coming along back then, Rion."

"Could you drop the pet name, please? It makes my skin crawl."

“You wound me.”

For a long while, Viviana hadn’t been able to give birth to the children of the snickering man lounging about there on the sofa.

It wasn’t that she hadn’t *wanted* to give birth, to be clear.

And just who on earth would *want to bear this man’s children?* The thought had occurred to Viviana, but she’d gotten in the royal family’s good graces, and she’d been married to Leonell, who’d been crown prince at the time. Viviana’s own feelings on the matter weren’t needed.

But that wasn’t the point. She’d wed at fifteen, and five years later, she hadn’t shown even the slightest hint of conceiving. She’d done all the things she was supposed to do. *Oh, is that too crude? Apologies. But it’d be just the same if I chuckled about it as I fanned myself.* The stares and words that seemed to cling to her body—they’d always made Viviana so uncomfortable she could hardly stand it. *“Oh, she’s still young, so let’s just keep our hopes up for later!”* they’d say. It made Viviana sick—so much so that she’d seriously considered burning the whole castle to the ground.

And so, after having grown sick of being in the terribly troublesome position of being the queen who couldn’t give birth to an heir, at the age of twenty, Viviana had advised Leonell to seek the company of a concubine.

The first words out of Leonell’s mouth? “What? No, that would just be a massive headache.”

“I don’t wanna hear your ‘would-be’ moaning!” Viviana had bit back. “My head’s *already* aching in the present progressive tense, you lout!”

So she had given him a solid lick and then set about making the preparations. She had made all the arrangements at lightning speed—which was, of course, a bit of an exaggeration—but nonetheless, Viviana had moved quickly. Otherwise she would find herself accidentally, but quite literally, stomping out the eyeballs of all those around her who couldn’t be bothered to leash their gaze. Truly, she had the benevolence of a goddess.

There’d never been any lofty emotion such as love between her and Leonell. They were both in the same boat, so they’d gotten engaged and wed, and now they were called the king and queen. And so long as an heir was born, not only those around but even Viviana herself would’ve been just fine with that.

And so, when the concubine had given birth to a baby boy almost immediately thereafter, she had nearly burst with joy. She had been overcome with joy from the bottom of her heart. *Thank you, O Gods! And thank you, O concubine!*

There were those who'd leaped on the opportunity to decry how unbecoming it was to have the child of a concubine sit on the throne and say all sorts of other nonsense Viviana didn't really understand, but Viviana and her husband set about silencing them all using whatever means were available.

Despite being unable to even form a proper sentence at that point, Leophel had been made the crown prince. Even though the concubine had been so reserved and ladylike before, once she'd given birth to a prince, she suddenly grew emboldened. Both Leonell and Viviana had a shared understanding that quarreling with the concubine would only be a headache.

Even then, the concubine had gotten pregnant impressively quickly.

I wonder if I'm the problem? Viviana used to think as she rubbed her own slender stomach. But then, eleven years ago—seven years after Leophel had been born—Viviana had been so shocked to find that she was carrying Leonell's child that she could've fallen from her chair.

When she saw that the wailing child she'd given birth to was a boy, all she could do was bury her head in her hands.

"For crying out loud, take a look around!" The words had escaped from her mouth before she even realized it.

It wasn't her son she had been speaking to, however—she had been speaking to her husband.

"Probably wouldn't be good if they thought we weren't on good terms," Leonell had said as he floated into her bedchambers. For her part, Viviana had merely nodded and agreed before shedding her heavy night-robe, so Leonell wasn't the only one worthy of criticism in her opinion.

From the sound of it, mothers could get rather irritated after giving birth. *In that case, I've got something just for you!* Viviana had thought, balling her hand into a fist. Leonell, however, had merely laughed and dodged out of the way. That was just the sort of man he was.

While there were plenty who were overjoyed to see that their

prediction that a child would be born to the king's legitimate wife had come true, Viviana never engaged with any of them. Why not, you ask? Because it would have just been another headache. It wasn't that she didn't have *any* ambitions. So long as the kingdom flourished, that was all that mattered. Anything more was just a headache, that's all…just a headache.

Unlike Viviana, however, the majority of people were rather assiduous. Those types claimed to be devoted to bettering their standing and authority, leaving Viviana quite impressed. She certainly admired them.

She didn't mean that sarcastically either. Viviana was too indolent to want to use her brain and energy on anything besides her duties, so when the concubine began shouting about how Leophel had a right to the title of crown prince, Viviana had done all she could to honor those wishes. Thinking it was perhaps a mother's love that inspired such passion in the concubine, Viviana had decided to ask Laeverion—who'd grown to be startlingly clever—his feelings on the matter.

"Rion, do you *want* to be king?"

"King?" Laeverion had echoed. "That's the last thing I want. It'd just be a headache."

He was Viviana and Leonell's child to a shocking degree.

"But you talk about His Majesty and the ministers and politics so much!"

"I enjoy setting the kingdom in order," Laeverion had replied. "And that's precisely why I want to stay within the safety of the kingdom being someone else's responsibility. Holding all the responsibility at the top of the ladder would just be a headache. I certainly have no need of it, so I hope you'll cultivate my older brother and his concubine mother into outstanding puppets."

He was indeed Viviana and Leonell's child. But he certainly did have a nasty personality!

Oh, but life never did go as planned. Back then, Laeverion hadn't even been alive long enough to count ten years of age on his fingers, but he had been unwilling to write off the stupidity of his older brother—who'd already come to be resented far and wide—as a mere fact of life. Puppets were handy because they performed exactly how you directed them, but if a puppet were to snap free of its strings, cause a mighty fuss, and jump off the

stage? Why, there'd be no show in the first place then.

"This would all go much quicker if you were willing to be king," Leonell said, casting his son a glance from the sofa he was sprawled out on.

"Absolutely not," Laeverion said with a pleasant smile. "Worry not, my younger brother will be born soon enough. I'll make sure to bring him up as a fine crown prince."

"Oh? But that's still a long way off," Leonell replied.

"Be a dear and live a long life for us, won't you?" Viviana added.

Leonell groaned. "Ugh. If that was supposed to be charming, it wasn't."

"Oh, the baby kicked!" Perhaps the child had heard the other men in the room spouting off nonsense. Viviana smiled as she felt the baby give a sound kick from her womb. "It doesn't look like that'll play out like you hope," Viviana added. "To begin with, it's not Leonell's child, so it has no right to the throne. And Rion? You said your younger brother would be coming, but we don't know if the child will be a boy or a girl."

"If my fool of a brother can be the crown prince, then anyone can."

"That's a terrible thing to say," Leonell replied, snickering.

When Viviana had taken a lover a few years ago, Leonell hadn't reproached her at all. He seemed to have been completely unbothered by it.

Viviana wasn't a fan of lurking about in the shadows, and fueling off-putting rumors would have just caused problems, so when Viviana had found herself unexpectedly in love, before she acted upon it, she'd simply asked Leonell head-on: "Do you mind if I have a lover?"

"Oh? That's fine," Leonell had responded, sounding as if it hardly mattered at all.

But his next question had been "Do you mind if I visit your chambers tonight?" so Viviana had given him a sound slugging.

It was right as they were about to celebrate twenty years of marriage. It had been a long while since Leophel had been named crown prince, and a clever child had now been born to Leonell and Viviana. By this point, no one was fretting over the king and queen's relationship, and Viviana couldn't help but feel even more joy at the indifference her stability now granted her. *Why don't you*

go and keep that concubine of yours happy!

Having caught on to the businesslike relationship between his parents, the clever Laeverion had even applauded her choice, complimenting her good taste. As such, Viviana made no attempt to hide the way she doted on her lover. From the outside, they must've seemed a terribly odd family, but it was Viviana's dear family all the same.

The fact that the concubine had seemingly been relieved at this state of affairs was, in Viviana's eyes, yet another reason to be delighted. *That concubine sure knows how to put on the pressure!* The concubine had grown more and more fervently defensive with each passing year, so the sheer force she exhibited truly was a thing to behold.

As harsh as it might sound, the woman was trying to take a pitifully incompetent boy and make him the king. What was more, that was while ensuring he didn't fall into the prodigious shadow of his younger brother or fiancée. Such a feat would require a nigh inhuman level of effort—from his birth mother, that was.

After all, the prince himself wasn't about to lift so much as a finger in his own interest. And so, the concubine strove to use whatever tools she had at hand—and even more at foot when that wasn't enough—no matter how dirty or uncouth as it might be.

And yet, her son had gone and messed everything up. It was almost too terrible to even behold. Wise was the man who said that a child knows not what lies in their parent's heart. Just how well did the concubine understand the consequences of what had transpired? Unfortunately, such was outside of Viviana's experience, blessed as she was with a foul-natured but clever son.

Sitting across from Viviana, Leonell made a grand show of letting out a sigh. "Well, what would you like me to do, Laeverion? Just what sort of punishment should I dole out to Leophel?"

Laeverion grunted unhappily. "That's enough of that nonsense out of you! We've lost the gem of the kingdom, and you're joking around as if nothing's wrong, you grimy bastard!"

Ha ha ha! My, that's a foul mouth he's got. Just whom did he get that from?

Slamming his fist down on the table, Laeverion rose to his feet. The boy glared at Leonell as the king leaned back onto the couch with a creak before casting his gaze to Viviana.

“Mother!”

“What?”

“I’ll be taking my leave now! Please, don’t strain yourself. And give my best wishes to Sir Verios!”

Even as he muttered angrily, he hadn’t forgotten to show his mother the proper respect and consideration. Part of Viviana wanted to tease him a bit more, but instead, she simply replied, “And you as well,” before watching his small shoulders turn as he left. Even when he’d *actually* gotten cross with her, Viviana couldn’t help but feel sad to see him leave.

“Kid’s pretty clever to play angry and leave the room like that,” Leonell noted. “Think he’s trying to say he doesn’t want to be involved?”

“I think he was being serious when he called you a ‘grimy bastard,’ at least.”

“Ha ha, how cute of him!”

“Like you *actually* mean that.”

It wasn’t that Leonell had been lying, it was just…well, he probably *hadn’t* meant a word of it.

Leonell lacked any love for either of his sons. *Love? Hmm? Oh, yes, yes, that. That word in the dictionary.* That was probably the full extent of his understanding of the emotion.

In truth, Viviana knew full well that her husband was emotionally void, lacking even the tiniest scrap of affection for anything or anyone. It was almost like he didn’t have enough screws holding his head on straight—or rather, like he’d been made with a few integral screw holes less than the average person.

It was relatively early on that Viviana had realized that he could *understand* emotions but couldn’t sympathize with them. Even then she had taken her place as queen.

“What a waste,” Leonell said. “He knows exactly what position he’s in even at his age. Not to mention there are probably more than a few plotting to put him on the throne.”

“And while he criticizes you for acting however you wish, he’s arrogant enough to try and do whatever he wants to all the same. He’s a lot like you,” Viviana added.

“Excuse me? Like me? *You’re* the one he took after,” Leonell replied, sounding entirely unconvinced.

Viviana scoffed. *Talk about disgusting!* Viviana was in no mood to put up with a sullen old man trying to rub things in her face.

"But still, why would one of the sons of House Warrion take his leave?" Leonell mused.

"Apparently, he was quite devoted to Lady Sophelia. He probably couldn't bear to see her treatment."

"My, you certainly are well-versed on the topic. Did you learn of this from Verios?"

"Who's to say?" Viviana replied, lifting her cup.

"Not that it really matters." Leonell ran his fingers through the golden threads of his hair. "But still," he continued with a sigh, "I wonder why my sons are so different from me when they're both half me."

"I have my own thoughts on the matter."

"Oh?" Leonell replied, pressing his cup to his lips. While both his conduct and the content of his character were immutable, his mannerisms, at least, were refined. For all his faults, he was still a king.

"It's not blood that shapes people—it's their environment," Viviana explained. "It's a question of what parents do when their child falls, for example. I'm not saying this or that is correct. But the little differences there can stack up to shape a child's personality or achievements, don't you think? However, I won't deny that there are some traits a child is born with."

Since, for instance, Leonell had apparently been born like *that*, Viviana didn't feel like trying to deny the existence of talents or traits inherited from one's parents. *These are just my thoughts on the matter, so if they make you uncomfortable, please feel free to let them pass in one ear and out the other.*

For his part, Leonell looked neither comfortable nor uncomfortable, instead simply tilting his head to the side. "Is that so? Then what would you have done when Laeverion fell, hmm?"

"I would have told him, 'You can stand, can't you?' and waited until he stood back up."

"How frightening."

"For what it's worth," Viviana continued, "the concubine would've sealed off the path where her child had fallen and fired the gardener."

"Mothers are terribly frightening creatures, aren't they?"

Excuse me?

The nerve. What a brazen fool he was! He'd forgotten all about his own behavior.

"How ironic coming from you," Viviana said, glaring hatefully at him. "Don't think I've forgotten what *you* did when Laeverion fell and nearly burst into tears. 'Why do you think you fell?' 'Is your hypothesis rooted in reality?' 'How can you verify that was really the cause?' 'What should you do to avoid falling again?' 'How will you test that it is indeed the solution?' 'How will you avoid the same situation?' Bombarded the poor boy with questions without giving him so much as a chance to breathe!"

You're not talking to some minister or statesman or your secretary! You're talking to a three-year-old child! Viviana had found herself dumbfounded at what she'd witnessed, but her son had proven to be just as unusual as his father. Rising to his feet with a grunt, Laeverion had answered all of his father the king's questions, desperately forming the words despite still being unaccustomed to speaking.

Viviana had been disgusted by the display, while her ladies-in-waiting and the knights present had all grown pale. The boy's response had been no surprise given his father. It had been immediately obvious that what had transpired was anything but ordinary, so she'd had to do her share of legwork to make sure the story didn't reach any other ears. *If the concubine and her bunch caught wind of that…you'd do just as well tossing a bomb into hot oil.*

And the vital inquisitor himself?

"I don't have the slightest clue what you mean," Leonell replied. They were both far too politely mature for him to make sense of what she was actually trying to say, but he'd been speaking to a little boy. He could have blabbered on all day and his son still wouldn't have gotten it. "Oh, did that actually happen? How did Laeverion respond?"

"I don't recall."

"You don't recall? Are you sure you're not getting things mixed up?"

What about a nice slap to the face, hmm? Viviana imagined what it would feel like to smack that clean-cut, deceptively youthful face of his and send him flying. *I might actually be able to love him if I cut him in two from the waist up.*

The slap seemed like a happy idea, but even assuming she were to go through with it, he was the king, and that meant risking her life, her son's life, and the life of the child growing in her womb. Viviana wasn't that worked up, so instead she settled for throwing a nearby cushion at him.

"Ngh!"

The cushion landed squarely on Leonell's face with a fair bit of force behind it. *That's what you get!*

Just when Viviana gave a delighted snort, a knock on the door rang out through the room, only for Leonell to clutch the pillow and make a sour face.

"Bleh, so that's just how you're going to be, huh?"

"Enter," Viviana said, ignoring her husband and urging their guest to enter the room.

"Ugh, no need for that at all!" Leonell groaned. But that was no concern of Viviana's. Viviana was the type to get anything bothering her out of the way quickly and then relax to her heart's content once the matter was resolved. In all parts of life, there was nothing to be gained from putting off things until later. The fuss they were dealing with now was a prime example—in Viviana's own lowly opinion, at least.

Hating any sort of headache even more than Viviana, Leonell furrowed his brow and tossed away the cushion.

"Pardon me, Your Majesty."

Just as they'd expected, the one lowering his head respectfully in their presence was Oznil Warrion, the vice captain of the Knights. He was the father of the knight at the center of all this drama, and the head of his house.

Oznil had slicked-back black hair and narrow purple eyes with a hint of blue. Word had it that that ferocious face of his bent into a bloodstained grin when he was in combat, and Viviana found herself admiring that face just a bit. In her younger years, every time she'd seen the massive, muscle-strapped man straighten his spine, she'd always gotten just a bit flustered. Every time she heard how the children who locked eyes with him would wail in fear, she felt relieved that he wouldn't belong to anyone. Sometimes, however, she would imagine what it would be like she'd done something about it.

But she hadn't done anything about it, and now Viviana lived a

life of comfort with her husband, her child, and her lover. For his part, Oznil now lived with his wife and two children. Be that as it may, Viviana couldn't help but somewhat admire Oznil even now that he'd grown older.

Viviana rose to her feet. "I'd only be in the way."

"Oh, Vivi, don't be silly!" Leonell replied. "The king and the queen are one heart and body. Why, I can't think of a single little thing that I wouldn't want you finding out about! Don't wound me so with your words!"

The hell? So you're saying you're not gonna let me escape all on my own, aren't you, you sleazy bastard? "Wound you"? Don't make me sick. That was what Viviana thought at least, but she was the queen, so she merely clicked her tongue in distaste and shifted her gaze to Oznil. "And how does Your Lordship fare?"

"I am but honored to stand in your presence, my queen. How might I feel anything to the contrary?"

Oh, is that so? Viviana didn't know if he was being sincere, but she certainly wasn't the kind of woman to object to the sort of man who struck her fancy.

She chuckled and smiled before sitting down beside Leonell with her cup in hand. They'd forbidden the maids and ladies-in-waiting from entering their room, so she offered her own seat to Oznil. "Then please, have a seat. I'll have the servants come with tea, so please wait just a moment."

"No, I'm quite all right, thank you," Oznil answered. "I'd like to begin now, if I may."

Even his hastiness was a bit charming to Viviana, but Leonell only groaned beside her in response. *That's enough out of you. Are you a duck? On second thought, that's an insult to ducks everywhere.*

"Just as straitlaced as ever, I see," Leonell said.

Excuse me? And what's wrong with that? Viviana thought, her eyebrows drooping down.

She was a compassionate queen, showing regard for her retainer who might've lost his son—at least that was the act she tried to put on before nudging the conversation forward. "And what of your son, Your Lordship? Has there been any progress with the search?"

"Your concern is deeply appreciated," Oznil answered. "It's that very matter I hoped to speak about…"

Picking up on Viviana's intention, Oznil glanced over at Leonell. For his part, Leonell had bent his lips into a crooked frown.

"What is it, then?"

"Allow me to apologize once again for failing to protect His Highness the Crown Prince's fiancée, Lady Sophelia."

"Hmm…? You ask for my pardon simply because you're a father who's lost his son? How entirely predictable of you. If any apologies are to be made, they should be from the Captain of the Knights and the knight who brazenly returned empty-handed."

With a truly nasty laugh, Leonell completely transformed into the clear villain.

At the very least, Leonell had said something that no parent could ever say. Either way, anyone could become a parent—anyone could, no matter their character.

While it was indeed lamentable, Viviana wasn't entirely innocent either, so it wasn't in her place to say as such. The one saving grace was that Laeverion at least had been brought up right. *On second thought,* has *Laeverion been brought up right? Hmm…*

Just as she was wondering what a "good parent" even was, Oznil, the poster child of a good parent, gave his response, his expression entirely unfazed: "The knight who was able to return is still unable to rise from his bed. His injuries were quite extensive. The captain has taken charge of the search for Lady Sophelia. I only came to offer my apologies as father to my son."

"Your *apologies*, is it?" Leonell replied with a laugh. "Let us be done with the acting." The shallow smile on his face was that of a ruler.

"You know very well that both Vivi and I detest anything bothersome. Tell me in earnest—what is it you want from me?"

"I want you to refrain from punishing the Knights," Oznil answered, "even if Lady Sophelia isn't found."

"You mean even if the Knights don't *feel* like finding her?"

"What's more," Oznil continued, "I want all authority over the search to be given to the Knights and the Knights alone."

"Are you hearing this?" Leonell said, crossing his arms. "You heard him, didn't you, Vivi?" Leonell said, addressing Viviana in a sickly saccharine voice. Viviana knew full well that, in truth, there wasn't so much as a teaspoon of sweetness in his words.

"The Knights failed to protect the crown prince's fiancée, and

this is the attitude they take toward their king!" Leonell went on. "Wouldn't you call this the very definition of shameless?"

How rich coming from you! Viviana thought. But it was just as he'd said. Had it been anyone other than Oznil making such a request, they would've likely had their head lopped off on the spot. Bold was hardly the word to describe such entitlement before the king and the queen. *How admirable!*

Viviana would've loved to see this sort of dignity and age-seasoned calm from her own husband, but instead she could only nod and give up such hopes.

"That's quite an impudent stand to take for a lord such as yourself."

Viviana tilted her head, wanting to dishevel that dignity of his just a bit. Viviana wasn't ignorant of Oznil's hopes to allow his son and Lady Sophelia to escape or of the Knights' apparent support behind the mission. Be that as it may, she couldn't take her own feelings into account; allowing the royal family to be disregarded would only invite trouble.

After a moment, Oznil spoke. "I had hoped that my request would be a bold one."

Viviana's eyebrows lifted as Leonell sighed beside her.

"Why didn't you address Lady Sophelia's engagement to His Highness the Crown Prince?" Oznil asked. "It was no secret that their relationship wasn't a pleasant one."

Oh! There's the jab!

In other words, he's trying to say that we're *the ones who drove Sophelia to flee.* Viviana found herself admiring that about Oznil. He had a large, strapping frame, with a heart just as imposing, and he was surprisingly intellectual to boot. It was enough to make Viviana's heart flutter, but it went without saying that she couldn't betray that with her expression.

Viviana's husband—who didn't inspire so much as a tremble from her heart—spoke up in a slow, dragging voice. "Now listen… Try facing the facts for what they are, Your Lordship. I can say this because it's you, but do you honestly think Leophel could become king on his own? Not only can Lady Sophelia take care of all the prince's duties, but she's also humble enough to never steal the spotlight from him. Where else on earth would I find such a future queen, one who would never disrespect the royal family? And

what's more, the royal blood running through House Lotus's veins isn't just a badge of honor to flaunt—it wouldn't be wise to make an enemy of her."

"Didn't you ever stop to consider Lady Sophelia's feelings in all this?"

"And why would I do that? It's for the good of the nation. The many policies and proposals she put into practice were superb. And she raised nary a complaint that they were all executed under Leophel's name. If you can find a more suitable fiancée for the prince, then I'd love to see her."

"How about you deal with your son yourself for a start?"

"How bold of you."

Things had heated up into a full-on war of words. Viviana took a long, leisurely sip of her tea.

Wow, he really is something else, isn't he? Viviana thought as she stared at her husband.

He's actually being serious now. He's actually trying to say he doesn't get the point of weighing the girl's suffering, her misery, her life against the good of the nation.

That was why Viviana had taken her place as queen. Leonell refused to subject the nation to suffering, even at the expense of those around him. The kingdom was always richly equipped with more than enough to go around, overflowing with the smiles of the masses. He simply wouldn't permit the blood of his people to be spilled. And even if the pain of another spread out before him like a massive ocean, he would simply look across the shining surface of the water and say with the utmost composure, without so much as a trace of uncertainty, or melancholy, or hesitation, "That's our duty, isn't it?"

He's deranged. Viviana had realized this rather quickly after having been appointed as his fiancée—and that was why she had taken her place as queen.

Even though Leonell had ordered her to be willing to die for the kingdom, Viviana had not argued—she'd been able to trust that he wouldn't poison her or otherwise betray her in pursuit of his own interests. He was a complete and total failure of a human being, but in a certain way, he was a true and faithful king. Viviana didn't love her husband, but she did trust him.

"If passion were enough to feed the people, then I would have

never become king."

Leonell knew that he was different from others. He knew that, no matter what he did, no matter how he tried, he would never be like other people. Unlike anyone else Viviana knew, this rich, lonely man could say the most terrifying things without batting an eye.

"I'm sure you knew there were suspicions that the head of House Lotus murdered his first wife," Oznil said.

"Crimes that don't harm the nation's interest are no concern of mine," Leonell replied. "It's terribly odd—everyone pretended not to notice, so why am I the one being blamed now?"

"If injustice is permitted, in time, the nation will collapse. That's exactly why law and order are needed, is it not?"

"So I ask you, then, Your Lordship," Leonell replied, "is your request of me not an injustice of its own?"

The king was indeed a truly despicable man. Just being "surprisingly intelligent" wouldn't be enough to win against the sheer audacity he had displayed. Kings weren't so kind as that—*he* wasn't so kind as that.

But even then…

"Very well, then, Your Majesty," Oznil replied. "I only ask that you overlook any injustice just as you always have."

"I believe my words were injustices *that don't affect the nation's interests*," Leonell shot back. "The girl is well-versed in both the matters of the royal family and the nation's politics. There's no way I can simply allow her to escape."

"Then the Warrions shall lay down their blades."

"What did you say…?" As he sneered like some beast, there was no kindness to be found in the king's temperament.

"House Warrion has sworn its loyalty to the kingdom for generation after generation. If you will not grant one *single* request from myself as House Warrion's leader, then I shall take that to mean you have no need of our blades."

"The Peerless Halberd" was House Warrion itself, referring to the house's leader. There was no need to specify who *wielded* that halberd. It was the halberd of the royal family—of the nation.

The founder of House Warrion had left absurd legends in his wake—talk of how he'd cleaved a mountain in two with only a single strike, for example—but he had used his blade to keep the king safe without fail. The reason no one scoffed at such legends

was because every leader of House Warrion was just as legendary. It was a common joke that House Warrion was the reason that the king could die peacefully in his bed—that was how much of a powerful force they were.

Their presence was well-known in other nations as well.

The mere fact that the head of House Warrion was a knight in service to the royal family was a threat to other nations: “Don’t go attacking that knight’s kingdom.” They were like human cannons or, rather, human walls. They’d done wonders for the kingdom’s defense budget.

In short…

“Are you threatening me, Lord Warrion?”

“Who’s to say?”

It was a threat through and through.

If House Warrion were to rise against the kingdom, calling it an “issue” would be an understatement. It wouldn’t be a stretch to imagine that other nations would seize on the chance to launch an attack on the kingdom. Leonell would go down in the history books as the most foolish king to ever live.

In truth, there was a part of Viviana that found it just a bit funny to imagine Leonell being labeled a foolish king, but it’d be a problem if conflict actually broke out. While Leonell might be able to suffice somehow even without the aid of House Warrion, Viviana didn’t want any more headaches. Kings and queens were apparently bound together to share the same destiny, after all.

Oh well, Viviana thought with a sigh.

“You’ve lost, Leonell,” Viviana said.

The king’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not convinced.”

“That’s because you’ve never lost before,” Viviana replied. “But it’s wonderful you’ve gotten to experience something new. Congratulations!”

“Ugh, I didn’t realize my wife was such a sadist…”

In the end, Leonell had ended up granting Oznil’s “request” with no strings attached. While putting it that way was sugarcoating matters, after being outwitted by Oznil, the king had agreed not to search for Sophelia and Livionis or to hold the knights who’d aided their escape accountable for any crime. They’d lost so brilliantly it felt nice. It was a complete and utter defeat. *The royal family? What*

was that again?

"You're going to think up a convincing reason, right?" Leonell asked. "A reason not to punish the Knights for letting the crown prince's fiancée be murdered before their very eyes."

"Why me?" Viviana asked.

After Oznil had left the room, Leonell had started melting away into the sofa once again.

"Come on," Leonell said, twisting his face into a pout. "You like him, so you were on his side!"

Hmm?

Viviana blinked.

What did you say?

"I can't empathize with others, but I can read their emotions," Leonell replied. "You have to understand your opponent to do any sort of bargaining. I said what I said, but a nation is just a massive cluster of its people's emotions."

Oh, I see now. So that was why he'd said he'd noticed Viviana admiring Oznil. *So that was it, huh? I don't know if you think you're some sort of famous detective or what, but at the end of the day, you're just Leonell. Ha ha!*

"You always did fancy men like that."

"How dim-witted can you be? This is how you atone for your mistakes."

"What?"

It went without saying that Leonell had never experienced guilt. But interestingly enough, Leonell looked up at Viviana and asked, "And just whom is this atonement supposed to be for?"

Well, I won't deny that I do like that sort of man, Viviana thought. *But that's not the point!*

Viviana thought of the girl who'd always put on that quiet smile. "Who else but Lady Sophelia?"

Leonell gave a wide-eyed blink like a child.

"In order to maintain peace, I've avoided getting involved with both the crown prince and your concubine," Viviana went on. "Needless quarrels wouldn't serve the 'nation's interests,' as you put it."

Leonell nodded. It was the promise Viviana herself had made with him back then:

"Take a concubine."

“No, it’d just be a headache.”

“You have my word I won’t fight her.”

That was where their conversation had landed. They both knew Leonell couldn’t handle any troubles between his concubine and his wife. After all, he was void of character.

Just the thought of struggling with the concubine in a fruitless battle over a man she didn’t like and power she didn’t want was enough to make Viviana want to flee the nation.

And those were exactly the same feelings they’d inflicted upon the girl.

“I never even talked to her aside from when I had to train her as queen or when we were in public,” Viviana said. “We only ever spoke as a matter of duty.”

Viviana paused. “Even though I knew full well that she’d numbed herself at a young age and that she was just a fifteen-year-old girl.”

“You were fifteen yourself when you shouldered the weight of the nation alongside me, though,” Leonell replied. “And it was even earlier that you and I were engaged.”

“That’s right, though I did have you,” Viviana countered. “I decided that I’d shoulder the burden of the nation *alongside* you. I wasn’t alone.”

“Hmm.”

As if to concede that she might have a point, Leonell uncharacteristically—truly uncharacteristically—displayed something that could have been considered empathy.

Was there a storm on the way? Was the ground about to tear apart?

Seeing Viviana’s shock, Leonell stood. “What’s with that face? I am at least thankful to you, you know,” Leonell said.

Was a dragon or the like about to fly straight at her? (Not that Viviana knew if dragons actually existed.)

But still—“thankful.” Really? Thankful. He’d said he was *thankful*.

To think that he possessed such a human emotion! Viviana found herself in just as much shock as the time she’d learned that the eggs she’d assumed had gone bad were actually a delicacy. *Hey, those eggs* were *rotten, weren’t they?*

Viviana stood observing Leonell unblinkingly.

“Ah,” he muttered. “So that’s what I was doing to her... Hmm.”

After that, Leonell didn't speak. He didn't leave the room. He didn't touch Viviana. Instead, he simply remained there, unmoving. Until the sun sank, he simply sat there, staying at Viviana's side.

One week later, after Oznil had called off the search, Leonell took the opportunity to declare that Leophel had been stripped of his right to the throne. At the same time, he ordered the first prince to wed Lilina Lotus and rule over the northern region alongside House Lotus as their son-in-law.

It amounted to a banishment for all involved, and given that it served as a declaration of the king cutting ties with both Leophel and House Lotus, it left many nobles confused and voicing their objections. The voices of frustration from those tied to House Lotus were joined by the earsplitting wails of the concubine. Leonell, however, simply smiled and paid no heed to either.

"You don't want me to blame you for your failures at that evening party we'd invited the king of the neighboring country to? I didn't realize you were so forgiving! Well now. Oh, in that case, one of you will take responsibility for it instead, right?"

Had the world been the sort of kind place where they might've raised their hands and said, "I will!" or, "No, I'll be the one!" then Sophelia would've never made her escape in the first place.

The oh-so-pitiful House Lotus set out on their journey to the north, almost as if directed by an outstretched hand pointing the way. *Come, right this way! See you around!*

No, this was a "fare thee well" for them, the poor things.

As for the question of who would take the throne? "We'll put that on hold for now" was the king's answer.

The concubine descended into a half-mad frenzy, and even at the very end, Viviana did not speak to her. The concubine had once tried to push her down the stairs when she was holding the baby Laeverion in her arms. It wasn't that Viviana didn't harbor a grudge over it—she just hadn't opted to make it public.

Viviana lacked both sympathy and compassion for her husband, and sitting beside her, Leonell simply watched everything play out as if it didn't matter at all.

"I'll just go ahead and say that I won't be the one to take the throne," Laeverion said. "Inheriting a throne is an absurd idea in

the first place. What happens if everyone born in that generation is a fumbling idiot?"

"Couldn't they just adopt?" Viviana asked.

"Then *you* should go and adopt another child right now."

"I've already got you though, Rion," Viviana answered.

"Then I'll just be another idiot myself. I think I'll go have some fun with some girls *and* some boys then."

"You seem like you'd be shrewd enough with your fun. Why not give it a shot?"

"I'll be sticking around for you two as long as I can after all!" Leonell chimed in—the same as he'd always been.

But even then, perhaps he was thinking of Laeverion just a bit? The mere mention of the succession issue was liable to spark all sorts of trouble, but Leonell hadn't brought it up. To think he'd actually make a headache for himself! It was out of character for him so she couldn't help but be surprised at the human side he'd demonstrated, but that was where it stopped. Nothing had changed. She was living another day in her life as queen.

The world was unchanging—it was just *there*, looking back at her as indifferently as ever.

Viviana took her leave of her husband and son's lively bickering. Back in her own room, she gently peeled the cover from the book she'd planned to lend to Sophelia. It was a small, inconsequential task that she'd been keeping up for the past few years.

Viviana would take the covers off yawn-inspiring history books and textbooks on this-or-that for queens and place them over romance or adventure novels before entrusting them into the girl's small hands.

They were books she could never open in front of her tutors, the concubine, or even those from House Lotus. The girl had known nothing of reading for pleasure, so Viviana had always tried to pass along the books whenever they met in hopes that she might be able to enjoy even a brief respite, an act of charity that was entirely for Viviana's own satisfaction.

Despite being unable to help the girl, it was at best the tiniest of means to lighten the girl's mood. How entirely foolish and arrogant it had been of her! At the end of the day, Viviana was the queen. She could only ever be the wife of the king, as arrogant and selfish and deranged as he was.

“I feel sick to my stomach,” Viviana said to herself.

The girl had taken the books, looking puzzled each and every time.

She was the girl Viviana had been unable to show much kindness—the girl who was unaccustomed to being shown kindness at all. But now? Now, Viviana could only wish that somewhere out there—somewhere in this unbending world they were powerless to change—that the girl had found happiness.

“Oh, are you all right? Would you like to lie down?”

She felt the warmth of the hand caressing her back, the joy of having someone look at her with concern in their eyes.

“I love you, Verios.”

She felt the joy of proclaiming one’s love. If only the girl might know that now…

Perhaps Viviana might be permitted to at least wish.

Viviana knew the ocean of suffering their failings had created. And yet, even then, she found herself here in this very day, living.

Side Story IV: Notes of Silver

Ditz Soleil was born to a middle-class noble family.

They were not astoundingly wealthy, but it went without saying that they weren't poor either. He was the third-born son to a mostly secure noble family. His family wasn't so wealthy that he'd go on a rampage demanding to know why he couldn't inherit the family fortune as the third-born son. Both of his older brothers were brighter than he was anyway, so he spent his days in a carefree cycle of sleeping, waking up, eating, and then sleeping again, without ever having anything in particular he wanted to do or anything he hoped to avoid.

Ambition? The desire to better himself? He lacked anything of the sort.

Ditz was so close with his servants that he would sometimes remember and snap back to his senses. *Oh wait, I'm not actually related to them, am I?*

Though he had been born a laid-back noble, he did possess a certain talent with the blade. It was a surprise—most of all to Ditz himself. Like his two older brothers, Ditz had taken swordsmanship lessons with every intention to dabble in it as a hobby, but his instructor, a former knight, was quite confident in Ditz's abilities.

In his instructor's own words: "You absolutely must take the entrance exam to join the Knights!"

Bwa ha ha! Whoa, like, seriously? Ditz had gotten full of himself after hearing his instructor's remark—well, not quite, but at the very least, he realized that even for a laid-back noble, being the spaced-out third-born son spending his days lolling about at home wasn't a very good look. So, Ditz made up his mind and knocked on the doors to the Knight Academy.

I beg you, grant me entrance! Well, he hadn't said that, but he *had* taken the exam as expected.

Indeed, he'd taken the entrance exam feeling quite relieved that even if he did flunk the exam, he didn't have any honor at risk of being harmed. And yet, he wound up passing with not too shabby

marks to boot. The Knight Academy was famed for being strict, so Ditz had never expected to pass and now found himself in a panic.

Wait, like for real?

Ditz read over his acceptance letter three times more and even had his whole family—no, his servants—read over the letter as well, but there had been no mistake.

Having only leisurely coasted through life, Ditz was proud of himself for this accomplishment.

He did a fine job enduring those seven years. Every day he'd been subjected to training to the point of vomiting and barred from any and all forms of leisure. He might as well have been in some hellish prison—no, make that hell itself. If any one of the students tried to make their escape, they'd be forced to clean each and every toilet across the Academy's vast grounds. Also awaiting any offenders was the torture—correction, *penalty*—of having meals withheld from them. And yet, with would-be escapees every day, it was a veritable *paradise*. As a result, the Academy's toilets were always sparkling clean. *Niiiiice.*

There are plenty of nobles attending the Academy, so why is this sort of tyranny permitted in the first place? Someone ought to tell their family and put a stop to this madness! Ditz himself had pouted and cried over it several times. *Little ol' me can't take this no more!*

But that wasn't an option.

The Knight Academy was directly affiliated with the Knights, in service of the royal family. Almost all of its graduates would go on to take the Knights' own entrance exam or become a knight in reserve for some noble family. While there were a handful of exceptions every now and again, most of the students in attendance were like Ditz, the third-born son or fourth-born son...and so on and so on. In other words, the Academy was filled with louts who were never slated to take over as the leader of their house. If they stayed home, their standing wouldn't change at all, but if they joined the Knights and made a name for themselves, they could build a future.

Even all the nobles who came to scout out knights for their own houses enjoyed lofty positions close to the royal family. Boys had to have their dreams to chase after.

And that was exactly why those same dreamer boys knew full well that their fathers would never pick a fight with the royal

family's knights. Or, put another way, they knew that if they went off whining to daddy about how their teacher was bullying them, their path ahead in life would be sealed off. Just who in their right mind would hire such a loose-lipped, weak-kneed loser like that? For better or for worse, most of the boys at the Academy had the brains to understand that much.

But then again, if they had the nerve to spit at the knights, they probably would've never walked into this hell on earth in the first place. They'd have a much quicker time of it telling their old man to hand over the family fortune. *Ha ha, now there's a laugh for you!*

That was why most of those who tried to escape were the sort of dimwits who couldn't think that far ahead, or the kind who'd been pressured into acting impulsively, or the sort of muscle-headed lunks who seemed to think they were the strongest ones around and were determined to "get the better of those bastards" to try and prove something. It didn't really make sense to Ditz, and the leisurely lad had little interest in finding out just what it was they were trying to prove.

Was it some sort of "rebel spirit"? Not that Ditz had anything like that in him either. If he couldn't beat them, then he'd do just as well to join them. If he could get on it, he wanted to stay on for the ride. *You're not fit to be a knight? No, believe it or not, that's just what it is to be the third or fourth or fifth son! Probably.*

Incidentally, out of all those who'd successfully escaped from the Academy over the course of its history, there was apparently one absolute beast who'd made his escape only to come back with a smile on his face and announce that he'd won. He'd been revered as a hero by the other students, but to preserve his honor, his name hadn't been left alongside his legacy. *What a shame!* The world didn't make a lick of sense to Ditz, but he'd have loved to meet the escapee someday.

And so, Ditz graduated from the school—that muggy, stifling school all those idiots lived in—with grades that weren't terribly good but not particularly awful either. He was, however, just a bit sad. He hadn't been scouted out by any nobles, so without any other choice, he decided to take the entrance exam for the Knights.

His grades up until then hadn't been especially noteworthy, but he passed the exam. Nearly twenty years—had it already been

twenty years?—had passed since then. Still surrounded by sweaty men and subjected to harsh training just as he had been in his days at the Academy, Ditz devoted himself to his duties.

Ditz found himself the leader of a group of ten and had come to be addressed as their squad's "chief." He was also a member of the Next Crown Princess Fan Club. *And what's that supposed to be?*

It all started when a certain young man joined their ranks.

"All right, front and center with you!"

Round One: Fight!

It wasn't unusual for someone to give such a shout to announce the start of a fight. They were all a bunch of hot-blooded young men in excellent health, so of course, fists and feet were quick to fly. But still, it was just horseplay for them. Anyone who actually wanted to do harm to their opponent wouldn't be getting into a fight where the public could see—instead, they'd take care of their business from the shadows. And nobody liked a gloomy, greasy bastard like that!

Either way, the knights that Ditz had found himself attached to were almost completely made up of muscle-brained idiots who'd graduated from the Academy, so fighting was just another way they could communicate with each other.

There was just one madman in the bunch. His eyes were different... But those little eyes of his were indeed so stunning Ditz could hardly look at them—straight on, at least. But no, that wasn't the point!

His showy eyes were adorned with rich, heavy eyelashes, but they belied a surprising friendliness behind them.

The knight had been born to a well-known house, and after skyrocketing through the Academy to graduate early with unrivaled grades, he had mowed down both his senior and superior who'd served as the proctors for that exam, all without taking so much as a scratch. He had a foreboding track record that left Ditz wondering in terror just what sort of nasty gorilla was coming his way. If Ditz gave orders to someone like that and they just gave him a defiant glare and disgruntled snort in response, he'd never recover. *Nope, I've had enough—I'm going home.*

And yet, the newcomer who'd been sent his way as his subordinate was...shiny. He had a bright and sparkly and dazzlingly beautiful face. He'd inherited his massive frame from his

father.

"Your instruction is most appreciated, sir!" the newcomer said with a smile, dropping his head.

The hell? This guy's pretty charming, isn't he?

"Oh no, I've heard all about how strong you are," Ditz answered. "I don't have anything to teach you."

"All I learned from my father was how to fight on my own or how to fight alongside my younger brother," the newcomer said. "While we learned how to operate as a group in the Academy, I still lack the necessary experience. I'd be so delighted if you put me through the wringer."

Whaaaaat? This is some crazy charming subordinate I've got on my hands here!

The newcomer's father was the vice captain of the Knights, and even the captain had high hopes for the newcomer. He had larger-than-life skills and the looks to match, and yet he still had this level of humility and open-mindedness—with a radiant smile to boot.

Livionis Warrion captured the hearts of the Knights' seasoned men in an instant.

"Hey, is that Livionis over there?"

"Come, I'll teach you how to use the bow."

"Then in that case, I'll show you how to wield a magic rifle!"

Even though they all tried to act high-and-mighty with their weapons in one hand as they put him through the paces over breaks, Livionis himself seemed completely unfazed.

"I've never used this weapon before!"

"Whoa!"

"Thank you so much, sir!"

"Did you see that? I might actually have a knack for this!"

Of course I'm gonna blush hearing all that! The young man's bigger than I am, and way more talented too, but he still beams at me with his eyes full of respect! Why don't you give it a shot then? He'll make you a puddle too!

Livionis was so shockingly straightforward and bright that Ditz couldn't help but wonder how the boy had come from his father. *How on earth did they raise him?* Not only did he present himself so well that he seemed to bring a breath of fresh air wherever he went, he was kind to his younger peers as well. He was the first to dash to the rescue whenever his friends found themselves in a

bind, using the heroic blade he'd inherited from his father to sweep away monsters with a single flourish.

And just what sort of fairy tale did you come out of, Mr. Hero?

Beloved by both his superiors and his younger peers, the only time Livionis Warrion's mood would instantly sour was when he heard nasty rumors about the crown prince's fiancée, Sophelia von Lotus.

"Man, that Lady Sophelia gives me the creeps, y'know?"

"Nah, I get it. Like, it's a joke, but it's really not at the same time."

So if that was what they were going to say...

"All right, front and center with you!"

Cue the *Round One: Fight!*

Seriously? Is your fuse that *short?*

"Listen up! She's the sort to take time away from her training to be the next queen to debate policy on a daily basis with our kingdom's ministers. All that new furniture and equipment we were given? It's thanks to her. She pours her heart out for the kingdom day in and day out. So, pray tell, just what were you saying about such a kind, benevolent soul? Hmm?"

"I'm sorry! Please, forgive me."

"What's that? Forgiveness isn't on the menu. I'll tell you all about it till the morning comes, so listen and listen well!"

"No, really, please."

Just as soon as he'd been given the signal, Livionis would thrash his opponent. Following this thrashing, the second part of his act was always clutching his opponent by their collar and extolling Lady Sophelia's numerous accomplishments. He was a serious young man at his core, so he always followed the signal announcing the start of duty or training. But as he went above giving an impassioned explanation without so much as a break for air, someone had addressed him as the "Chief Excessive Officer" of the Next Crown Princess Fan Club.

And just where'd that come from? Ditz couldn't help but wonder, but it seemed fitting enough.

Rumor had it Livionis had picked up the nickname back at the Academy. *And just where'd* that *come from?* Ditz couldn't help but wonder, but he could imagine it easily enough.

Others were inspired by Livionis's devotion, as one man after

another proclaimed he'd joined the fan club, some stricken with joy while others were sometimes moved to tears. Before Ditz knew it, the fan club's ranks had grown.

After all, she'd improved the hellish halls of the Knight Academy and voiced her complaints toward the structure of the Knights, where the reckless and heedless reigned. A tear or two was only to be expected. Taking on the tough guys at the top of the Knights with that tiny little frame of hers? It was an act of madness. *Someone bring her a warm blanket and soup—now!*

Having been trained to be content so long as they still drew breath, they were all well accustomed to how the Knights did things, but the more their efforts were rewarded, the more delighted they were.

They were treated to a broader array of dishes in the dining hall. The break room had been given a luxurious renovation. They'd been given a shower area. To the delight of their wives and children, they were given more breaks. They were all small things on their own, but taken together, the knights were surprised to find that their conditions had grown much more comfortable. Learning that all of it had been Sophelia's doing, they found themselves at a loss, even more so for the veterans who'd spent many years in service of the Knights. They'd have to have been senseless beasts not to be grateful!

Which was why Ditz himself was also a member of the Next Crown Princess Fan Club. Even his wife and child had joined him.

"It's because of Wady Sofwelia you get to come home early, daddy? Then I wuv her!" his daughter, Hina, had said.

"Well now, then it's only fitting that I support Lady Sophelia as well, isn't it?" his wife had added.

Wow... I've got the cutest wife and daughter around! Ditz was a devoted husband and a doting dolt of a father.

The fan club was a heartwarming affair like that, and they primarily tasked themselves with missionary work. They worshipped the angel who'd striven to make improvements to the Knights and that terrifying Academy, aiming to support her from the shadows to make things even the slightest bit easier for her as they went about spreading word of her wonders.

For example, they would mercilessly crack down on those who would paint Lady Sophelia in a negative light compared to her

younger sister or covertly guide Lady Sophelia in her route through the castle so that she wouldn't encounter the prince, who subjected her to harsh criticism despite the fact that he chased after pleasure at the expense of all else. They added more cushions into her carriage and made sure to go slower than usual to avoid shaking her. When Lady Sophelia seemed tired, they exerted tight control to ensure no one could approach her.

The fan club's members were in no position to thoughtlessly approach Lady Sophelia and address her, so while it was vexing that they could only help out in truly minor ways, the club's Chief Excessive Officer had decided that was just fine, so there was nothing they could do.

All the Knights could do was watch over the girl, who always put on a smile, despite being subjected to comparisons with her half sister and her fiancé's mistreatment.

I hope she can run about as freely as a child someday.

Stroking his daughter's head as she softly murmured in her sleep, Ditz thought of Lady Sophelia's quiet smile.

Those days had come to an end. They were done. Put to rest! And by none other than the girl herself!

It had been three years. Just like Livionis—who'd outstripped them as he rose to success—as soon as the fan club's members heard Sophelia's uncharacteristic scream, they immediately understood the situation.

That means it's time to tango, right?

Halfway through dragging the relevant parties to the room where Sophelia screamed, the members practically burst into tears at the voice that echoed into their magic gems: "Get a carriage ready for the Chief Excessive Officer...!"

"H-Huh? What's he talking about?"

"He's talking about keeping our special guest safe."

"Oh!"

As if! Ditz thought, laughing back at his comrade. *And just who is this Chief Excessive Officer guy supposed to be anyway?*

There was no way anyone who wasn't a member of the fan club could ever understand the intention behind this order. What was more, this was a message directed at the *especially* excessive members within the fan club's own ranks.

That's right! Members just like me! The time has come! The hour for the boy and the girl to fly away is finally upon us! How could this old man not be in high spirits, huh?! All right, outta the way! That's right, outta my way!

"Ch-Chief, I'm crying…?"

"Not yet, save the waterworks for later!"

"Ch-Chief…!"

Patting his comrade's shoulder, Ditz assessed the situation.

Following Livionis's orders, it appeared that they'd been able to divide up their duties. There was the team of members who'd prepare the carriage and request provisions, Livionis's steed, and a change of clothes for Sophelia from House Warrion; as well as the members who were set to assist Livionis to ensure they could make it to the carriage without any undue attention; and finally the driver of the carriage. They were all moving exceedingly quickly.

In that case, Ditz decided to nominate himself and his subordinate for the crowd control team. To ensure that none of the guests would accidentally wind up near Sophelia and Livionis's escape route, they would work extra hard to take an undaunted attitude and remorsefully tell guests, "We're so terribly sorry for tonight. Your carriage is right this way. Might we offer you our assistance?"

After all, it was an evening party. With the sheer number of guests in attendance, it was best to have as many hands on deck as possible.

"And what of the guards for the rest of House Lotus?" Ditz asked his subordinate.

"There are orders out for the men of Unit One, Squad Nine," his subordinate answered.

"Then there's nothing to worry about."

"Indeed."

Like Ditz and his subordinate, the members of that particular squad were excessively passionate members of the fan club, so they wouldn't do anything to alert the showy members of House Lotus to Sophelia and Livionis's escape either. Even if the family were to stumble their way out of the room, he was sure the squad would handle it.

Ditz was burning with passion. *Like we could ever pass up this*

opportunity!

Indeed, the Next Crown Princess Fan Club wasn't just made up of the knights who simply wished to support Sophelia. Instead, there were also those truly excessive members who insisted, "Wouldn't our Livionis make Lady Sophelia happier?" or, "Our Livionis is just way too noble—doesn't he deserve to be rewarded?" And the name that someone had given to these very same souls? The Livionis Support Brigade!

No, but seriously, who actually came up with that? On second thought, that was all fine and well. What wasn't all fine and well was her engagement!

No, no—I mean, really, no, like seriously, who would ever give their blessing to that good-for-nothing getting engaged to Sophelia?! That's sure not what someone's parents ought to be doing! The older men in the group with daughters of their own were particularly indignant, joining hands with the youth to secretly form the Livionis Support Brigade.

In all actuality, Ditz didn't know whether or not Livionis was truly interested in her, but even then, none of them even considered ignoring their station and purposefully interfering with a marriage in the royal family. How Livionis felt wasn't for Ditz to know. *Hey, a man's free to think though, right?*

But he did make just a few tiny arrangements here and there.

He'd given Livionis priority for guard duty at evening parties Sophelia was attending or had Livionis serve as her escort. Watching Livionis's unfazed expression as he quietly upheld his duties even in front of Sophelia, Ditz couldn't help but feel all warm and fuzzy.

Even as excessive of a fan as he was, Livionis never once betrayed his feelings for Sophelia in his expression or attitude. Far from it, he drove the men to tears with his stoicism.

"Lady Sophelia, our Livionis might look terribly serious, but he's actually a massive fan of yours!"

It was those around him who struggled to hold back. All the older men would find themselves dangerously close to tears, so duties that involved Sophelia and Livionis together were secretly relegated to the younger generation or the knights outside the club out of consideration for their older peers.

Back on your rocker, you excessive old coot! Ditz couldn't help but

cry just a bit at the insult no one had directed at him.

"Ditz."

Already starting to look back on those days fondly, Ditz spun around in surprise when he heard his name. "C-Captain!"

"You're right where I need you. I've got a bit of a favor to ask. Come over here," the captain said, directing Ditz to the shadow behind a pillar.

Just as Ditz's mind had gone blank with the fear that their strategy had been discovered or that he was about to be punched, the captain placed a leather bag in Ditz's hands.

"Will you give this to the carriage driver? We can't let him go before he's gotten his salary."

"Huh? But Captain—"

"It's fine. I don't want to hear it. I *won't* hear about it, in fact."

The captain, who'd brought his shoulders in close to Ditz, had his own standing to keep in mind—even if he sympathized with Sophelia, and even if he understood the feelings of lovesick youngsters so deeply that it made him sick as well. Or perhaps that was exactly why?

Leisurely noble though he was, Ditz had spent over half his life in an unbending, rigid hierarchy, so he understood the root of the captain's feelings. Such things were too "basic"? Those same "base" elements formed the cornerstone of society precisely because they were inevitable. That was just what *love* was.

The captain had only cast a blind eye toward Ditz and the others as they went about doing this and that in secrecy and silence—that alone was enough.

"Are you going to write them a card too?"

"Hurry up and go!"

And so, Livionis and Sophelia were able to safely set off on their journey. Did parents feel this same mix of sadness and pride when they saw their children depart? Ditz thought of his young daughter, who'd once said she was going to marry him when she got older. Ditz had cried just a bit after that.

That aside...

After being assigned to "the Search for His Highness the Crown Prince's Fiancée," Ditz had been leisurely working away at his duties alongside his team formed from the Livionis Support

Brigade…by going fishing, cutting down trees for better visibility, and collecting chestnuts for his subordinate's daughter, Michelle, who couldn't get enough of the things. But today, however, Ditz found himself on guard duty in the castle, pale as a ghost after learning that the search had been called off.

He'd been treated to expensive spirits by the vice captain the previous night and had been drinking until daybreak. To be quite honest, he felt so sleepy he just might die and—if he could be so bold—he felt just a bit queasy to boot.

Why'd it have to come to this?

Because he'd drunk enough to fill a whole bathtub, that was why.

Why didn't I stop them when I had the chance? Ditz thought to himself as he looked back on the night of revelry that had seen the knights devolve into a mob.

No one had tried to stop him. He and all the others had been drunk, and it wasn't hard to imagine that even if someone had tried to intervene he wouldn't have actually listened. He'd just wind up thinking, *I'm still okay!* or, *I'm still good for more!* or *Hey, everyone else is drinking!* Right? There wasn't so much as a shred of proof to support that though. He'd been a proper idiot. That was what people were—idiots, simply outright idiots.

Ditz found himself overcome with both intense regret and intense drowsiness, but since the developments playing out before his very eyes were so shocking, it didn't seem like he'd have to worry about falling asleep while standing. That was one good thing. Wait, was that a *good* thing?

"With that in mind, I'll say it once more. Leophel, you are to marry Lilina Lotus and become a son-in-law to House Lotus. Needless to say, you are stripped of your right to the throne. And next, House Lotus: You are to rule over the Wymble territory. You are each to take responsibility for the disturbance at the party that evening."

Hearing His Majesty King Leonell speak, the crown prince—no, the *former* crown prince Leophel grew pale alongside his mother, while Wilson Lotus grew bright red in the face.

"Y-Your Majesty! You would send House Lotus to such an untamed, barbaric land?! Do you think nothing of our house?!"

"How strange. Did I say that you could speak?" Leonell replied.

“Opening your mouth without the king’s permission? And just when did you become esteemed enough to do that, hmm? Oh, that’s *right*! That’s why you felt entitled to do whatever you pleased at a party the neighboring country’s king had been invited to! How impressive!”

The king laughed, but his voice held no emotion.

The kingdom was flourishing. The taxes were not unreasonable, yet even then, the towns were kept clean, well equipped, and suitable for living. There was always more than enough to go around. Stores thrived here and there, and smiles enveloped the back alleys and main streets alike. It was a tremendously warm nation.

And yet, Ditz had never felt any warmth at all from the king. It was just a bit terrifying.

“Ergh, ugh, my deepest…apologies,” Wilson said, grating his teeth as he dropped his head. After all, it had been his own family that had ruined the evening party by screaming and by driving the girl to scream in the first place. *Nope, probably nothing he can say back to that!*

Ditz stood upright, forced to keep his face just as stiff. He couldn’t see Leonell’s face from where he stood. Ditz tried to imagine a smile from the king’s soft voice, but for whatever reason, try as he might, he just couldn’t imagine the king smiling at all.

“I am deeply grateful for the kindness that you have shown us,” Wilson said, looking up, his voice trembling and blurred by fear and trepidation. “Sophelia has always caused nothing but problems for His Highness the Crown Prince. Lilina only sought to comfort him. With all due respect, His Highness was only showing consideration for Lilina’s kindness. Sophelia, however, resented this, and lashed out in anger at both her younger sister and His Highness. For my part, I—”

A monstrous crash thundered through the room.

Unaware that he’d been clenching his fist as Wilson spoke, Ditz’s shoulders jolted up at the sudden roar. The sword Ditz clutched at his side gave a small rattle in its sheath; he’d been just about to reflexively draw his blade.

Ditz glanced around the room and gasped.

The king was smiling with his right hand in the air.

At his feet, an absurdly expensive-looking small, gilded table sat overturned, while the glasses and glass pitcher on it had been shattered into tiny pieces. The glassware had been filled with water, staining the red carpet beneath a shade darker. It was the water stand the queen herself prepared and kept beside the throne. The king had likely upended the whole thing, table and all. "You speak far too much."

"Let's be clear," the king continued, standing up as he gave the overturned table a resounding kick. Ditz's stomach clenched as the table—which even from afar he could tell was worth far more than he made in a year—tumbled over.

"I asked if you had any explanation to give for what happened that night. I didn't ask you to insult the vassal whose loss I'm still lamenting, now did I? Surely you don't mean to tell me you didn't know I'd appointed the girl to such an important role."

"Ngh…"

He had to have known, surely.

He might have been just a leisurely noble, but even Ditz knew that not only was House Lotus a family with a proper history and royal blood flowing through their veins, but the head of the house excelled in politics.

But even then, just as the king had been unable to predict what Sophelia and the crown prince would do, Wilson had been unable to predict what Lilina and the crown prince would do either.

It was well-known that Wilson favored his second wife's daughter, so assuming Lilina and the crown prince truly had feelings for each other, then perhaps someday… At the very least, Wilson had probably thought they might do something at some point, but he'd surely never thought that they'd do it like *that*. What they'd done hadn't just spited the nobles and the royal family—it had rubbed their faces in it.

But both of them let their children run wild, so that made them guilty of the same crime, didn't it? Both of them failed to supervise their children properly, didn't they? At least that was what Ditz thought as he tried to follow the conversation. But even then, there wasn't a parent out there who knew everything in their child's heart. *Tomorrow, it might be me in the same position…* Ditz resolved himself to be a stern father but one his daughter wouldn't despise. Indeed, he wished to be a father like the vice

captain. In fact, he wanted to call the vice captain “father” himself.

“I myself have a few regrets of my own for what has happened, and yet there you went, besmirching your *dead* daughter’s name,” Leonell said. “I was so surprised, I wound up upending that table. And what do you think about all this, Leophel?”

“Uh, I…” The prince’s voice was tremulous and raspy. There was no mistaking it. The prince was *petrified*.



“Well, it’s, uh, what I’m trying to say is…” The prince’s voice trembled weakly as he strung together words that didn’t make very much sense at all. *His mind’s at a dead standstill right now, no doubt about it.* At this very moment, the prince was veritably standing on the crumbling edge of a towering cliff. *He’s practically at death’s door!*

The prince was the exact opposite of his usual self, no longer bloated with confidence and talking down to all those around him. He was just as pale as Ditz was from his hangover, so much so that Ditz couldn’t help but feel somewhat sorry for him.

And to be clear, it wasn’t because Ditz was a drunkard. From the prince’s perspective, his defense was probably “Well nobody stopped me!” *You saying you wouldn’t realize what you were doing until somebody stops you? And somebody’s definitely* tried *stopping you, but you wouldn’t listen to ’em even if they did!* In any case, putting all that aside, the fact of the matter was that Ditz had a history of drinking too much and that he at least felt so nauseous he wanted to rip his stomach out.

By the time someone tells you, “I told you so!” it’s already too late. The past is in the past, so you can say anything you want about it. But that’s not the point! The point is things happen when you drink too much and then you have to figure out what you’re gonna do! Yup, that settles it. No more booze for me.

Hmm…? What was I thinking about just now? Ditz had started to feel a bit fuzzy, but then he saw the concubine leap forward.

“Your Majesty!” she howled. “You’re the one who said you’d make my son king! Do you mean to go back on your word now after so long?! You said you’d make me the mother of a king, didn’t you…?!”

“And I thought to,” Leonell answered, “so long as you followed my orders, that is.” Leonell let out a sigh, looking straight at the concubine. “Where did the old you go? Back when you were so selfless and reserved?”

“You won’t find a single *selfless* person in all the land!” the concubine bit back. “All I wanted was for you to love me! More than her, and more than her child, I wanted you to love *us*!”

“Love?” Leonell’s eyes sparked open at the word as he let out a dry laugh before limply slumping down onto the throne. Covering his face with his right hand, the king burst out into laughter. “If

that was what you wanted, then you should've chosen a normal marriage." The king's voice was boundlessly quiet and flat—as if he were watching the dullest thing imaginable, as if it failed to spark even the slightest hint of interest within him. His steely voice was perfectly level. It was an empty voice—terrifyingly so.

"Wh-What...?" Hearing the king's voice, the concubine sank to her knees and—suddenly, without so much as a warning—began to scream.

Leophel's shoulders flinched upward from beside her, while the knights assigned to watch over her rushed to her side as she let out unintelligible screams at the top of her lungs.

Without so much as batting an eye, the king continued. "If it's love you say you wanted, then you all shouldn't have loved me—you should've loved the people of this kingdom and been loved by them in turn."

Not like we ever really "loved" you as king! Ditz thought, but even if his mouth were to tear open and run off, that was a feeling he could never voice. From the perspective of a leisurely noble like Ditz, one who had no interest in the struggles of different factions vying for power—or even the standing to participate in such in the first place—it hardly mattered who was king, to be quite honest.

If possible, he'd rather protect a good person instead of some garbage human being, and he'd have been quite pleased if his salary went up, but the thought that "So-and-so ought to be king!" was a matter so far above him, so far beyond the clouds that no other candidate came to mind.

As far as Ditz was concerned, from the present day until a bit into the future—at the very least, for the span of his and his child's lifetimes—so long as they could live in peace and tranquility and laugh together as a family, then it was all fine and well. So if someone had told him that who was king was a concern, then Ditz, having lived as a leisurely noble in a kingdom that had been peaceful since before he was born, would simply reply, "Oh? Thank you deeply for such an insightful opinion!"

But by chance—and truly, it was just by chance—Ditz had seen the true face of a certain girl.

Until he'd met Livionis, Ditz had only thought of Sophelia as the crown prince's rather bland fiancée. She always had the same smile on, no matter when he saw her, so he'd thought his

assessment was right on target. Even after hearing rumors about how talented she was, all he could do was think, *Oh?* After all, she was His Highness's fiancée, so that much was a given, wasn't it? He'd never put too much deep thought into it.

But then, Ditz had just happened to meet Livionis. After hearing what Livionis had to say about her, he couldn't help but pay attention and watch her. In doing so, he had discovered the girl's true face and could no longer simply think of her situation as someone else's concern.

That was why, when it came right down to it, they were all the same. Ditz, the fan club members, the king, the queen, the crown prince, the concubine, the prime minister, and the ministers—each and every one of them were all the same. All of them would just say, "Well, Sophelia never says anything about it!" not even bothering to see what sort of hardship the girl had swallowed down behind that plastered-on smile. Instead, they'd just thrown the crown prince on her out of convenience and written the matter off as finished. But the kingdom hadn't changed at all; it ran in peace as it had since ages past. And that was all—that was the *only* thing—that anyone was concerned with.

And that was why, in Ditz's opinion, no one in attendance today had any right to condemn anyone else. There was only one person in the whole world who had any right to shout out, "Don't be absurd!" There was only one person—and that was Sophelia herself.

But the girl had cast away all of her bothersome, unsightly fetters. And it was all because she'd taken the hand of the one man who had noticed and told her, "That's far too bitter for you to just swallow it down."

She'd never come back here again. She didn't have to. She must never return. Ditz wanted her to go where she wanted to. He wanted her to *live*. Somewhere, in a place that hardly mattered, he hoped that she'd break out into a wide grin, showing her teeth, and laugh with breadcrumbs stuck to her face, just like Ditz's own daughter did.

Ditz prayed that such might come true before covering his mouth. "I don't feel so good."

"It'll be your head if you throw up here!"

Ditz was both an adult and a parent, so he had no choice but to

swallow it down.

Gulp.

Why has it come to this?

I got to spend every day with my kind father and live in a large, pretty manor. I was happy.

Mother and father were always smiling. There were plenty of maids and ladies-in-waiting, and they were all ever so kind and considerate. If I said so much as “Oh?” they’d ask, “Whatever is the matter?” and gather whatever I needed.

My older sister was a bit strange and never showed up to dinner with the rest of the family, but father always patted my head and smiled. “There’s nothing to be done about the girl, so you don’t have to bother with her,” he’d tell me. “My, how cute you are!” he’d say.

I’d always nod and wrap my arms around him and tell him I loved him. And then father would squeeze me in an embrace and ask me, “Where would you like to go tomorrow?” He’d always take me out shopping or out to go see the opera.

Father hated my older sister, but he loved mother and me. So when he found out that I liked His Highness the Prince, he smiled and told me he’d do something.

His Highness said he hated my older sister too. He told me that I was the only one for him, and that he loved me. And though I’d never spoken to them before, I was sure the queen and the king’s concubine would like me too.

But that day—that day, when His Highness touched my dress with his hand, I thought about my older sister just a little.

I was sure my older sister would just put on that same, doll-like smile she always wore and say, “I see,” as if it didn’t interest her at all. Something about that response didn’t feel very nice, so I figured it was only natural when His Highness kissed me.

After all, everyone always said it, didn’t they? Everyone—each and every one of them—always said that I was cuter than her. They said I was so wonderful, that I was kind, that I was like a saint. *Hee hee. It’s a little embarrassing, but it’s all true, right?*



So why, then?

Every day since then, father's been angry and mother's been crying. His Highness was supposed to be living with us since we're married, but he goes out somewhere every day. I realized that we only have a handful of butlers and maids and ladies-in-waiting now. They say the head butler and head maid have been at our manor for years, but they've always been cold toward mother and me. They just stand there in silence—just like my sister. It's scary and I really don't like it.

So why did it come to this?

Father says we have to move soon. He isn't happy about that. Sometimes he gets angry and says he'll "show them." Sometimes he strikes mother when she cries—just as he would strike my older sister. I don't really get it, but I think she did something bad like my older sister. If that was the case, it only made sense. After all, mother was the one who said we should do as father told us to.

On that note, apparently my sister died—not that I felt it too much since I hardly ever saw her, even though we lived in the same house.

I'm more worried about just when my wedding will be, but no one's said a word about it. It's a little bit weird to get married before the wedding, but mother said that can happen sometimes, so I think the wedding will be very soon. My wedding dress? My shoes? The pearls I'll wear? The friends I'll invite? I wonder when I'll need to decide all that.

Personally, I want to wear a dress from Maramaladia, just like the one the queen wore. I want it to be a pure-white dress, with plenty of lace and diamonds on it! If I wear a beautiful dress like that, I'm sure His Highness will tell me, "You're so cute," and, "I love you," again.

I've got to hurry. I won't be ready in time for the wedding.

But no one's said a thing.

"Oh, whatever will I do?"

Why won't anyone answer me?

Why did it have to come to this?

In the past, mother was always quiet and reserved. She was kind, and she even seemed to get along well with the queen.

Not to mention everyone always treated me like I was number one. Of course they did. Hey, I was gonna be the king, after all. I was special—one of a kind. I was the only one in the whole kingdom.

But mother's been acting odd ever since *he* was born. She started to call the queen "that woman," and whenever she'd see father, she'd always throw herself on to him and cling to him.

She didn't have to do all that. I was the crown prince! I was the one and only crown prince, but she always told me, "You're the one who'll be king," as if she were being chased by something.

She didn't have to tell *me* that. Of course I knew that.

But there are a few bastards who try to secretly compare me with him—that slimy little twerp with that high-and-mighty face of his who always makes it sound like he's got it all figured out—even though he's seven years younger than me. And because of that, mother got even *more* loony!

It was the same with that unbecoming swine too.

Father brought that swine of a girl along and told me she'd be my fiancée, but she had a face as dull as wallpaper, and she'd always plaster that grown-up smile on her face. She talked like a grown-up too. She was always mocking me. Why'd I have to get stuck with a girl like her for a fiancée?

When I told them I wanted them to find me a new fiancée, mother just gave a troubled laugh.

"Really?" father replied with a laugh. "Well, if you can do something about *these*, we shall."

He handed me a stack of papers, but I didn't have a clue what was written in them.

That sow was the farthest thing from cute and everything she said was a royal bore, but she at least came from a fine house, so father probably had never had any intentions of canceling the engagement—he just wanted to make me look stupid and get me out of his hair.

If that was how he was going to be, then they could've just married her off to the twerp! They were both deadly boring, so they were sure to get along well. If they did that, then I could get hitched with a girl that was way cuter than her. Yeah, I could even make a harem! I *was* going to be king, wasn't I? My instructors and the ministers are always blabbing on about how I have to study

more or how what I'm doing isn't good enough, but even if I don't lift a finger, I still get to be king! I'm the only crown prince around.

You want proof? No matter what I do or what I say, not a single person tries to stop me! Every now and then I feel a little weird when father watches me, but that's it.

I'm special in this kingdom. I'm one of a kind, and the only one.

But then…

But then I wasn't the crown prince anymore. Mother transformed into something I can't even begin to understand, always cackling away all on her own.

I was forced to marry Lilina and while she is cute, she always just smiles like she's trying to wheedle something out of me. I don't know why, but it kinda gives me the creeps. I mean, I could've sworn I thought that part of her was cute. The twerp and the swine always wore an icy smile that didn't want anything at all. Lilina's smile was the exact opposite of that, but now it just gives me the creeps.

I've tried to run away from House Lotus several times, but each time I was caught and tossed back in my room. The leader of House Lotus is apparently *using* me to try and find a way to avoid having to move to the north.

I don't really know all the details, but through the ages, the king had always taken good care of House Lotus. But now that the king has thrown them away, no one's even bothered to turn around—it's the same for me.

Miranda, Ayra, Louina…each and every one of them had said they wanted to marry me. They said I was the best. They said I was special. But now…

Sibyl and Arsante both said they'd support me, not the second prince. They said I was born to be king. But now…

None of them would meet with me. I send them letters, but I never get a single one back. There's no one—not a single soul. I don't have anyone.

I haven't done anything. I'm special—I was meant to be king. But now…

Why did it have to come to this?

How did it come to this?

He said I wasn't allowed to do anything.

He said my job was just to be here, eat, and laugh, and sleep. That was all. It's *absurd*. As long as you live, you have responsibilities and duties to fulfill. If you never accomplish anything, you'll never gain anything either.

I told him that, but he only looked back at me with that beautiful face of his and nodded. "I see."

Right? I started to nod back but froze.

"In that case, that means that I have to pay the price for having someone as cute as you by my side," he said.

Hmm? I don't think that's quite right. No, there's no "think" about it, that's not right. No, it's not. That's not how it works.

He watched me rush to open my mouth. Those gentle violet eyes of his were so stunningly beautiful when he smiled... I found myself at a loss for words.

I couldn't do a thing anymore, so why, then? Why did he seem so happy whenever he looked at me?

"You're just so cute."

I'd never been told that before in my life, but he'd said just that with a loose, sloppy smile. It made me want to tell him that *he* was the cute one, but every time I swallowed the urge to do so, he just giggled.

"You don't have to endure anything anymore," he said. "Please, just tell me what you want."

One smile from him was all it took to turn me into a powerless crybaby. I was a weepy, gloomy mess, but he just held me tight and said, "Let's rest for a bit." His voice was rapturously sweet and heartwarmingly kind. "I'm feeling sleepy."

Seriously? No way! Sleep? Like this? That's what you're suggesting?

"You're not allowed to get up," he said. "Your job now is to just stay still until I wake up." *What? You've got to be joking! I mean, you don't look sleepy at all!* His expression as he closed his eyes like everything was normal was shockingly beautiful, but I could hear his heart pounding away loudly in his chest. It was far too loud of a heartbeat for just one person.

The bed at the inn was modest and hard, but even then, it felt nice. I couldn't move so much as a muscle.

Tumbling around in bed like this together, acting so scandalously? *Oh, what am I going to do with myself?*

How did it come to this?

Feeling strange somehow, I couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

My Fiancé Cheated, But a New Love Rings!
FIN

Side Story: Laugh It Off and Depart on Your Journey!

Hyley the innkeeper had been struggling with mornings as of late.

Oh, just what was the problem anyway? The older she got, the less she slept and the sleep she *did* get was of diminishing quality. And thanks to that, she was sleepy and draggy, and her head hurt too. *When I was younger, I could snap outta bed just like that!*

Hyley grunted as she lowered her basket full of potatoes to the ground and let out a sigh. *Ah, it's a real tragedy my back's aching like this.* The passing of time was a cruel thing indeed. Bemoaning her body that had been left behind by the passing years, Hyley rubbed her back. *No, you sure don't wanna get old*, Hyley thought as she rubbed away.

"Madam!"

Hyley looked up, only to find Mia beaming at her. Mia's smile was practically the embodiment of youth, beaming so brightly it made Hyley's eyes sting.

"We filled up all the single rooms!" Mia announced happily, clutching the inn's ledger.

Mia was one of the employees of the inn. Her husband worked at the stables for travelers passing through town. Hyley was fond of the pleasant, hardworking young couple. *But then again, thinking like that just shows how old I am. Ouch.*

Madam. She'd built up a presence that made the term fit like a glove. Hyley had once been an "inn girl" like Mia herself, with a slender frame and a fluttering skirt. But she felt like she'd been called a few other things even immediately after she'd taken over running the inn.

I wonder just when it was that they started calling me "Madam"? Then again, it's kind of sad that it doesn't feel odd in the slightest to hear it now. Despite thinking such, Hyley didn't show so much as a smidge of it in her expression, instead giving Mia a hearty laugh back.

"Looks like all your hard work making those beds paid off!"

After the previous guests left, they were always in a rush to get ready for their next guests—cleaning, washing the sheets, making up the beds, and getting all the ingredients for dinner at hand. It was delightful to see that these efforts hadn't gone to waste.

Casting her eyes over the ledger that Mia had given her, Hyley checked the entries detailing the guests' names, room numbers, and meal preferences.

The town was far off of the main roads, a small community without any local specialty of particular note. It was a town sustained by travelers—that is to say, adventurers—who visited it as a stop along the way to their destinations. As such, the town's taverns came alive at night. Adventurers were terribly fond of drowning themselves in mead and meat in a lively environment.

But there were some adventurers who preferred more quiet surroundings, and not all of the visitors to the town were adventurers. There were some guests who simply wanted a peaceful meal in the inn's dining room, so it was a chance for Hyley to collect an additional fee.

But unfortunately...it looked like there wouldn't be too many hoping for a meal that night.

"Mia, you can go ahead and take a break," Hyley said. "With so few patrons, there's no need to get in a rush to get dinner ready."

"Okay!" Mia replied. "I'll go ahead and peel the potatoes, then!"

"I thought I told you to take a break?"

"I'll peel the potatoes while I'm sitting down and taking it easy!" Mia said, casting a wide grin at Hyley.

Hyley gave the girl's slim back a light pat. "And make sure to eat those cookies I got you for a snack!"

"No complaints from me!" Mia said, laughing like a child.

Hyley laughed in return and went to the front desk.

While it wasn't as grand of an affair as one might imagine from the term "front desk," it was still the crucial location where they greeted their guests.

Cleanliness was their livelihood, so Hyley wrung out a cleaning rag and gave the counter a careful wipe down. Next, she lifted up the inkwell and checked to see how much was left. It had been a while since she'd replaced the ink, but it looked like there was still some inside. Right as Hyley gave a satisfied nod, the inn's door swung open.

“Welcome!”

Hyley blinked. *Black. That’s…a whole lot of black!*

With his black hair carelessly resting at his shoulder, the stubble-faced man was wearing a black coat, a black shirt, and even black gloves. The small, dainty girl beside him wore a stunning dress that swayed alongside her long black hair. She was covered in black from head to foot as well.

If they’d come right out and said, “We’re involved in some shady business,” Hyley would’ve just nodded along and said, “Makes sense to me.” Any way she looked at it, these two dressed in all black seemed sorely out of place in a shabby inn like this. *“Shabby” is a bit much, isn’t it? After all, we just rebuilt this inn! It’s brand-spanking new and shiny!*

Hyley was so taken aback she was on the verge of forgetting herself. With the two of them standing together before her very eyes, Hyley blinked again.

This… This guy doesn’t look half bad…does he?

He had a manly complexion and a wrinkle dividing his brow. Even from his expensive-looking clothes, it was obvious he was strapped with muscle. The man was just Hyley’s type. It was only recently that she’d laughed at her old friend’s impassioned cry that her heart was “just too full” when she watched a young actor from the next town over perform. *I get it now… So this is what it means when your heart’s just too full.*

“Do you have any rooms open?”

My, and what a nice voice too! Care to try your hand at acting? But he seems like the real tough guy type. That’s a good thing though. He doesn’t seem like so much of an actor…more of a mob boss type.

Against the wisdom she’d gained over the years, Hyley was happily frolicking about inside her mind, chanting as she went. Remembering the ledger she’d been looking through moments earlier, Hyley opened her mouth to speak.

“All of our single rooms just filled up.”

The man’s brow creased in an unusual way at Hyley’s reply. It was a small town—the man was likely surprised to learn that it saw so much business.

“Our town’s a small one—not to mention out of the way,” Hyley began. “But thankfully we’re busy enough to keep the tumbleweeds away!”

“We were just relieved to find a town with an inn,” the man replied. “It’s just what we needed.”

Hyley blinked as a laugh escaped the man. His words sounded warm as they seemed to tumble off his lips.

Without quite knowing why, Hyley found herself straightening her posture.

“Glad to hear it!” Hyley said with a laugh. “We have a double room, though. Is this your little sister with you?”

Or is that some little lady you kidnapped from somewhere? Hyley didn’t ask that question, though.

Standing beside the man, the young girl had a childlike face, and while the colors they wore certainly meshed, you could almost —oh, how to put it—smell a crime brewing. *I can’t tell how they’re related one bit! If I were being generous, I’d say she’s probably his younger sister. Probably. If that’s the case, they probably won’t mind being in the same room.*

The man made a face like he’d had something unsavory forced in his mouth at Hyley’s question, looking down at the girl before looking back at Hyley. “Something like that.”

Huh? And what sort of answer is that? It was almost as if he were trying to say, “We’re not actually related, but I guess it’d make the most sense to say that, huh?” *Wait, is this guy* actually *a criminal?* While Hyley had momentarily felt like she’d returned to the blossom of her youth after encountering such a handsome man, all it took was a moment for her to be wrangled back to reality. *Another headache’s the last thing I need!*

“She is my little sister, but at her age, we’d like to get separate rooms if we can.”

“I’d rather be together, though,” the girl chimed in.

“Hey, listen…”

The man had just been speaking out of concern, but the girl was indifferent to such things. Watching the man clutch his head at the girl’s reaction, it was clear the man had just been making a commonsense appeal.

“Listen, you’re a young, unmarried girl—there’s no way you’d be fine in the same room with a guy!”

Even though the way he looked was anything but common, what he was saying was indeed just common sense. The two of them seemed much more relaxed than their appearances

suggested.

Hyley nodded in agreement. “You can’t go trusting men willy-nilly now, young lady!”

“But he’s my, uh, older brother, isn’t he?”

Hyley fell silent.

Yes, I suppose so. That’s right. But the man’s face made it obvious that he couldn’t say anything, and the way the girl had replied had *That’s what we said we’d be, wasn’t it?* written all over it. Just whose side would Hyley take between the self-proclaimed “brother and sister”? As both a businesswoman and someone farther down the road of life than them, Hyley only had one answer to give:

“We have one other double room, so what do you say?” Hyley began. “If you’re willing to pay for both of them, you’re more than welcome to use both.”

Looking at the duo’s apparently luxurious clothes, money likely wasn’t a concern for them. Hyley’s business senses told her that they might be just the type to have money to burn. And in that case, her only option was to squeeze him for all she could—even if he was a handsome young man who was just her type. Hyley put on her business smile, neatly stowing her ambitions away out of sight. What sort of businesswoman would she be to let a chance to make money slip away?

Instead of making a sour expression at Hyley’s business pitch carefully disguised as concern, the man only gave a relieved nod and said, “I see.”

The girl, however, blinked, as if chewing over what she’d just heard, before looking straight up at Hyley with those jet-black eyes of hers.

The girl softly parted her small lips. “I want…to be together.”

Oh my! How absolutely adorable! Hyley felt her chest tighten with adoration. The girl’s expression was unbelievably blank and her eyebrows didn’t so much as flinch—but even then, she could see it. Hyley could see it! Hyley could see her sink away in disappointment! *You’re sad, aren’t you? Your “older brother”—the jury’s still out on that one—told you you’d get separate rooms, and that made you really sad, didn’t it? It’s okay! He was trying to be kind and thoughtful!* Fighting back the urge to give the desk a resounding, hearty smack, Hyley brought her gaze back to the man.

The wrinkle splitting his brow was something else. *That's impressive!*

"Does that…make me selfish?" the girl asked.

"Well, I wouldn't call it 'selfish'…" *But that's not the point!* The man didn't say as much, however, instead massaging his brow with his thumb as he let out a long sigh. "Can we get one double room, then?"

"I'll get you all taken care of!"

It was a moment in history when Hyley the businesswoman met defeat.

Right after the strange duo returned from shopping, Hyley closed her ledger and decided to start getting dinner ready. They'd had two more guests—and wealthy-looking guests at that—than they'd originally planned, so she figured it might be a good idea to rework the menu for that night. Hyley thought about which ingredients might work but then reconsidered as she remembered the pair dressed in all black.

The two of them were strange all right. Despite the fact that they looked like nothing more than a kidnapper and his victim, Hyley found herself oddly convinced as she watched the two of them talk. The way they talked as if they'd known each other for years wouldn't have been out of place for siblings—even though it seemed like that wasn't the case.

"Who knows, they might even be sweethearts!" Hyley laughed to herself. If that were the case, though, they wouldn't have been going for separate rooms. There was just no way that devious-looking handsome devil was one of those shy, late-to-romance types everyone always spoke of.

Just as Hyley was thinking, the door to the inn swung open. Realizing that meant they had a guest, Hyley looked up. "Welco—"

Hyley tried to give her usual greeting but froze.

We've… We've got one hell of a guest now!

H-His face—it's, it's shining! Look, it's actually shining! He had a face like a priceless work of art, narrowing his eyes and smiling and— *Huh, hold up, I'm gonna die! My eyes are going to die. "My eyes are going to die"? What does that even mean?*

Hyley was shaken to her core. She'd been born in a small town to her mother, who had run the inn. She'd had a kind grandfather who'd always spoiled her. She'd yearned to be an adventurer and

fallen in love here and there. Her grandfather had passed away and then her mother, and then she'd been left all alone to—

Hyley gasped as her life flashed before her eyes.

That was a close one! Hyley thought, clutching her head. *And scary! It's scary he's got enough face-force to make my life flash before my eyes! Wait, what's "face-force" supposed to be, anyway?*

"Excuse me, do you have any rooms open?"

Hyley nodded at the man—*He is a man, isn't he? He's surprisingly large and well-built too!*—with the terrifying face as he tilted his head to the side.

"Oh, well, uh... Could you sign here?" Hyley couldn't conceal her disarray.

Reaching to grab the pen, even the man's fingers were long and beautiful. *What is this? It's like I'm watching a sculpture moving!* Hyley had never seen such a sculpture before, but it was probably something similar to this. *This isn't good!* The man wasn't doing her brain or her eyes any favors. *This is just dangerous. He's practically a walking weapon!*

Hyley glanced over at the man's companion. The girl had stunning green hair the color of fresh, summer-sun-soaked leaves. Her gaze seemed to melt as she watched the man's fingers at work. Realizing he was being watched, the man blushed, his cheeks turning a soft pink. His blushing face was at once both incredibly beautiful and incredibly dangerous. *With a face like that, you should be used to getting plenty of looks by now... Ha ha. And it looks like we've got a pair of lovey-dovey sweethearts on our hands! You can see that much clear as day!* Feeling her heart grow warm for some reason, Hyley cast her eyes down at the ledger.

"So it's Livio and Sophie, hmm? Did you two just get hitched?" Hyley asked with a laugh.

They both turned bright red as if their faces had been set on fire. Hyley couldn't help but let out a laugh. It wasn't all that strange to see such innocent and pure couples these days.

"Oh, you two just make the most adorable little couple!"

What was more, this duo had also launched into an exchange about whether or not they'd get separate rooms. Hyley couldn't stop laughing—youngsters these days were just too adorable!

They were so adorable, in fact, that Hyley the businesswoman ended up tasting defeat for the second time. No use fussing over

it now—after all, they always said history repeats itself!

But still, adorable wasn't the only thing those youngsters nowadays were! The swordsmanship and magic they'd whipped out was unlike anything she'd ever seen or anything she'd likely see thereafter. It was almost, well, indecent! But even then, they looked as if they'd done nothing at all. In fact, they just politely thanked her and gave Hyley their brightest smiles when she brought them their food and cleaned up their dishes. They didn't just look so innocent that they wouldn't hurt a fly—they were so innocent those same flies might just up and turn into flowers! All Hyley could do was lift her hands in resignation. She'd been met with the shock of practically being able to see a boundless future unfurling itself behind the young man's smile.

Even Hyley had had a future like that once. But even then, the reason that she hadn't been able to take the hand of the adventurer who'd invited her to go with him was because she was a coward. She hadn't had the courage to leave her mother and the town she'd spent her whole life in behind to throw herself into a life of love. If, that day—when the world was still vivid with color—she had been able to rush out, would she have been able to escape the depressing gloom of waking up to the same day over and over again? *That's...* That was what crossed Hyley's mind as she watched her life flash before her eyes again. That was some terrifying face-force all right.

It seemed the sheer shock of it all had shaken Hyley's body to its core. The following morning, not only was Hyley able to wake up right away, she was able to spring up out of bed as well. What was more, it almost seemed like her skin had more of a glow to it. Looking at herself in the mirror, even though her face hadn't changed at all from yesterday, it seemed to tingle with life somehow. *Oh, I see! So this is shock magic, huh? Long live the face-force!*

"They're all the talk of the town—and the town has a lot to say!" Mia laughed as Hyley set out the sheets to dry, feeling like she could break into song.

"I'd imagine so!" Hyley laughed in return. The warm rays of sunlight and the pure white of the sheets fit Mia well.

"It seems like they all knew each other too... I wonder how

they're all related?"

"It's not our place to go poking our noses in our guests' business now."

"I know, it's just…aren't you a little bit curious?"

Hyley was *extremely* curious. In fact, she'd even had a lively discussion with her old friend when she'd come by to deliver the eggs that morning, but instead, Hyley played innocent and laughed. "Just don't get too carried away!"

At present, the prevailing theory between Hyley and her old friend was that the all-black duo was the boss of some shady, underground organization and the daughter of the boss's deceased best friend, while Livio and Sophie were an eloped knight and princess in turn.

The truth of it all doesn't matter a hill of beans at the end of the day though. No matter their true identities, they were the town's heroes and the inn's valued guests nonetheless.

That's right. Nothing's changing. Not a thing.

After all, the one who'd decided not to change anything—the one who'd chosen this present moment—was Hyley herself.

The inn was just a stop along the way on someone's journey. But it was a place for them to rest their legs in a clean, warm bed before they set off on their journey the following morn with a bag full of hopes and dreams. The inn was a place where Hyley could see off those youths on their journey.

The one who wanted to keep that same place safe was Hyley herself.

It was true she was a coward. It was true that she hadn't been able to leave her mother behind. But the fact that she loved the town and her job of sending off guests with the same charge of "Be safe out there!" every single day… That was all true too.

"Mia, once we're finished here, let's bake an apple pie."

"That's a great idea! I love your apple pie, madam!"

Hyley had inherited her apple pie recipe from her mother. It was sweet but spicy and one of Hyley's favorites. She wondered if those mystery-laden travelers—polite, naive, and adorable as they were—would enjoy the pie too. She certainly hoped they would.

Hyley would have to take extra care to make sure her life didn't start flashing before her eyes, but then again, maybe that wasn't a bad thing. After all, she had a past, so she knew just how precious

the future still ahead was. That was why Hyley was able to see them off on their journey.

Maybe getting old's not that bad after all. Or something like that! In high spirits, Hyley stretched her back.

My body even feels lighter! Huh...? Wait, no, my back's definitely sore!


Position: The Crown Prince's Fiancée
Sophelia von Lotus (Sophie)
Age: 15
Height: 160 cm
Sophelia has lived a life of tireless effort and endurance, but after she finally snaps, she encounters Livionis and makes her escape.
Position: Knight
Livionis Warrion (Livio)
Age: 16
Height: 190 cm
The eldest son of a legendary family that has produced generations of unstoppable knights. Yearning after Sophelia, he invites her to escape with him.
My Fiancé Cheated, But a New Love Rings!


Position: King of the Neighboring Kingdom—the "Usurper King"
Varroyce Elsarte Athkylos (Vyce)
Age: 31
Height: 170 cm
Foulmouthed, but kind and considerate.
He is skilled at close-range combat.
Position: Varroyce's fiancée
Lunatietta Dearbless (Lunetta)
Age: 17
Height: 155 cm
A princess of Magyck, kingdom of magic. While normally quiet and reserved, there's no stopping her once she gets started on her favorite subject: magic research.



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My Fiancé Cheated, But a New Love Rings! Volume 1
by Ehito

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