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Return from Death
I Kicked the Bucket and Now I'm Back at Square One With a Boyfriend Who Doesn't Remember Me

Table of Contents

Copyright

Character Page

Chapter 1: Reliving the School Entrance Ceremony

Chapter 2: Fourth Year, Second Time Around

Chapter 3: The Shadow of Summer

Chapter 4: In the Middle of the Road

Chapter 5: The Night’s Desert Star

Chapter 6: A Storm of Hidden Emotions

Chapter 7: An Ill-Fated Love

Chapter 8: The Best Birthday

Chapter 9: A Dress, Love, and a Bouquet

Chapter 10: The Star’s Protector

Chapter 11: Shaking of the Shrubs

Chapter 12: White Sky, Red Flame

Afterword

Other Series Pt. 1

Other Series Pt. 2

Return from Death: I Kicked the Bucket and Now I’m Back at Square One With a Boyfriend Who Doesn’t Remember Me Volume 1

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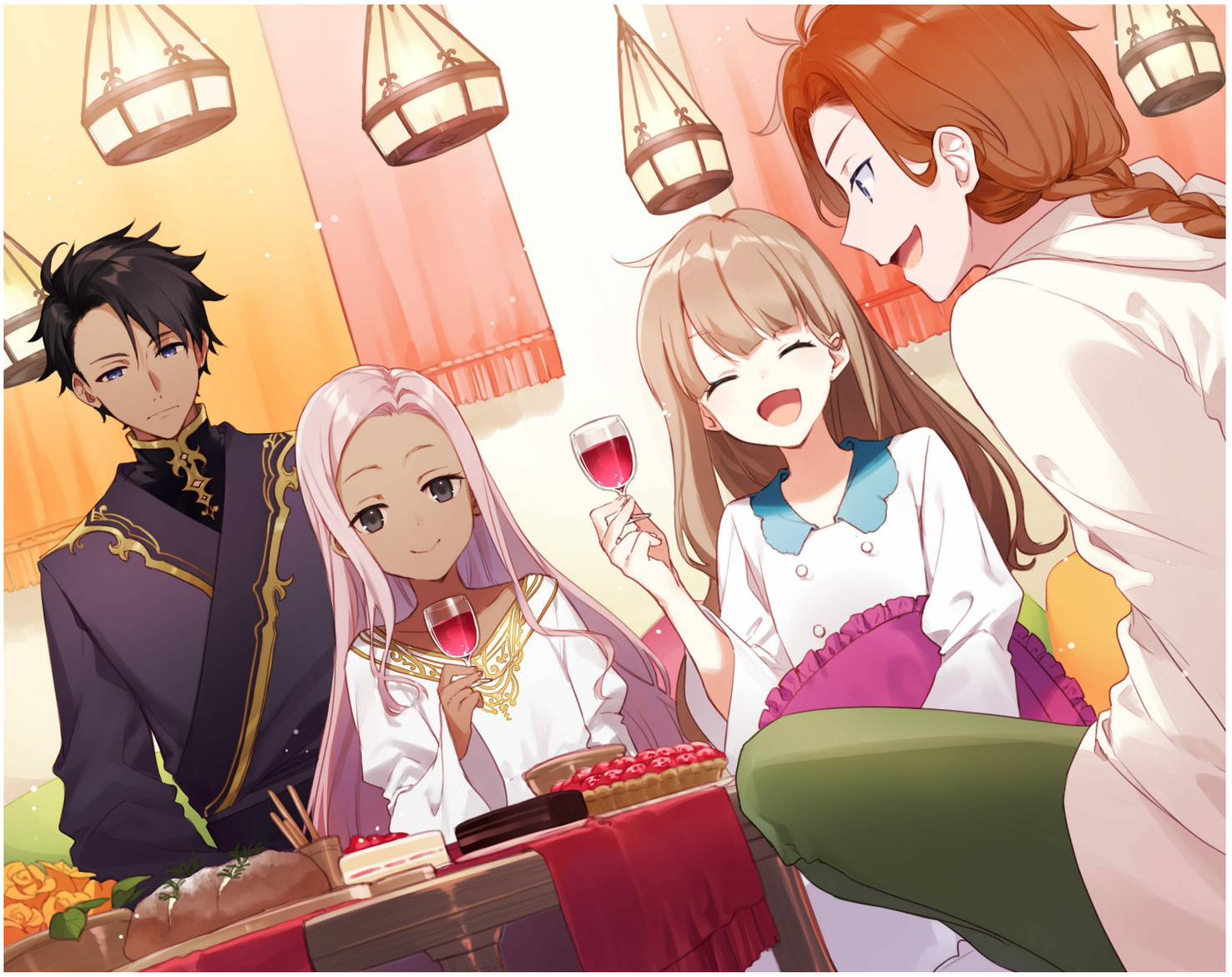
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Chapter 1: Reliving the School Entrance Ceremony

SNOW peppered the grounds of Lagen Magic Academy, as if heralding the new season.

“Vince!”

Waves of students in brand new uniforms crowded the sidewalks, and thirteen-year-old Oriana, a new student herself, had to cut through the oncoming tide as she rushed in the opposite direction. She bounded along like a young fawn. Her fluffy, milk-tea-colored hair fluttered behind her, dancing through the air with the falling snow. The heels of her loafers clapped against the pavement, but she couldn’t hear them over the sound of her own hammering heart.

“I’ve *missed* you!”

His toned arms readily caught her as she flew into him, and his familiar cedarwood scent flooded her nose.

Yes, this is it! Just how I remember…

No matter how much she’d searched and searched, she’d never found anything that smelled quite the same. She inhaled deeply as she squeezed her arms around him. His scent, his warmth—all of it overwhelmed her, making her heart tremble.

Although she was on the verge of tears, Oriana steeled her legs to keep herself upright and peered up at him, a great smile stretched across her face.

“How have you *been?* Were you all right? Were you lonely? Oh, how I’ve *longed* to see you again! See, when I woke up and realized I was seven again—”

“I’m sorry, but…” His cold voice cut through the air like a blade.

That was when Oriana finally noticed. Something about him was…*different.* He’d normally pull her close and gently call her name. It was decidedly unusual for him to tense up like this.

“You must have the wrong person,” he said.

“…What?”

His purple eyes, as beautiful as gems, stared coldly down at her. He easily broke her embrace.

“Wait, Vince. What’s wrong? I…I’ve waited so *long* for this day—for the chance to see you again…!”

“Should I call someone to come help you? That’s the most I can do for you.”

“Wait. Don’t you…don’t you remember me? *Us?*”

“I’m sorry; I can’t afford to humor you anymore,” he said. “Please excuse me.”

Though his warmth still lingered in her hands, the boy himself slid past her and disappeared into the crowd of people.

The other students, who’d been watching this scene with bated breath, broke into noisy murmurs all around her. Their curious, probing gazes bore into her as she stood there frozen, arms still hanging in the air. Nervous sweat beaded down her forehead.

Don’t tell me…

Oriana pursed her lips tight. Even these strangers could recognize the panic on her face. Since *she’d* retained her memories, it never occurred to her to consider that he wouldn’t have, but…

Does Vince not remember what we were in our past life?

Given how cold his eyes and voice were, that was the only possibility.

Oriana Elsha and Vincent Tanzine had first begun dating in the winter at the beginning of their fifth year. That was also the first year they were allowed to participate in the school ball, and that was where Vincent picked Oriana as his partner.

It was possible to pick someone as a partner even if you weren’t dating them, but seeing how red Vincent’s ears had been as he’d stood there, a bouquet in his hands, Oriana had easily deduced his feelings.

She’d taken his hand and the two had begun a slow dance.

Or at least, that was how the now-first-year Oriana remembered things playing out as she stepped over some large tree roots protruding out of the ground.

“As…as you all know, the dragons have graced our world with their divine protection. *Hah, phew…* We have *them* to thank for our bountiful harvests and peaceful daily lives.”

Having already been through this class once, Oriana now found this lesson incredibly dull. The only reason she hadn’t fallen asleep was because she had to keep moving. Currently, she found herself in a densely green forest.

The first years, who’d barely begun their new school lives and were clad in freshly bought robes, chatted amongst themselves as they navigated through the trees. They’d all only turned thirteen recently, but the promise of adventure in the form of magic lessons had their hearts thrumming with anticipation.

“As mages, the most important blessing of all to us is the numerous Dragon Ley Lines, filled with magic, that run underground.”

In charge of leading these young lambs was Lady Wilton, a Magic Academy professor, who rattled off this explanation even as she paused periodically to catch her breath. She kept her skirt hiked up as she walked, but its hem was already covered in dirt and fallen leaves.

“These ley lines, which can be found all over the world, are filled with our beloved dragons’ magic. Thanks to them, we can use our wands and incantations to conjure magic. Thus, you will be using branches from the Dragon’s Tree to fashion a wand for yourselves.”

In the center of these woods was a conspicuously large tree—the Dragon’s Tree—and Professor Wilton crouched down upon its roots.

“You’re all here, aren’t you? In that case, start picking up fallen branches. Don’t worry! You were all chosen as mages; you’ll be able to tell at a glance whether a branch is from the Dragon’s Tree or not.” As the professor doled out instructions, she produced a handkerchief from her pocket and started mopping up the sweat on her face.

“Whatever branch you pick will become the wand you use for the rest of your

lives. Take your time and think carefully. You can pick based on length, feel, weight, or whatever you desire. Be careful not to wander too far, though!”

Once she finished saying all that needed to be said, Professor Wilton hung her head in exhaustion. She probably intended to recover as much stamina as she could while she waited for them. After all, if anyone wanted to eat dinner tonight, they’d have to trek back the way they’d come.

Like the others milling about, Oriana glanced around at the ground as she walked, strands of plain, brown hair tickling her cheeks.

Beside the Academy was a vast forest that swept over the land. So vast, some recesses were still yet unexplored. It served as a source for rare plants and less dangerous animals, but most importantly, it was home to the Dragon’s Tree. As its name implied, it was a tree beloved by dragons. It, and others all over the world, grew where numerous underground ley lines overlapped, leaving these trees teeming with magical power.

The branches were fashioned into wands, the bark was used for creating magic ink, and the leaves were crafted into magic paper. The latter two were also used for drawing magic circles.

As common sense would dictate, one could not simply break off a branch from such a holy tree. No harm was permitted to come to it. Instead, mages were to receive their blessing by retrieving whatever fell from the tree.

As she looked around, Oriana spotted the perfect branch. She scooped it up, squeezing her fingers around it. It fit perfectly in her hand. She smiled bitterly. What were the chances that she’d pick up the same branch as she had in her past life, in a forest as huge as this, with hundreds of other options? She could think of no other answer for it than fate.

Although she’d only just turned thirteen, she carried not only her memories from this life but her past one as well. No, “past life” wasn’t right. It was her exact same life but a different timeline. She’d been born to the same parents, grown up in the same household, and enrolled in the same magic academy. However, in the previous timeline, her beloved Vincent had died at just seventeen.

“Oh, Mister Tanzine!”

Oriana spotted her darling in the distance and her face immediately lit up. By contrast, the moment she called his name, Vincent's expression soured. His reaction did little to dampen her spirits as she sped over to him. The other students glared at her and stalked away, having lost their chance to approach Vincent, thanks to her disruption.

As the Amethyst Dragon Duke's heir apparent, Vincent enjoyed great popularity among the other students, even though he'd only just begun attending. The Amethyst Dragon was the name of the region Vincent was set to eventually inherit.

The country of Amanecer was once protected by eight dragons, and its regions had been split respectively and named after each one of them. Eight hereditary dukedoms ruled these lands, their titles similarly named after those dragons.

Having said that, Vincent's popularity wasn't merely due to his future title. His gorgeous face was like a masterfully crafted sculpture, yet so soft and welcoming that he didn't come across as intimidating. His golden hair fell to his ears like silk, and his eyes were a vivid violet, sparkling as if they'd swallowed up the spring sunlight. There was something dignified about the way he conducted himself, and though just barely thirteen, he had an air of elegance that bespoke his cultured upbringing.

"Have you found a good branch?" Oriana asked.

"Unfortunately, no; I've only just begun looking."

Ever since Oriana had realized he didn't remember her, she'd endeavored to treat him as a classmate and nothing more. Alas, she couldn't hide her affection. Love was all the motivation she needed to sidle up to him.

"Then let's look together!"

She tried to loop her arm around his, but he slipped out of her grasp.

"That's quite all right. I'm *sure* I could search better in silence."

Oriana frantically tried several more times to latch onto either his back or his arm, but Vincent never gave her an opening. Finally, she gave up and heaved a sigh, resigning herself to walking beside him instead.

“Come now, don’t be so cold… Oh, hey, what about that one there?” Oriana noticed a branch at her feet and casually plucked it up.

Vincent eyed it suspiciously but accepted it out of good manners. His brow furrowed with confusion. Oriana was sure the branch felt perfect in his hand.

“Is it a good fit? Judging by your face, I’d say it *is*.”

“I…” Vincent hesitated. “I will consider it as a possible candidate.”

“I’m pretty sure the one you used before was about that length.”

“*Again* with that tall tale of yours?” His beautiful features soured again. “I believe you said something about us eventually becoming a couple and swearing our love for one another a few years from now?”

Apparently, he thought of her story as nothing more than an excuse she’d cobbled together to try to get close to him. It was, admittedly, a bit absurd to claim they’d once been lovers in a different timeline. She couldn’t really blame him for not buying it.

“Regrettably, I’ve no intention of taking your nonsense seriously, nor do I plan to haggle with my father so that you can be considered a possible marriage candidate in my future.”

“That’s fine with me!” Oriana said, beaming. “It’s not like I *want* to be a duke’s wife anyway!”



Vincent flinched in surprise.

“But if you *do* decide you want to resume our relationship, you need only say the word. I’m ready and waiting whenever you are!” she said, smiling at him.

“You needn’t worry about that happening…ever,” Vincent said acidly. “Now stop holding your arms out toward me like that.”

“Oh! I guess I should’ve introduced myself first! My name is Oriana Elsha. My birthday is on the fifth day of the first month of winter (December). I’m four feet, nine inches tall, and…well, my weight is a bit of a secret~! I also love all kinds of noodle dishes and—”

“I’m sure that information would be *most* fascinating if I had any interest in you at all, but alas, I do not.”

“*Ehehe*. I even love how much of a grump you can be! *Tehehe…*”

Vincent shot her a cold look. The annoyance on his face was plain as day, but no matter how much he rebuffed her, she would not be discouraged.

Oriana didn’t really remember the moment of her death very well. At the time, she was too busy cradling Vincent’s body in her arms. He was already gone by then, his body cold as ice, without a trace of warmth left.

Her body trembled as she recalled that awful memory. She wrapped herself around Vincent’s arm. He only allowed it because he’d momentarily dropped his guard, but he quickly slipped away again. Even then, Oriana wouldn’t give up. She tried to sidle up to him again, only for Vincent to gradually retreat and put space between them. She then launched herself at him, hoping she could latch on, but Vincent swiftly evaded her.

“Excuse me, Mister Tanzine? Shouldn’t you be treating a lady like me with a bit more delicacy?”

“As social decorum dictates, I am maintaining adequate distance to preserve your honor.”

“Oh goodness, you’ll make me blush! How should I *interpret* your concern for my honor? *Hm…* Is this your way of trying to court me?”

“I prefer not to have to spell out the obvious, but it seems I have no other

choice: cease your blushing and that disturbing…wiggling you keep doing with your body!”

“*Hmph*,” Oriana pouted, sticking out her lips.

These sorts of unconscious, childlike behaviors of hers had often prompted Vince to call her cute in their past life. Unfortunately, it seemed she wouldn’t be hearing those sweet nothings from him anymore. All he did now was shoot cold looks at her.

“But I like *that* part of you, too.”

“You could stand to take another lesson in modesty.”

Another… Yes, it was precisely *because* she’d gotten another chance that she was alive and able to see him again like this.

And that’s all that matters, even if *it means he’s forgotten me.*

Oriana had already decided that this time, she’d do whatever it took to protect him.

❦ ❦ ❦

ORIANA still wasn’t sure what’d caused Vince’s death. His body hadn’t been riddled with stab wounds. There were no burns. He’d just stopped breathing.

One of the biggest events at Lagen Magic Academy was its mid-spring (April) ball. Vince had died just after it ended.

The day it had happened, the two were supposed to meet up in their favorite lounge. There were many such lounges scattered throughout the school. They were places where students could rest or hold meetings, and at times, it even acted as a reception hall for events on the weekends. Usage of the rooms was unrestricted and left to students’ discretion.

The lounge Vince and Oriana adored was a small one located at the edge of the eastern building. There wasn’t much traffic in the corridors there once lessons were over, since only specialized classes were held in that part of the Academy. After years of going unused, their lounge had been largely forgotten. It was their secret spot, where they could be alone without fear of interruption.

That day, a teacher had flagged Oriana down and tasked her with some

errands, so she'd arrived at their lounge a bit later than planned. It was thundering outside, and as she raced down the corridor, flashes of lightning had silhouetted her, casting long shadows. She stepped into the familiar room, and, like he'd always had before, Vince was there waiting.

"Sorry I took so long."

He was lounging on a sofa by the fireplace. The flames inside danced as the wood crackled. Perhaps Vince had decided to warm the place up ahead of her arrival, she thought.

As she approached, she saw he had a gentle expression on his face, his eyes closed.

Is he sleeping? Maybe he's exhausted?

Oriana sat by his feet and placed a hand on his knee. She started to lean in closer to nuzzle him, when she realized something was off. Even through his pants, his body was ice cold.

"Vince?"

Something had happened.

Oriana immediately put her hand on his cheek. It was shockingly frigid, devoid of all warmth.

"Vince? Vince?!"

She gently patted his face several times. When he didn't respond, she started putting more force into her swings. No matter how hard she slapped him, his cheeks stayed pale white, and his eyes didn't open.

Oriana cradled him in her arms and slowly sank to the floor.

She had no idea what could've happened to him. The school was peaceful. Sure, there were some disputes and feuds between factions, but it wasn't the kind of place where someone would murder another person.

Had he taken ill suddenly and died from that? Or had someone snuck in here and murdered him before she came?

Oriana studied every inch of him, but there were no stab wounds, no marks

around his neck to suggest he'd been strangled. Students swore an oath not to use any magic (with a few exceptions) outside of class, and even then, they'd never learned, nor would they ever learn, any magic that could kill someone.

Vince looked like he was sleeping peacefully. It was hard to believe someone had murdered him.

Oriana continued to puzzle over the matter as she held his cold body in her arms.

She knew she should leave and go call someone, but she couldn't bring herself to do it. It was bad enough that Vince had died here all alone. She couldn't bear to leave him by himself again, not even for a second.

The only sounds in that tiny little lounge were the crackling fire and the roar of thunder outside.

Perhaps because she'd shed so many tears, Oriana was starting to feel lightheaded. Her brain couldn't process anything. Before she realized what was happening, a sweet, unfamiliar aroma filled the air around her.

Oriana caressed Vince's cheeks over and over. Hot tears rolled down her face, dripping onto his. She pressed her lips to his, which were damp from all her crying. The next moment, everything went black.

❦ ❦ ❦

ORIANA had no idea why she'd been given a second chance at life, nor why she'd retained all her memories. For some reason, she'd assumed that since time had rewound itself for her, the same had to be true for Vince. Perhaps she'd only convinced herself of that because it had brought her hope amidst all the anxiety of having her life totally repeat itself —a phenomenon she'd certainly never heard of happening before.

She'd convinced herself to work hard because she was sure Vince would be waiting. Knowing that he'd be feeling the same emotions gave her strength. She realized she was lucky to get another chance, but that didn't stop her from feeling powerless and alone. She was only able to overcome that and keep going forward because of Vince. Until the two met again, she'd promised herself she wouldn't give in to despair.

But when we finally met, he didn't remember me at all…

It was probably incorrect to claim he didn't remember. More likely, Oriana was the only one who'd gone back in time. Realizing that made her feel so very isolated.

She never dreamed she'd lose Vince—the anchor she'd been latching onto this whole time—forever.

"Can't believe he told me it was love at first sight back then," she muttered as she watched him walk through the forest now.

Liar!

She cursed at him, even though she knew it would do her no good.

Vince had once gently stroked her cheeks, his own face bright red as he confessed how he'd fallen for her.

But this isn't love at first sight at all! If anything, it's been hate *at first sight!*

It was hard not to feel hurt when he dodged her and treated her so coldly now.

But I have no idea what else to do…

In her past life, Vince had genuinely loved her. She'd never had to work for his affection. He fell for her naturally and had loved her, flaws and all. It was only due to this second go-round that she realized how much she'd taken all of that for granted. She could still remember how sweet and loving he'd been, and that only made it more difficult.

The way things are now, I'm no different from the other girls swarming around him, trying to earn his favor. No, actually…I'm even worse *than the rest of them.*

Oriana didn't have exceptional social status. She wasn't a peerless beauty either, and she wasn't the most compassionate or saintly. Instead, she was a rather plain-looking girl born into a merchant family. It'd be difficult for someone like her to win over someone like Vincent.

Thus, Oriana changed her goal.

It's fine if Vincent and I don't become lovers this time. As long as he doesn't die, that's enough for me!

True, it'd pain her to see him hook up with—and maybe even marry—some other girl, but better that than him dying again. That said, she'd no intention of keeping her distance. Oriana was the only person who could shield him from the tragedy that awaited him.

She needed a way to stay by his side so she could protect him. Merely clinging to him when the opportunity presented itself wasn't enough. Left with no other choice, she had to bury her nose in books and study so she could stay close. Classes at Lagen Magic Academy were split up based on a person's academic level. If she fell behind, she'd be placed in a different class, and that'd make it difficult for her to see him every day.

If someone really *had* murdered Vince, then she'd find the culprit. If it was an illness that had taken him, then she'd stay vigilant.

Oriana was now bound and determined to do whatever it took to keep him safe.

Chapter 2: Fourth Year, Second Time Around

“GAAAAH! I give, I give! Mercy! Please go easy on me! It’s cramping!”

“See, if you move too quickly like this, it puts a strain on your body. Everyone, take your time and stretch! Make sure not to push yourself past your limits.” The girl spoke in a relaxed tone to the other girls in the room, even as she kept a solid grip on Oriana’s ankle, bending her like a human pretzel.

“Yana! J-Just let go of my leg for now! Please—”

“There’s no point in doing this pose if your big toe is facing inward like this. You need to turn it out like so…”

“Ow, ow, *ow!*”

Smack, smack, smack!

Oriana beat her hand against the floor in surrender, and the noise echoed through the girls’ lounge.

There were about ten girls in the room and they all wore intense, determined expressions on their faces as they watched Yana demonstrate by twisting Oriana’s body this way and that. Not a single one of them made any reference to the anguished look on Oriana’s face. There was something more important at stake here than her suffering. The passion behind their gazes said more than words ever could: they were all intent on mastering the correct yoga pose in the pursuit of beauty.

“All right, go on then! Try doing it yourselves.”

After prompting the other girls to begin moving their bodies, Yana finally released Oriana.

Tears, sweat, and snot poured down Oriana’s face as she slumped face down onto the floor, her shoulders heaving with each breath she took.

“Goodness, Oriana! You wouldn’t be so winded if you didn’t neglect your stretches. Didn’t I tell you to keep up with them daily?” Yana spared Oriana a

pitying look.

Her full name was Yana Nova Mahathin, and she had built a position for herself here as a yoga instructor, occasionally conducting her lessons on Fruit Day mornings. Her skin was dark brown and her hair an almost mystical light purple. With such peerless beauty, it took just a glance for boys and girls alike to fall head over heels for her. This had earned her the nickname “Desert’s Star.”

“Uh, yoga just doesn’t…agree with me, I guess you could say,” Oriana said with a shrug.

“The only people yoga ‘doesn’t *agree* with’ are the people who don’t put the effort in to continue it,” Yana chided softly.

Her soft rebuke prompted Oriana to pull her lips into a tight, dismayed line. The other girl was as beautiful and graceful as a doe, which made her words seem all the more convincing.

“Besides, don’t you *also* want to increase your appeal so you can sweep Mister Tanzine off his feet?”

I do! I want to sweep him up so hard, he won’t know what hit him!

Alas, she’d long since abandoned such fruitless desires.

Oriana scrunched up her face, conflicted. This prompted Yana to burst out laughing.

“Using your head all the time won’t get you anywhere! It’ll just make your body freeze up. Keeping an exercise routine, morning *and* night, is what really improves a woman’s beauty!”

Yana wasn’t merely a yoga instructor; she was also the thirteenth princess of the neighboring country, Ete Karima. Currently, she was studying at Lagen and just so happened to be Oriana’s roommate.

Four years had passed since the two began sharing a room, meaning Oriana was now sixteen and in her fourth year. Lagen Magic Academy was a five-year institution, which meant students began at age thirteen and attended lessons until they were eighteen. Classes were split into four based on academic

performance: Special Class, Class 1, Class 2, and Class 3. In the process of mastering the magical arts, students also formed friendships and rivalries with one another.

The Academy itself was built near the Dragon's Tree, which played a pivotal role in their classes. Since the tree was connected to the underground leylines, it was impossible to transplant. There were only a dozen or so of these precious trees in the world to begin with, which limited the number of magic academies. Only two existed in the country: Lagen Magic Academy, located near the capital, and one near the western border. This was why so many students came from all over the country to enroll here.

Most of those in attendance at Lagen were nobility or common folk with a lot of coin. A hefty sum was required to cover admittance and dorm fees, as well as all the materials necessary for learning.

Oriana was one of the common folk. Her parents were prosperous merchants and, with some luck, they could even use their contacts to help her debut into high society. That said, there was no social hierarchy for those at the school. People regarded each other as mages, nothing more, nothing less.

Underlying this egalitarianism was the belief that all were equal under the benevolence of the Great Dragon. One was obligated to refer to anyone outside their immediate circle by their surname and the title "Miss" or "Mister." Even though Oriana was a mere commoner and Yana a princess, they still referred to each other by their first names.

"Nah," said Oriana. "I'm not skilled enough to juggle two things at once. For now, I think I'll focus on my studies."

Her first priority was Vincent, not her own looks. She was willing to use a bit of makeup on herself, but she didn't have the extra free time to spare on beauty exercises.

Oriana had been dedicated to her studies these past four years, to the detriment of her sleep cycle. Even with the knowledge her previous life afforded her, it was still a struggle to stay at the top, since she wasn't naturally gifted.

"Yes, I suppose that dedication *is* one of your more charming features," said

Yana with a reluctant nod.

After that, Oriana bid her friend farewell and headed out of the dormitory.

The girls' dormitory was only a short distance from the main school building, and the boys' dormitory was on the opposite side. The Academy's grounds were enormous. Besides the dormitories and the main school building, there was also a park, a greenhouse, a stable, some fields, and other facilities.

Oriana's intended destination was the study hall, as usual. It'd become such a force of habit these past four years that all the other students knew she spent virtually all her time there.

Not moments after she left the dormitory, she spotted a familiar face. When he noticed her, he made his way over in a few long strides, his hulking frame towering over her.

"Morning, Azraq."

"Morning, Elsha! Where's Princess Yana?"

The man casually greeting her was Yana's bodyguard, Azraq Zalena. His colossal height was enough to leave anyone slack-jawed in awe, and he was also covered in muscles. He had the same dark skin as Yana, but where the princess had an almost mystical aura about her, he had a more sensual one.

Azraq was two years older than Oriana, but they were in the same academic year. Someone must have pulled some strings to make sure he was admitted in the same year as Yana.

"You can just call me Oriana, you know. *Ooh*, or would you prefer to call me Ori instead?"

"Yes, pardon me, *Lady Ori*. I do hope you will allow me to inquire as to the nature of my lady's whereabouts, as it is high past the hour she would normally exit from the dormitory."

His joke earned him a chuckle from Oriana.

"Yana's still in the midst of 'imparting her beauty secrets' to the students, as it were. Since you're already here, I guess that means she's running later than usual. Probably because I was throwing a fit in there."

“Wait, Elsha, you mean to tell me *you* were taking part in yoga today? What a shame I couldn’t be there to witness it.”

“Come on, don’t tease me like that! A beached whale flopping about on the beach would have done a better job than me today, I can tell you that.”

Azraq’s emotionless expression cracked, giving way to a faint smile.

For Oriana’s part, she thought of the man as a comrade. She took up the role of keeping an eye on Yana where Azraq couldn’t, such as in the girls’ dormitory or anywhere else male entry was restricted. What she did wasn’t as extensive as being an actual bodyguard, but she still went out of her way to look out for Yana. Azraq made his gratitude for that readily apparent.

“Going to the library?”

Azraq probably suspected she had business at the school, since she was still wearing her uniform, even though it was the weekend. Or maybe it was the countless books and report papers she had with her that gave her away.

“Nope, the study hall. Want to come with?”

After a short pause, he said, “No. I’ll…pass on that.”

Azraq’s primary duty was as Yana’s bodyguard, so he didn’t put much effort into his magic studies. He probably had no interest in school, to begin with. She’d already known he’d likely refuse her invitation, but she had to laugh at the way he responded, like a child being scolded by their mother.

Wind suddenly gusted around them, prompting Oriana to tamp down her hair. It managed to carry off two of the papers she was holding. Panicked, she managed to snatch one before it got away, but the other flew up beyond her reach.

Azraq plucked it out of the air with such ease, it almost looked as if he’d pulled it towards himself.

“Thanks,” said Oriana. “The way you did that was like magic.”

“You think I would use magic on a mere sheet of paper? It’s faster and more efficient to simply grab it.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

When he lifted his arm, Oriana got a brief glimpse of the bandages hidden under his sleeve.

He must be sporting some kind of injury.

Exceptional bodyguard that he was, Azraq noticed the subtle shift in her facial features and quickly dropped his arm. Oriana pretended not to notice, instead accepting back the report he'd snagged for her.

"If you change your mind, feel free to join me at any time."

"If Lady Yana orders me to do so, I will," he said, wrinkling his nose. Obviously, he didn't want to have to study on their day off.

Oriana laughed and bid him good day.

❦ ❦ ❦

WHEN Oriana entered the study hall, her eyes lit up. The very person she'd hoped to see was sitting there by the window. He was glancing down at one of the underclassmen, keeping a soft tone as he explained to them how to use a dictionary. He was so considerate, so kind, and so *utterly* divine! Oriana was convinced all the other people in the room who saw him were thinking the same thing.

Oriana stepped to the side so she wouldn't block the entrance as she absently observed. Once the underclassman walked away from Vincent, she made her move, scuttling as silently as a crab until she was right behind him. Then she threw her arms around him and leaned in, letting her hot breath caress the shell of his perfectly shaped ear.

"Surprise, Lord Vincent!"

"Gah??!!"

Vincent must've been so immersed in the book he was reading that he hadn't sensed her at all. He slapped his hands over his ears and spun around to face her. Since she was still clinging tightly to him, he could only crane himself awkwardly.

"*Miss Elsha*, what, pray tell, are you *doing?*"

Oriana was accustomed to him drawing a line like that—indirectly chastising

her for using his first name. He always kept her at arm's length. That was true when it came to other people as well, but his vehement rejection was reserved for Oriana alone.

Nonetheless, she maintained indifference as she responded, "Indeed, that *is* my name, *Mister Tanzine*. I have come here to study hard, so I can remain ever at your side!" As soon as she finished that straight-faced delivery, she broke into giggles.

"That's not what I meant." A vein popped on Vincent's forehead. "I meant, why are you clinging onto my—"

"Now, now, *Vincent.* Do you *really* think it appropriate to raise your voice like that, considering where we are?" the boy sitting beside Vincent chimed in, trying desperately to suppress a laugh as he spoke.

All three of them glanced over at the entrance where Professor Wilton was standing, brows furrowed in dismay as she glared at them.

Pleased to have support, Oriana continued clinging to Vince's back, plastering an innocent look on her face as she glanced at the boy who had spoken in her favor.

Miguel Ferveira was a dear friend of Vincent's. He had long red hair tied behind his head and always wore an annoyingly arrogant grin on his face. His father was Earl Hydrangea, and as the Ferveira heir, Miguel would eventually succeed him. He and Vince were close because they had attended lessons together from an early age, and they would also share political ties after graduation.

Although Vincent offered the same measure of (arguably tepid) kindness to everyone, there was only one man he'd ever called friend—whether in this life or their past one—and that was Miguel.

"Yeah! You make an excellent point, Miguel."

"Good morning, Oriana! You're as adorable as ever, I see."

Oriana had been on good terms with him, even in her past life. In fact, it was only through Miguel that she'd even became acquainted with Vincent, to begin with. He was just as friendly with her this go-round as he'd been back then.

But Miguel's smile is completely unreadable. I can't tell if he genuinely wants *to be friends with me or not.*

"Morning, Miguel," she replied. "As always, I did my best today, hoping Mister Tanzine here would find me adorable as well."

Oriana finally peeled herself away from Vincent and nonchalantly plopped herself down in the seat beside him.

Vincent's purple eyes glared at her, as if he'd something he wanted to say.

"Yes? What is it?" Oriana asked.

"I merely wondered if you'd asked my permission before you decided to sit there."

Oriana feigned shock by dropping her jaw and pressing a hand over her mouth. "My goodness, Mister Tanzine. I *never* would have guessed someone of your position to be so forgetful! Are you unaware that students here are free to select whatever seat they like?"

"Thanks to *you*, I seem to have remembered now. Much appreciated," he retorted, breathing a small sigh. That was the end of his snark for now at least.

In the past, he'd merely wrinkled his nose in displeasure and ignored her or gathered his things and changed seats. When she sat by him lately, he merely fussed at her a bit.

That's a step forward, right? Oriana thought as she grinned.

Vincent, who was equally nice to everyone (besides Oriana), was practically a school celebrity. His conduct was professional, his grades perfect, he was always kind and sincere, and to top it all off, he was insanely handsome. It would be strange if he *wasn't* constantly in the limelight.

Nonetheless, Vincent's noble bearing was so intimidating that it was difficult for him to make genuine friends. Most would consider it scandalous to plunk down beside him without permission. The other students sent chastising looks Oriana's way, but she ignored them all. She hardly cared about what excuses they gave themselves for not working up the courage to approach Vincent.

Besides, I only have one year until he dies.

He hadn’t made any complaints yet that would indicate illness, nor had she noticed anyone who might resent him enough to murder him. Anyway, Vincent was a pretty shrewd person; he only consumed food the school provided or was otherwise directly served to him. He wasn’t the type to heedlessly eat whatever someone else offered him.

Even so, Oriana couldn’t help worrying. She’d learned any magic that might help protect him, clinging to him at all costs, so she could keep an eye out. If she humbly kept her distance, she risked losing him again. That was one thing she couldn’t bear.

Determined, Oriana cracked open her book and spread out her papers, careful not to encroach on Vincent’s space as he sat beside her. Once she’d finished that, she took out her pen and set to work.

❦ ❦ ❦

“ORIAN… Ori?”

“*Hngh?*”

She was so immersed in her studies, she didn’t realize at first that Miguel was calling her name. Unable to peel her attention away as her pen danced across the page, she grunted instead.

“Sorry, but can you lend me your Kahn rune dictionary? All the other ones here are checked out.”

“*Ngh.*”

Oriana continued scribbling with her right hand while her left traced over the table, feeling through a nearby stack of books for the appropriate volume. She’d devoted so much time to studying these past four years that she could distinguish between books by the feel of their covers.

Unfortunately, the dictionary was heavy enough that tugging at it with a single fingertip wasn’t nearly enough to pry it loose from the pile. She continued struggling spectacularly, until Vincent finally retrieved the volume for her and passed it over to Miguel.

Oriana’s pen froze. She peered up at Vincent.

“Th-Thank you.”

“It was nothing.” He averted his eyes, as if the thought of helping her had made him uncomfortable, and focused back on his own textbook.

Oriana followed his example and returned to her studies, but for the life of her, she couldn’t focus.

It’s things like this that totally throw me off!

The Vince she had dated and the current Vincent were completely different people and yet, also fundamentally the same.

Oriana set her pen aside so the ink wouldn’t drip and started slowly flipping through her book. Her brain wasn’t digesting any of what she read. Nonetheless, her eyes followed the words as she tucked back the strands of hair that’d been tickling her cheek.

❦ ❦ ❦

SENSING someone’s eyes on her, Oriana casually glanced to her left. Vincent had his eyes narrowed and was staring her down. When their gazes met, he grimaced.

Oriana had no idea why he was making such a face at her. Suspicious, she glanced down at his hands and noticed strong rays of sunlight pouring in from the window.

“A bit blinding for you?” she guessed.

“You’re too self-conscious.”

“Huh? Uh, sorry?” Oriana had no idea what he was reprimanding her for, but she apologized all the same. “Anyway, if the sun’s too bright for you, we can switch seats.”

She assumed he was staring over at her because the light was blinding him, hence her offer. It was no surprise he was having trouble looking at his paper with how intense the sun was.

Vincent gawked at her for a moment before his cheeks lit up as bright as the evening sky.

“*Pff…pffft…*”

That strange noise prompted Oriana to turn her head toward Miguel. He was using the dictionary he’d borrowed earlier as a shield, standing it upright as he leaned forward and hid his face.

Sensing something amiss, she opened her mouth to question him, but Vincent beat her to it.

“Miguel.”

“Sor—”

“*Miguel*.”

“My bad, my bad.” He lifted his head and wiped the tears from the corners of his eyes. Judging by his expression, he was struggling to hold back his laughter.

Oriana stared blankly at him. What part of their exchange had Miguel found so funny?

“Silence is golden,” Miguel reminded his friend.

“Shut up,” Vincent huffed like a sulky child before turning away.

Shut up… Vincent *just told someone to shut up…*

Oriana had never seen this side of him in their first timeline. That expression was probably one he’d only ever shown to Miguel. Her heart flooded with warmth and a smile tugged at her lips. She’d gotten to see a side of him no one else ever did!

“*Tehehe…*”

“What *are* you giggling about?”

“Oh, I’m just delighted.”

“Which is precisely *why* I— No. Let me be clear so you do not misunderstand. It wasn’t as though I was looking at *you*, I—”

“What?” Oriana blinked at him.

Vincent pressed his elbows against the table and cradled his head in his hands. Apparently, he’d flubbed whatever he was trying to say. Again, Miguel

hid himself behind the dictionary, shoulders shaking with uncontained mirth.

Oriana's gaze flitted between the two. Vincent had a wounded look on his face, so she leaned in closer. "Vincent?"

"What?" he huffed back sullenly.

She swallowed hard. This time, he didn't scold her for calling him by his first name. Aching for more, she stretched a hand toward him. The moment she brushed his hair, he glared at her.

"I haven't given you permission to go that far yet."

"As you say, Your Excellency!"

The way he said it implies he's now giving me permission to call him Vincent!

Unable to suppress her own grin, Oriana pressed her hands on either cheek, stretching her mouth out. That still wasn't enough, and although she clenched her teeth, a creepy giggle still leaked past her lips.

"You really don't learn your lesson." He suddenly smiled with such warmth that it took her breath away.

In order to swallow back the tears that threatened to spill out, Oriana whipped around to face Miguel. "Did you *see* that just now, Miguel?! I finally had an effect on Vincent!"

Miguel finally peeked out from behind the dictionary. He flashed his canines, grinning. "I did, I saw!"

"Oh gosh, I feel like I'm floating on air! After seeing a beautiful smile like that, I don't know if I'll be able to sleep tonight. I'm just so happy! I *adore* you, Vincent! I truly do!" Oriana clapped her hands over her blushing cheeks and started squirming in her chair.

Vincent scowled. "I did *not* smile and you do *not* have any effect on me. It's merely because you are so thickheaded—"

"Yes, yes, I *know!* I know that, but it still made my heart skip!"

"You are posi*tive*ly—" Vincent was about to express his exasperation for her again but suddenly cut himself off.

Curious what'd convinced him to stop midway, she followed his gaze and gasped.

"Plenty lively over here, I see. Perhaps if you have so much energy, your time would be better spent exercising outside than sitting around in the study hall?" Professor Wilton was now standing beside Oriana, her arms folded.

After that sharp reprimand, the three gathered their belongings and hurried out.

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ONCE they fled the study hall, they paused in the courtyard to catch their breath. It was already starting to grow dark outside.

Oriana reached into her sleeve, rummaging through it until she finally produced a portable magic lantern. She also had a small piece of paper with a magic circle drawn on it. After pressing her wand to it and pouring some mana in, it lit up, and she tucked it inside her lantern. The Kahn rune for "light" was written on the tiny note, and now, imbued with her magic, it gave off a dim glow. Of all the magic permitted for use outside the classroom, this was the kind used most regularly.

Oriana held up the lantern and, as the dim light poured over all three of them, they finally collected themselves.

Vincent finished patting down his disheveled sleeves and combed his bangs back. "What a mess. Today was lively from beginning to end, thanks to you."

"Oh, I couldn't agree more," said Oriana. "My apologies. I'll take full responsibility. Let's get married!"

"Fine, my bad. I shouldn't have said that. Just please lift your head."

She'd bowed her head low and stuck out one hand toward him. Vincent was now slowly edging away.

"I'm afraid I can't do that until you give me one of three answers: yes, of course, or absolutely!"

"Will you knock it *off?* If anyone else sees us, they will think I am threatening you."

The truth was just the opposite, but anyone too far away to eavesdrop on their conversation would be none the wiser. Indeed, whispers were already bubbling up around them as others milled by.

Beside Vincent, Miguel had his hand pressed over his mouth, trying desperately to stifle his laughter.

“At any rate,” said Vincent, “I thought you said you had no interest in being a duke’s wife.”

“That would be a consequence of our union, but it’s not my main goal! I’d have to be *crazy* not to want to be your bride, Vincent!”

“This is *exactly* what I find so…” His voice trailed off as he drew his brows. His cheeks were red with anger.

Sensing she had pushed the envelope enough, Oriana said, “Okay, I’m sorry, Vincent.”

“It’s nothing you need to apologize for.”

“Really? Yay! You’re the best! In that case, I want to go back to the dorm before dinner, so I’ll take my leave here. See you again on Seed Day!”

Once Fruit Day ended, the week began with Seed Day. Thus, Vincent and Oriana would see each other again tomorrow.

The days of the weeks were as follows: Seed Day, Root Day, Bud Day, Stem Day, Leaf Day, Flower Day, and Fruit Day.

Students like Oriana normally had classes from Seed Day until Leaf Day, giving them both Flower Day and Fruit Day off. However, there were facilities (outside the classrooms) open for students on the weekends. Some students would take that opportunity to study by themselves or seek help from upperclassmen or teachers.

Once Sprout Day arrived, Oriana wouldn’t have to go out of her way to visit the library or study hall to see Vincent. She was grateful for weekdays for the simple fact that meeting with Vincent on the weekends was much more difficult.

“Bye-bye!” Oriana glanced over her shoulder and waved to Vincent and

Miguel as she headed off to the girls' dormitory. The lantern in her hand swung from side to side as she went.

Miguel excitedly waved back, while Vincent merely grunted and raised his hand slightly.

Chapter 3: The Shadow of Summer

AS someone repeating her past life, Oriana found some advantages to her situation. Most notably, her academic progress. She didn't fully understand all the ins and outs, but since she already knew the material, her classes were basically just review. She understood almost everything the teacher said, which meant she didn't feel panicked and, outside of some inconveniences, she'd even call it enjoyable.

Oriana's worst subject in her previous life was herbology. Yes, she was only dealing with plants. But they were still living things and she hated knowing her own failings would result in their deaths.

Fortunately, Oriana wasn't going in blind this time; she'd learned from her prior missteps. Now, she understood the different species' unique needs—such as where they should be stored or how much water they should be given. She was able to care for them naturally, without undue anxiety.

Herbology lessons were held in the classroom, practice room, field, or the conservatory. The latter was constructed entirely from glass. At night, it looked like something out of a fairytale, lit by lanterns that resembled stars glowing in the darkness.

The conservatory was located some distance from the main school building, and it was surrounded by fields of vegetables and herbs used in a number of different courses. Traveling to the fields and changing into work clothes ate up a lot of time, so field work was generally conducted in half-day intervals, either during the morning or the afternoon.

"My muscles are definitely gonna feel this tomorrow morning."

They were working in the herb field today, and the one grumbling under his breath as he tilled the earth with his hoe was Derek Turkey. He was a fourth-year and the Special Class president. He was a kind boy, albeit unremarkable—but that was actually part of his charm.

Their class was split into six groups to divide plant roots, but the boys were handling the hard labor. Professor Heinz was the one who'd paired them up. He had disheveled hair, a dark five o'clock shadow growing in, and his white lab coat was covered in stains, hanging loosely off his shoulders. He was easy to talk to but lacked the authoritative presence one might expect of someone in his position. His detached demeanor didn't do his reputation any favors either.

"Thanks," Oriana said to Derek, "and sorry about the work. We'll leave the tilling to you."

"Nah, it's okay. You girls have it tough with those weeds too."

Oriana was in charge of pulling out all the weeds from the area where they were going to transplant these herbs. She rubbed her sore lower back. Beside her, Marina Leroy—a girl from the same group—followed suit.

"I don't know if I'm going to be able to stand tomorrow," Oriana groaned.

"Forget tomorrow, I'm worried about this afternoon!" Marina grumbled.

"I hear you," Oriana concurred.

When Oriana paused to wipe her sweat with her sleeve, it left a smudge of dirt on her face. She hesitated, debating whether to pull off her glove and wipe it away or not, but finally gave up and turned her gaze back to the weeds. Meanwhile, the other students babbled all around her.

"I want a magical implement that can till, pull the weeds, and dig out rocks on its own. Aahh, a guy can dream…"

"Who knows how much it'd even cost to get magic paper big enough to conjure such a thing! Plus, there's no *way* it would be able to do the entire field."

People used such paper to draw magic circles, which served all kinds of purposes in different fields of study. Sadly, this paper was only good for a single use, and they likely didn't make rolls of it big enough to cover the length of an entire field.

"Come on, magic! I need you to evolve to a higher level."

"In the future, it'll be up to us to make those kinds of advancements."

“Assuming we *did* have such a large piece of magic paper, what would you write, Miss Elsha?”

Before Oriana could respond, the other students chimed in.

“Hm… Assuming it’d cover the whole field, maybe ‘Wave.’ That would enable it to till and take out the rocks. Of course, we wouldn’t know for sure unless we tested it out.”

“Isn’t the whole premise of needing an enormous sheet of magic paper a bit too restrictive in the first place?”

“Well, then what would *you* do? Use your magic instead to move it until you run out of mana?”

“No, I don’t mean you should move the paper. I *mean* you should attach the paper to something that already can be moved.”

“What, like a hoe or something?”

Despite still holding farming implements in their hands, Oriana’s classmates were launching into a magic debate. It wasn’t exactly surprising behavior for a class full of elite mages, but it was definitely something Oriana had never seen before in her previous life with Class 2.

They sure do have a lot of energy.

Oriana’s chest tightened as she remembered her friends from back then. Occasionally, she’d overhear them in the courtyard laughing among themselves, and her heart would ache. Oriana wanted to laugh along with them like she used to, but she didn’t have the time to meet them and cultivate friendships all over again.

Right now, she wanted to pour all her effort into Vincent.

“So what would you write on your hoe then, huh? ‘Feet’? Then all we’d have is a walking hoe!”

“Wonder if there’s another Kahn rune that might work better. Y’know, something to make it dart around more, give its movement a bit more *oomph.*”

The debate was getting heated.

Oriana only really knew the basics of the subject at hand and had no ambition to learn more, so she'd no desire to participate in these types of conversations.

As she listened to their quibbling, she thought to herself, *But if I* were *to write something, maybe the rune for "Sway."* Oriana didn't bother voicing her idea, however. Fourth-year students hadn't yet been taught about those kinds of magic circles.

While she silently kept weeding the field, the other students eventually went back to work.

❦ ❦ ❦

ALL of the students were busily working, the sun beating down on them, when cheers suddenly erupted from one of the other fields.

Something must have happened, Oriana guessed.

She looked up and immediately figured out whose group was involved—the one with Vincent and Miguel.

"Wonder what *that's* all about."

"Don't tell me they're already finished?"

"Let's take a short break," Derek said, flopping back onto the ground.

The five boys in their group were overseeing all the tilling, and despite it being a small field for medicinal herbs, it was still exhausting work. Not many mages were brawny warrior types, mainly since magic required no physical strength.

"I just went and asked what's going on and get this: they said they found something in the ground!" Marina came racing back to report, having slipped away at some point to snoop for answers. "From what I can tell, Mister Tanzine was the one who discovered it. Seems it's like a rock, but it may actually be something special. Professor Heinz said he'd go ask Professor Wilton about it later."

"Maybe a relic from the dragons?"

"Possibly, since he said it seems like a rock."

"Wait, does that mean this'll become huge news and the herb fields will be

sectioned off?”

“What, *seriously?* After all the tilling we’ve done?!”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me.”

The boys hung their heads, leaning their weight against their hoes.

“Professor Heinz said we might see more like it pop up in the other fields, so we should keep an eye out,” Marina said.

“What?” Derek gaped. “No way. We don’t have the time or energy to waste on that.”

Telling them to keep an eye out really meant he wanted them to go back over the work they’d already done. The students had pulled out any rocks they came across while tilling and randomly tossed them aside. It’d be impossible to tell which rocks had come from which field at this point. Nonetheless, they would have to comb through all the rocks near their respective fields.

“Mister Tanzine sure is incredible,” someone blurted out, triggering a slew of people who shared the same sentiment.

“Yeah, we may be in the same class, but he’s a step above the rest of us.”

“And he’s even nice to commoners like me!”

“I know exactly what you mean, but he *is* kinda hard to approach. It’s like he’s from a different world.”

“Oriana, you’re pretty incredible yourself, doggedly pursuing him the way you do!”

“*Ahahaha…*”

Doggedly pursuing… Well, her classmates weren’t mistaken about that, at least. There was no denying how persistently Oriana went after Vincent.

“You don’t find him intimidating?”

“Huh? Intimidating?” Oriana echoed. “No, not in the least! Vincent isn’t the type to get mad at someone simply for striking up a conversation with him.”

“Well, it’s not like I think he’d get *mad*, but he’s hard to approach…”

Oriana was shocked. She knew the underclassmen found Vincent scary, but she never realized that even his fellow classmates felt the same. Although, prior to becoming acquainted with him in her original timeline, Oriana had thought the same thing.

While they were in the same year, there'd been few opportunities for them to interact since they were of opposite sexes and in different classes. She'd no personal interest in him back then either, so she hadn't gone out of her way to approach him. People only ever spoke positively about him. The way they'd built him up made him seem like a distant star, shining far beyond her reach.

"Oh, I see," said Oriana, "but I don't think Vincent's any different than the rest of us. He's just like any other seventeen-year-old boy."

Perhaps she only had that impression of him now because she'd lived through this all once before. Unconsciously, she'd started viewing her fellow students from a distance, as if from a birds-eye view. It was an isolating experience, but Oriana had accepted it as a natural consequence of this being her second life.

"He's no different from the rest of us. The reason he's able to keep up with his studies and show such kindness is because he's put in the effort," Oriana stated confidently.

Vincent had outstanding grades, but he wasn't born with that knowledge. Admittedly, he wasn't like Oriana; he didn't pore over books to obtain knowledge several years ahead of his current level. But he did work hard. Oriana knew that because she'd spent the last four years at his side.

If only I *had put in more effort back then…*

In her previous timeline, Oriana thought she could get away with only doing what was required. She'd never felt the need to push herself.

I never dreamed that being in the same class as him would change everything.

It wasn't until this second time around that she'd learned how enjoyable it was being able to walk to classes together.

Back then, he would go out of his way to visit me during our short breaks.

Oriana never realized then how much effort he'd expended in their

relationship, and as she looked back, her heart filled with guilt. Inwardly, she clasped her hands and apologized to him.

You really did *love me…!*

Although there were many things she could no longer experience, her new life did afford her opportunities she'd never had before. For instance, Vincent actually acted his age in front of her and Miguel. In her previous life, he'd only ever shown her his affectionate side. Part of that could be attributed to how much work he put into their relationship. He wanted to be kind to her—to look good in her eyes—so he did his utmost to be gentle.

It is sad that he doesn't put in the same amount of effort now, but I am pleased—no, maybe even way happier—that I get to see his genuine self!

Ultimately, as long as she could be close to Vincent, nothing else mattered.

"I bet if you invited him to ramen, he'd be happy to oblige," Oriana said to her classmates.

"You're kidding! I can't imagine Mister Tanzine eating ramen!"

Ramen was a new item on the cafeteria menu that had recently grown popular. A chef who'd only just returned from a trip abroad invented the dish. It'd become a fast favorite for Oriana, since she loved all noodle dishes.

The only downside is I have to avoid Vincent after I eat it because of the smell.

Food was just as important to her as love, especially since Oriana had waited four whole years for ramen to finally come to the cafeteria.

"No, I do not eat ramen."

"Oh, huh. So he doesn't eat it— Wait, Vincent?!" Oriana's hand froze as she pulled out another weed. She whipped her head around to find Vincent staring down at her. "Oh wow! You look *super* cute in your work clothes!"

"Whatever you say." He glanced at her briefly and shook his head.

When Oriana rose to her feet, he faltered, retreating back a step. Undeterred, she pressed closer and peered into his face, tilting her head.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You're not getting close to heatstroke, are you?"

“What? Why would you say *that*?”

“Because your cheeks are a bit red.”

His cheeks flushed even more, an embarrassed look flickering across his face for only a moment before he lifted a sleeve to wipe the sweat from his brow.

“It’s nothing,” he said.

“It’s not nothing! Let’s drink some water. This isn’t good! Not when your body may already be weak.”

“My body is *not* weak,” Vincent huffed. “How can you even look at me and say that?”

Because I saw your corpse firsthand, Oriana thought, but since she couldn’t say *that*, she simply furrowed her brow.

She peeled off her glove, which was caked in mud, and slipped a hand into her pocket. After pulling out a handkerchief, she dabbed it against Vincent’s forehead to mop up the sweat. Threadbare and frayed as the fabric was, Vincent didn’t knock her hand away. Instead, he patiently stood there.

“Just be careful,” she warned. “Let’s at least go get you some water to drink.”

“Later. I came here for a reason and I need to see that through first.”

“Oh, that’s right. What did you come here for?”

Vincent turned toward the other students. They all flinched, nervously staring back at him. He offered them a graceful smile as he gently explained, “Professor Heinz sent me to deliver a message. He asks that you all keep on your guard since you may run across unfamiliar items while tilling your field.”

The group exchanged looks. Marina had already shared that information with them after she’d snuck off to snoop.

“All right, we will.”

“Very well; I must be off to inform the other groups.” Vincent spun on his heel and started to walk away.

“Vincent! Water! Drink some water before you go!”

“Please don’t follow me.”

In contrast to his polite attitude with the other students, Vincent curtly rebuffed Oriana. It did nothing to discourage her. Oriana continued after him, having no intention of relenting until she saw him take a drink.

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AFTER Oriana left, Marina and the others began whispering among themselves.

“When all the fuss started, a bunch of people slipped away to see what was happening. I’ll bet everyone else already knows the situation.”

“You don’t *seriously* think Professor Heinz would send Mister Tanzine around to all the groups just to deliver that message, do you?”

“Nah, if he was gonna have anyone act as errand boy, he’d pick another student, I’m sure.”

“But don’t you kinda get the feeling that he came to our group on purpose?”

“Speaking of which, when Miss Elsha started saying that stuff about Mister Tanzine being a normal seventeen-year-old, he was standing right there!”

“No *way!* You should’ve said something sooner!”

“Like I *could* say anything! I mean, his face was bright red!”

Their faces flushed, they all squealed quietly to themselves, squirming around until Oriana returned.

❦ ❦ ❦

***NIGHTS** are always the worst. Probably since I was so certain I’d be able to see him again…*

After jumping back through time, Oriana had found herself back in her seven-year-old body. She hadn’t reentered the Academy until she was thirteen. All through the six years in between, she’d dreamed of her reunion with Vince—of the day when he’d gently wrap his arms around her once more.

Moonlight poured in from the window, stretching its fingers toward her bed. Yana occupied the top bunk, Oriana the bottom one. Judging by her deep, rhythmic breathing, Yana was already fast asleep.

Oriana slipped out from her bed and wandered over to sit in a chair by the window. She pulled some perfume from her shelf and sprayed it on her sleeve. The aroma of cedarwood enveloped her. No matter how similar, it didn't smell the same as Vincent.

Her longing for him only deepened on nights like this.

I miss *Vince! I knew you could never be reunited with someone once you lost them, but when I got this second chance at life, I couldn't help hoping. I thought…maybe I could be with him once more.*

No matter how much she loved him, *this* Vincent wasn't the same as *her* Vince. This Vincent didn't share her memories and didn't possess the deep love for her that Vince had. Their lives and relationships with her were completely different.

But…I still find myself wanting to sit beside him.

She wanted to fix his tie for him when it was crooked. To bury her face in his neck when she felt embarrassed. To pay him back for all his acts of kindness.

All of that's beyond my reach now.

Oriana's new relationship with Vincent involved constant tension and a sense of responsibility. There were nights when she couldn't help and desperately wanted to return to the time when he showered her with affection.

I want him to hold me. To tell me everything's okay. To tell me I've done a good job. I want him to stroke my head and…

Her fingers brushed across her lips. The cedarwood smell flooded her nose and her eyes filled with tears.

"Vince…" she whispered softly into the darkness.

❦ ❦ ❦

AMANECER was a country protected by dragons. In ages long past, these same dragons had given their blood as a blessing, and it was only their descendants who could hold the prestigious title of duke.

There were eight dukedoms, one corresponding to each dragon, and Vincent was the oldest son of the Amethyst Dragon Duke. He'd one day inherit his

father's property and title and with it, the duty of managing the land and its people. Gaining the relevant knowledge for managing a region was already difficult enough, but as the son of the Amethyst Dragon Duke, Vincent also had to undergo a rigorous magical education.

Prior to attending the Academy, he had a tutor who taught him the basics in agricultural and woodland management, finances, and the ins and outs of commerce as well. After entering Lagen Magic Academy, he'd spent most of his time learning magic, but his longer breaks were dedicated to studying regional administration.

Vincent was quick to absorb knowledge and needed only a little experience to fully comprehend a topic, making it easy for him to meet everyone's expectations. He had no difficulty sussing out what people wanted from him, and traveling the path his parents had laid out for him proved to be no challenge. Vincent obeyed their commands and received the education they wanted for him.

Having had the rules of the aristocracy impressed upon him from an early age, Vincent didn't find true freedom until he came to the Academy, where he'd walk about freely, like the whole place was his vast garden.

Vincent could sense a presence approaching from the other side of the wall. How long had it been since he'd first noticed it anyway?

His eyes were closed as he lay stretched out across the sofa, but he pried them open slightly.

Currently, he was in a small lounge in the eastern building. He'd discovered it by accident as a first-year. It'd been covered in dust at the time, meaning it'd been disused for many years.

When he wanted to be alone, Vincent came here. If he frequented the place too much, he risked it being discovered, so he limited his visits. Yet, at some point, he'd started sensing a presence outside his tiny lounge. The person in question had to be listening quietly because they would flee at his slightest movement. He had managed—just once—to successfully sneak a peek at them.

The snooper was—of course—Oriana Elsha.

There were two questions that gnawed at him: Why was she coming here? And why did she never try to come inside?

Vincent was always wary of prying eyes when he came here. He found it hard to believe anyone could've followed him since he was always so cautious, but that was the only explanation.

She followed me all the way here*?*

Like any normal person, he found that unsettling.

Vexed, he'd tried to find another oasis, but it annoyed him to have to change his habits just because of Oriana. He decided to ignore her instead. For a while, he waited on tenterhooks, wondering when she'd brazenly burst through the door and welcome herself inside. But over the past four years, she'd never once intruded. The fact that she fled the moment she sensed him moving indicated she didn't want him to know she was ever there.

I suppose it doesn't matter, as long as she doesn't try talking to me.

But that thought had only lasted a short time, and gradually, he'd begun wondering: *Is she* really *never going to come inside?*

If she did intrude, it'd be just the two of them.

This would be the perfect opportunity for her to make a move, given she claims to have feelings for me.

Today was like all the others. He'd stilled his breathing and waited, but there was no sign of her even so much as putting her hand on the doorknob. Instead, she listened quietly on the other side, as if checking to make sure he was there.

Maybe she'll change her mind and decide to come in today.

Vincent laid completely still, waiting for the doorknob to turn. Although he was irked at himself for so eagerly anticipating her intrusion, he continued pretending to sleep as he waited.

Like every day before, the door never opened.

❦ ❦ ❦

"Viiiinceeeent!"

Oriana barely finished calling his name before flying into Vincent from behind. He normally never even flinched at the impact, but today, he actually lost his balance. Panicked, Oriana peeled herself away.

“Are you all right?! Are you hurt somewhere?” she asked, face growing pale as she began examining every inch of him.

The other students in the hallway watched sidelong as she felt him up. They dismissed it as her usual antics.

“Enough, Elsha.”

“B-But you’re…”

Oriana had both hands cupped around his cheeks and was trying to press their foreheads together when he snapped at her again.

“I said *enough!*”

Reluctantly, she pulled away. Vincent grimaced and glanced at her for a moment before sighing.

“I simply lost my balance. Don’t embarrass me like that.”

“I’m sorry,” Oriana murmured. Despite her apology, she wasn’t satisfied with his answer.

Did he really *only stumble because I caught him off guard?*

She was far more sensitive than most when it came to Vincent and his health.

“You really aren’t hurt anywhere? You don’t need to go to the infirmary?”

“He’s *fine,* Oriana. Just a little fatigued from the summer heat,” Miguel said with a laugh as he stood beside Vincent. There was a lollipop stick jutting out between his lips as usual, and it bounced up and down as he spoke.

“Vincent has summer fatigue?” she echoed.

Oriana had never seen him fatigued like this in her past life. Perhaps he was careful to hide it around her.

“Miguel, I thought I told you not to say anything,” Vince reminded him.

“Aw, come on! She wasn’t gonna accept your excuses anyway. Plus, as your

friend, I'd be *real* torn up if I had to watch you get carried off to the infirmary by a girl."

"You needn't put it *that* way…"

"Nope, I worded it like that on purpose."

Vincent's forehead wrinkled as he glared at Miguel.

"Adorable," Oriana gasped. "I love that expression on your face."

"Do you understand now, Elsha? As you heard, I am a bit fatigued due to the heat. I'd appreciate it if you'd let me rest in peace."

But *that*, Vincent thought to himself, was like telling water to stop being wet.

"Are you okay? Do you need to lean on me for support?" Oriana slid closer, trying to loop her arm through his, but he brushed her off.

"No need. If you're that concerned for me, then please cease your usual antics."

Even his attempts to shake her off had less bite than usual.

Oriana paused to think before meekly nodding. Surprised she was so willing to oblige him, Vince stared at her wide-eyed.

"What time are you planning to eat dinner?" she asked.

Without missing a beat, Miguel answered, "About seven or so."

"All right. I'll be waiting for you then. Take care." She waved at the two before heading to the cafeteria.

❦ ❦ ❦

ORIANA owed her second life thanks for many things, and one of those things was her intricate knowledge of Vincent's preferences.

When Vincent and Miguel entered the cafeteria at seven as promised, Oriana hurried over to them with a tray in hand.

"Heya, Oriana."

"Miguel, thanks for earlier. Are you okay sitting here?"

"Yep. Wherever is fine. Let's grab some open seats."

Oriana generally ate with Yana, but it wasn't like she took her eyes off Vincent completely. She always had a general idea of where he was sitting.

As Vincent and Miguel took their seats, the latter motioned for her to join them.

"You don't mind me sitting here too?" she asked.

"It's a bit late to ask that now," Vincent said, shooting her a look. "You've already brought your meal with you."

"No, this is for you."

Seated on the silver tray in her hands was a deep dish full of spaghetti.

"I'd like you to try this today."

"Unfortunately," said Vincent, "I don't feel like eating anything other than fruit lately."

That sort of diet would only exacerbate his fatigue. Vincent was surely aware of that already. The main issue was that the school menu only offered three options each day, and since the students were still growing, all the food was a bit heavy. Oriana could understand why he didn't want to eat any of that in the summer. But that was precisely why she'd requested to be let into the kitchen, knowing full well she was asking for the impossible.

Thankfully, the Elshas had donated enough money for her to have some pull here, and she'd managed to push her request through without any trouble. Oriana had then asked for a few ingredients and put together a light dish she thought would suit Vincent's taste.

After her mother passed when Oriana was younger, she'd grown close to the head maid, who'd always looked after her. Since she'd always followed that maid around, Oriana had gradually taken a shine to cooking. Her father graciously gave her the freedom to experiment, and while she'd nearly gave the head maid and the chef panic attacks, she did at least manage to polish her skills to a point where she could make basic meals.

For this dish, she had added thin pasta to chicken stock with slices of lemon. She'd also broken some nutrient-packed chicken breast into bits and sprinkled it

over the dish. Since she'd chilled it with her magic, it was sure to be refreshing and light.

"If you refuse to eat it, I'll just have to kiss you instead." Oriana's expression gave no indication she was joking.

Vincent scowled and begrudgingly picked up his fork. He spun the cold noodles around the end of the fork and lifted it toward his mouth, pausing to grumble, "I wish you could at *least* do something about the aesthetic."

"What? Aw, it's cute! See, I cut the lemons up into round slices."

"Seeing lemon in a dish like this is…off-putting, to say the least."

Oriana stared at him in disbelief. She'd seen Vince eat this same thing countless times in their previous life. He would often order citrus-flavored items from the menu when they were available. Naturally, she assumed that was because he liked it.

"*Hm?* I don't think I remember there being anything on the menu with lemons today," Miguel remarked as he stared at Vincent's plate. He must've seen the menu already.

"That's because there wasn't. I pulled some strings and made this myself," Oriana admitted. "Sorry. I was under the impression you liked citrusy flavors, Vincent. I can eat that dish instead then. I'll see if I can find something else for you." She turned to head toward the food counter, but Vincent stopped her.

"I never said I wouldn't eat it." He lifted the pasta the rest of the way to his lips. His movements were so graceful that Oriana watched in awe. Come to think of it, this was the first time Vincent was eating something she had made in either of her lifetimes.

To think the first thing I would ever feed him would be something he doesn't even find appetizing…

Oriana couldn't mask her shock. Her shoulders slumped as she watched him swallow down the first bite and quietly scoop up a second helping. Vincent continued eating without making any other complaints. Miguel and Oriana were so entranced that they completely forgot to retrieve their own meals.

By the time Vincent polished off the last bite of pasta, Oriana had sunk into the seat beside him.

“Thank you for the meal,” he said.

“I…hope it wasn’t too hard to stomach…?”

Vincent reached for some water. Perhaps the rich soup had dried out his throat. Oriana stared at him, still flabbergasted. Once he finished swallowing his drink, he awkwardly fiddled with his glass.

“I can see it was wrong of me to judge prematurely.”

“Hm…? Uhhhh?” Oriana tilted her head, confused.

His eye twitched in annoyance, as if he thought her an idiot for not immediately catching his meaning.

“He’s saying it was delicious,” Miguel interjected. “Good for you, Oriana.”

Oriana’s face instantly lit up. “Seriously? Vincent, you really thought it was that good?”

“It was…edible.”

“It must’ve been, for you to be able to eat it in your current state. What a relief! That means you’ve no trouble eating that type of food, right? I’ll let the head chef know.”

It was great that he was able to get something down today, but it wouldn’t have much effect if he went back to barely eating anything tomorrow. While Oriana didn’t know how much compassion she could hope for from the kitchen staff, it wouldn’t hurt to bring up the matter. She shot out of her chair, eager to speak to them about it, but Vincent stopped her before she could leave.

“Elsha.”

“Yes?”

“…I…appreciate what you did.”

Oriana’s whole body trembled. The boyish, embarrassed look on his face was overwhelmingly adorable. It hit her like an arrow to the heart. She turned her gaze to Miguel, hoping he might understand her elation.

He gave her a tepid smile and nodded encouragingly.

“Oh, I can’t *take* it, Vincent! I just adore you!” She wrapped her arms around his head and squeezed. He didn’t even try to shake her off. Perhaps that was his way of thanking her for the meal. Oriana pulled his face to her body, inhaling his scent. She continued to hug him tight until she finally had her fill.

The cafeteria menu changed the next day to include one citrus-flavored option among three. Vincent wasn’t the only one who benefited from this; it was widely popular with the female students as well.

❦ ❦ ❦

THERE were five volumes on herbology lined up beside each other on the shelf. Oriana plucked them out one-by-one.

She was well-acquainted with the library, coming often for books. In her last life, she’d only come here when she had a report due. Things were different this time; she came with a purpose and was immensely grateful for the information the library provided.

Oriana had asked her father to buy her a number of different books the moment her second life began. While she actually really disliked reading, she’d cut no corners when it came to protecting Vincent. Unfortunately, her father had refused a number of books on the grounds that they were “too disturbing.” He was delighted at how ambitious and self-reliant she was, but there were some things even he couldn’t abide by. Specifically, tomes on poison and homicide.

Well, can’t say I blame him. Anyone would be concerned if their seven-year-old daughter suddenly asked for Death by Poison, The Complete Edition: Countless Methods of Murder*!*

Oriana had quickly given up on having her father buy that particular book for her. She figured she’d be able to seek it out in the Lagen Magic Academy library anyway. Thankfully, her hopes weren’t dashed. One of the best things about this library was that it carried nearly every book ever written.

Still, the tome in question did cover a disturbing topic, so she’d need permission to borrow it. Oriana put in a special request with the librarian, like

she'd done countless times before. Approval came even more swiftly than it ever had before—likely because she was always borrowing such books. Since she was forbidden from taking it out of the library, she settled down at a table, cracked it open, and began scanning the text.

Almost all of the herbs used for poisoning were difficult to obtain. Some of them grew natively around the school, but Professor Heinz had transplanted any with deadly toxins to where they were kept under strict control.

Oriana looked over the ingredients for poisons and their characteristics.

These past seven years, she'd found a number of poisons that could have caused Vincent's death. There were so many in the world, but the lethal ones always left some kind of trace on their victim. But in Vincent's case, he'd looked like he was merely sleeping.

In all of Oriana's research, she hadn't found any poison that could take someone's life and make them look sound asleep. Moreover, the few rare possibilities she *did* find had all involved ingredients too difficult for a mere student to get their hands on.

Only an adult would be able to obtain these things, and it'd have to either be someone in a position of power or someone involved in medicine.

These ingredients all involved precious herbs or rare magical creatures, none of which one could obtain through money alone. A person would need a source and connections to be able to access them.

Oriana was deathly terrified of Vincent's phantom killer—someone she'd never seen and couldn't even imagine—and yet hated them with every fiber of her being.

This isn't the right poison. Nor this… Rather than trying to learn how *they killed Vince, it might be better to search for the culprit.*

Oriana had exhaustively combed through all the information she could find from the moment her second life began, including the four years she'd spent here at the Academy.

Although the Elshas were neither well-trusted nor popular, they did have money. Oriana was able to hire a detective who'd been making a name for

himself lately around town. While a bit stalkerish in nature, she assured her father she wouldn't go overboard. Her father was put off by her overwhelming (and clearly futile) love for the duke's heir, but he gave her the freedom to do as she saw fit. As far as he was concerned, it was better for her to hire someone else than doing the stalking herself.

The detective informed her that there were a number of people around Vincent that might hold a grudge, but none of them were students. Students needed a permit to leave the grounds of the Academy, but guests couldn't enter without observing proper procedure. Even alumni and relatives weren't allowed to freely come and go as they pleased.

Although the detective gave her a list of names, Oriana couldn't recall any of those people going through the rigorous procedures to visit the school and make contact with Vincent.

Rain started pelting against the window.

Oriana had been so lost in thought that she hadn't even noticed the storm rolling in. She absently gazed out of the window. Thick gray clouds painted the sky.

A familiar figure suddenly appeared in her periphery.

It's Vincent!

He'd plopped himself at a table neither too close nor too far from where she was and had buried his nose in a book. Vincent always kept a rigid posture, even when reading. In front of others, he never slouched or rested his chin in his hands.

He'd surely noticed her already. She *had* spent this entire life chasing after him.

His death had come in the spring, a few days after the ball. Oriana cursed herself for not being able to remember exactly how many days after—whether two, four or even five.

But I remember the thunderclaps.

She'd never forget the sound, and until they safely passed that day, she could

never let her guard down. Not even for a moment.

Oriana turned her attention back to her book.

Whatever it takes, I'll make sure that Vincent lives this time around!

❦ ❦ ❦

THE rain started coming down harder.

As she gazed out at the deluge, Oriana's impatience grew. She slid her book shut, careful not to make any sound as she hurried out of her chair, cradling the book she'd borrowed against her chest.

The librarian was nodding off when Oriana arrived at her desk. She kept her voice low as she said, "Excuse me, I'd like to return this."

"Oh, done already?"

"Yes. Sorry for all the trouble I put you through with the paperwork."

Once she finished returning the book, Oriana slipped out of the library. She speed-walked as soon as she made it out into the corridor.

Rain continued pounding on the windows. The smell of it crept in around her, sending a chill that spread through her body. Oriana's pulse quickened as she picked up her pace.

She thought she was walking, but at some point, she was going so fast, she was practically running. She couldn't afford for a teacher to catch her and scold her. If her poor conduct led them to switch her into a lower class, she wouldn't be able to stay at Vincent's side anymore.

Oriana knew she should slow down, but she couldn't. She was racing to escape from the rain outside. When she descended the stairs, she took two steps at a time.

Lightning flashed outside the window. It was so powerful, her vision went white for a moment. Moments later, the ground trembled as thunder roared.

"*Ah…!*"

Oriana cradled her head in her hands and crouched along the edge of the stair landing. If she kept her back to the windows, closed her eyes, and clamped her

hands over her ears, she could escape the lightning.

The thunderclap was deafening and stretched on for what seemed like forever. Once she sensed it was over, Oriana tried to move, but all the strength had left her legs, and she couldn't even pick herself off the floor.

The thunder crackled again.

"Eek…!"

She no longer had the will to stand. Instead, she leaned on the wall, hugging her arms around herself as her legs trembled beneath her.

Right now she was in the west building. The girls' dormitory was on the other side of the east building. If she had moved before the lightning and thunder started, she could have rushed out through the rain and returned to her room. Now it was too late for that.

If Oriana continued cowering here, someone might find her. The last thing she wanted was for someone to see her pathetically quivering, terrified of the storm.

I need to find somewhere to hide.

At least if she was in the eastern building, she could retreat to her and Vincent's lounge. There were lounges in this building as well, but they were always bustling with people, since there was also a library and study hall nearby. Oriana definitely didn't want to be in one of them.

Whatever the case, I need to stand and get moving. Then…

Then what? Where would she go?

It doesn't matter where I run. It's all the same. Vince is already—

"Elsha!"

She flinched as the one voice she didn't want to hear called out to her from above.

"What is it? Did you trip?" Vincent flew down the stairs toward her.

Oriana was still crouched, her face in her hands. She couldn't bring herself to look at him.

He finished his reading that *quickly? But he'd only barely arrived when I left.*

"Are you not feeling well? Can you stand?" Vincent's voice was full of genuine concern. Despite how much trouble Oriana caused him daily, his moral compass wouldn't allow him to abandon her in a time of need.

Oriana slid down, wrapping her arms around her knees. She squeezed them tight and shook her head.

"Nothing to worry about," she answered in a sing-song voice. "Give me just a few minutes and I'll be right back to my normal self!"

"So I *was* right. You aren't feeling well. Give me your hand. I'll take you to the school infirm—"

Oriana put on a brave face and said, "Seriously, I'm fine. It's nothing like that. You don't have to—"

Another clap of thunder echoed through the building. It must have been close, given the volume. Oriana's shoulders jumped.

"…What? You're scared of thunder?" The concern left Vincent's voice as he teased her. He chuckled, probably thinking her childish for being frightened by a storm.

Oriana couldn't blame him. Anyone else who saw her like this would have the same reaction. Even her father, who always doted on her, teased her about being a big baby when he saw her trembling because of a sudden storm.

So it's not *Vincent's fault. I know that. I can make it through this.*

"Yeah, you got me. *Ehehe*! I'm like a kid, I know. Pretty pathetic, right?" She curled her body tighter.

Once Vincent knew she was all right, she was sure he'd leave. There was no reason for him to waste his concern on her, now that he knew she wasn't sick or injured. If he enjoyed teasing and wanted to poke fun at her for her exaggerated reaction to the storm, then maybe he'd stick around after all, but Vincent wasn't that type of person as far as she knew.

Although, I am *always causing him trouble. There's no guarantee he won't use this opportunity to get back at me.*

Whatever the case, it was no different than the storm. All she had to do was hold out until it was over.

Vincent suddenly sat down beside her. She barely had a chance to register her surprise before he draped something over her head. Startled, Oriana lifted her eyes to discover it was his robe.

“Oh?” echoed a male student’s voice. “What’s going on here?”

“Nothing,” Vincent answered. “I merely found a girl who wasn’t feeling well.”

“Oh, uh…is she okay?”

“Should I call a professor?” asked another voice.

“No, that’s all right. I’m looking after her. I’ll take her to the infirmary later,” Vincent replied.

“Oh, okay. Well, we’ll be off then.”

“Very well. If you see anyone else coming this way, could you please tell them to be quiet as they pass through?”

“Nah, I’ll just take a different route instead.”

“I’ll let the other people coming in behind us know.”

“I appreciate it.”

Several sets of footsteps faded into the distance as the male students left. Even after they were gone, Vincent didn’t try to strike up a conversation with her, nor did he remove his robe or stand up to leave.

When she inhaled, the scent of cedarwood filled her nose.

He helped hide me from the other students.

Her arms grew wet from her tears.

See, Vince—I mean, Vincent—really is *kind!*

Her chest swelled with a gratitude she couldn’t put into words. As Oriana hid beneath his robe, she clutched tightly at her own.

“There was thunder that day,” she mumbled as the rain poured in the background, beating against the windows. “The day someone precious to me

died.”

Vincent swallowed hard.



That day she cradled his cold body in her arms, she'd listened for what seemed like forever to the thunder in the background. It'd sounded like a dragon's angry cry.

"I hear they sometimes call thunder 'the Dragon God.' It really was like a dragon's curse that day."

His body had been so deathly cold that she'd known calling for help would be pointless.

There was nothing I could do…except burst into tears and listen to the thunder as it roared in the background…

Oriana associated thunder with Vince's dead body and the god's curse. It was a symbol for how powerless she was.

"I realize I didn't know your circumstances, but I apologize for laughing," said Vincent.

Oriana shook her head, causing the robe he'd draped over her to sway.

"Next time you hear thunder, you can seek me out," he offered.

Surprised, she lifted her head. His robe slid down to her shoulders.

"I can at least sit beside you like this," he said gruffly, turning his face away.

An enormous weight lifted off Oriana's heart, and for a moment, she forgot to breathe. She choked in a breath as happiness filled her.

"Vincent, I adore you!"

"Oh, enough."

Oriana tried to fling herself at him, but Vincent turned away and dodged her. She broke into laughter and took her seat beside him again.

So…he'll actually stay with me!

Oriana pulled his robe off her and up to her nose and took a deep inhale. As she enjoyed his scent, she folded the clothing up and handed it back to him. She'd recovered enough now that she didn't need to hide anymore.

"Thank you, Vincent. I'm all right now."

"…But it's still raining," he mumbled, implying he wasn't going to leave yet.

That was her cue to cheer and do a happy jig, but her heart ached too much for her to show such excitement. Instead, she turned away and muttered a quiet, "Okay."

I wish the rain would never stop.

Oriana was no longer worried about the sound of the rain or the thunder. All she could focus on was Vincent's presence beside her.

❦ ❦ ❦

"YANA, you're getting married?"

"Only if there's a man out there who can beat Azraq!"

The cafeteria where all of Lagen Magic Academy's students assembled for meals was filled with clamor. People jabbered, laughter echoed, forks and spoons clattered, and chairs scraped against the floor as people left their seats. All of the deafening hubbub blended together in the background.

Oriana, Yana, and Azraq occupied one table at the corner of the room, eating together. Oriana was having spaghetti with clams, twirling the noodles round and round with her fork.

No matter how many times I have to do this, it never gets any easier.

Anyone who'd lived through the same timeline once already—which, as far as Oriana knew, was only her—would have trouble producing the same reaction as they had the first time. It was especially challenging when she had to do it for every conversation. Since she already knew of the trials Azraq and Yana had had to face thanks to her previous life, she stuffed her mouth full of pasta rather than try to feign shock at the news.

"A princess of the desert is given two choices: marry a man chosen by the king or undergo a trial."

Under this trial, the man who defeated the princess's chosen bodyguard could make her his bride. It was mostly a formality nowadays, but in times long past, countless warriors were summoned to the desert nation to fight for a princess's hand. Ete Karima, Yana's home country, was a rich land full of strong warriors

and beautiful women.

"And *that's* why you came to the Academy?" asked Oriana.

"Yes. It was my first time ever leaving my homeland, so I surely caused you a lot of trouble our first year."

"It *was* entertaining! I remember you giving me commands—like telling me to open the door for you."

Yana shook her head. "I really *was* stuck-up and entitled. I'd like to think I've grown to be a better person now, thanks to you."

The two giggled as they recalled their younger selves. Azraq quietly watched them.

"I said I'd marry whoever can beat Azraq, but of course, that merely gives the victor the *right* to wed me. They are free to decline."

As long as there were challengers, a bodyguard had to be ready to fight anytime, anywhere. Duels were conducted one-on-one, but people *could* challenge the bodyguard consecutively. Although it was technically forbidden for people to team up as a group and use underhanded means to achieve victory, not all were above stooping to such lows.

A bodyguard had to be enough of a veteran battler to be able to handle even the most brutal of situations. There were even those who, out of loyalty, died during a fight. Apparently, there were also those who lost purposefully in order to end the trial quickly.

Political motives naturally came into play, since it was a marriage involving a princess. Those in power would not sit idly by when presented with a legitimate opportunity to wed royalty. Any bodyguard who lost purposefully likely had a fitting reward offered to them in return. Ultimately, it was a fixed race from the very beginning where the palace had already chosen the victor.

Since the whole point of the trial was for the bodyguard to lose at some point, his defeat was not considered dishonorable. The number of bodyguards who'd fought off all challengers and spurned any under-the-table offers could be counted on one hand.

The princess could not dispute the outcome of her trial, no matter how unjust. If her bodyguard refused to offer his loyalty during the process of the trial, that was also considered a failing on her part. Thus, just as it was a challenge to the bodyguard, so too was it an ordeal for the princess.

“Although magic and real swords are not used during one of these duels, there’s still the risk that other students may be dragged into it. I made sure to properly explain the rules of our country’s traditions prior to enrollment, and after negotiating, the school gave me permission to attend. So please be at ease. I am sorry for worrying you over Azraq’s injuries, though.”

The conversation first began when they were bringing their food over to the table, and Oriana brought up how concerned she was after noticing Azraq’s bandages before.

“So there *was* a good reason for him getting into a fight,” Oriana surmised.

“Yes. Those not apprised of the situation probably mistake him for nothing more than a thug. As for me, I don’t know a man more loyal than him.”

The details of the trial had spread among the male students, but very few of the female students were aware of the situation. Most of them thought of Azraq as an unruly hooligan. He often had cuts and bruises on his body, and he frequently engaged in fights. It made sense, given the frequency of the duels.

Not only did this trial give a man the opportunity to enter the Ete Karima royal family, but it also meant they could wed Yana, a girl so renowned for her beauty they called her the Desert Star. Those confident in their physical strength were eager to challenge Azraq.

“Why did you decide to do the trial?” asked Oriana.

“It’s a princess’s duty to bring someone strong back to her home.” Yana grinned.

It couldn’t be easy for a sixteen-year-old girl like her to treat marriage as a tool. As a commoner, the odds were in Oriana’s favor that she could marry for love. Her father had earned a favorable position for himself, but he still yearned for proper status. If she wanted to be useful to him, it was probably better for her to marry whomever he desired for her.

In truth, there actually *was* someone her father and others hoped for her to marry, but Oriana wasn't particularly worried about that ever becoming a problem. Her father may've climbed his way up from nothing, but he wasn't the type to force her into a marriage she didn't want. Since the beginning of her second life, she'd been staunchly against a union with her father's apprentice, whom her father had hoped she'd marry. All talks of engagement had since disappeared.

Yana's issue couldn't be dealt with quite so easily; hers was too complex and layered. It was on a completely different scale. Oriana would never be able to fathom how much determination and will it required of Yana.

"You're amazing," said Oriana.

"No, the *real* amazing one is Azraq."

Oriana turned his gaze toward Azraq, who was sitting across from Yana. He was scooping up food with his spoon, looking utterly bored with the conversation, as if he were listening to a math teacher drone on.

"You have a point," Oriana conceded. "He must have it tough. Since you said he can't use real blades, I assume wooden swords are okay?"

"Nothing about it is tough. Yana's future is on the line," said Azraq.

Yana smiled gently at him. "I was blessed to be able to pick you as my bodyguard."

"It's more honor than I deserve." His voice was shockingly soft, but it was proof his words were sincere.

Oriana felt like she was seeing something she shouldn't, and she quickly averted her gaze to her plate. Judging by their conversation, Azraq couldn't be chosen as Yana's partner. After all, it wasn't physically possible for him to beat himself.

But it seems pretty clear to me…

She lifted her eyes from her pasta, sneaking a glance at Azraq.

"Lady Yana, please eat your tomatoes."

"No need. I can get the same nutrients from other vegetables."

Azraq remained steadfast despite her protests, and Yana reluctantly stabbed her fork into her tomato. The uncomfortable atmosphere that had settled over the table moments before was completely gone now.

I mean, it's clear that Azraq likes her, right?

In her last life, she'd never noticed his feelings for Yana, but this time around, she was fairly confident in her assessment. Azraq was always clever at hiding it, but Oriana still caught glimpses. There were moments when he'd call Yana's name and his voice would swell with pride. There was a gentleness to his gaze, and his hands were always so meek when he touched her.

Oriana had watched them closely. She noticed the slight change in his reactions with Yana, but she never spoke a word of it to anyone. Yana showed no indication that she knew of his feelings. Likewise, it didn't seem likely Azraq would ever tell her. His love for her was unrequited and would likely stay that way.

As Oriana spun her pasta around on her fork, she couldn't shake the thought that she and Azraq had something in common.

Chapter 4: In the Middle of the Road

AS far as Vincent Tanzine was concerned, Oriana Elsha was like an enigmatic flower growing smack dab in the middle of the road—one he couldn't avoid if he wanted.

"…She's not here."

It was Seed Day and class was to begin shortly.

Vincent glanced around, searching for the figure he was always used to seeing hanging around in front of the main school building at this time.

Miguel watched beside him, grinning from ear to ear. The lollipop stick protruding from his lips jiggled up and down with his snickering.

Irritated at his friend's antics, Vincent turned his head away.

"*Aw*, your little puppy isn't here today."

"Spare me," said Vincent. "She is nowhere near as cute as a puppy. More like a large, undisciplined mutt."

"Hey, big dogs are cute too."

"You seem to have missed the part where I said 'undisciplined.'"

"There you go acting coy again." Miguel grinned knowingly.

Vincent snatched the lollipop from his friend's mouth. He knew that would only draw Miguel's laughter, but he couldn't leave well enough alone. Never before had he struggled to control his own actions, not until he met Oriana. Vincent had always practiced moderation when interacting with people. Oriana was the only one he hadn't been able to contain his emotions with.

But you can hardly blame *me…*

Oriana was exactly his type, and on the very first day of school, she suddenly started clinging to him. Telling a thirteen-year-old boy to not be shaken by such an encounter was asking for the impossible.

She started telling him that their meeting was fate—a miracle. Vincent initially

thought she'd mistaken him for someone else and felt betrayed. It was probably the first time anyone had ever wounded him so deeply.

What was I hoping for? We weren't even acquaintances. We were strangers.

He later realized it wasn't a misunderstanding; it was either Oriana's own delusion or her attempt to capture his interest. At the time, it was all he could do to play it cool. He'd tried to push her away, lest he get swept up in her nonsense. But no matter how many times he rebuffed her, she came right back for more.

It was becoming increasingly difficult, especially lately, to treat her coldly. It horrified him how he found himself wanting to throw his arms open and welcome her when he saw her looking at him like a jubilant puppy, happy to see its master.

No one would be pleased if he and Oriana got together. He knew that. And yet, it was impossible for him to hate her. At the same time, he didn't have enough confidence in his own feelings to say he liked her. He knew, realistically, that a relationship with her would be difficult regardless. Vincent's entire life had been based on meeting the expectations of those around him.

Whatever affection he felt for Oriana was best ignored, but whenever she smiled up at him, his chest swelled with emotion. Her every little action moved him: the way she studied earnestly; the way she showered him with adoration; the way she wore her emotions on her sleeve; the way she trembled in fear during a thunderstorm; and the way she cracked jokes about herself without hesitation. All of it endeared him to her.

Oriana's candid fondness for him was a big plus in her favor, as far as Vincent was concerned, and the only downside was her strange, nonsensical story about them being past lovers. Actually, if he wrote that off as a failed attempt to try to catch his interest, honestly, it was more a plus than a minus.

I don't even know what I'm doing *anymore,* he thought. *If I treated our relationship like a fling until graduation, my family would probably accept it.*

Vincent didn't think it right to approach her with those intentions. Or rather, he didn't want to. It'd be disrespectful to her, for one. But more than anything, he was terrified he wouldn't be able to let her go afterward. Crossing that line

would change him. No longer would he be the type to make cool, rational decisions as others expected. He'd become a completely different person and he lacked the mental fortitude for that.

Fortunately, we're still fourth-years. We've over a year until graduation.

That meant he still had plenty of time to decide whether he would maintain a friendship with Oriana as he had or commit himself to building a future with her.

"Oh, there she is," said Miguel.

Vincent followed his friend's gaze and spotted Oriana. For some reason, she was coming from the direction of the boys' dormitory. She usually came to class perfectly groomed, but today she wore no makeup, and her hair was a disheveled mess. Although she was wearing her robe, she had pajamas on rather than her school uniform beneath it.

Her lateness was already bizarre, since she usually came to school early to study by herself. But the cherry on top was that she wasn't even alone; Azraq Zalena was beside her for some reason.

Vincent was gobsmacked.

Azraq was Yana Nova Mahathin's bodyguard. He was infamous enough that everyone in the boys' dormitory knew of him. There was a credible (albeit exaggerated) rumor spreading among the student body that the man who could bring Azraq to his knees in a duel would not only win the beautiful Yana's hand but also enter into the Ete Karima royal family. Then they'd never have to worry about money again. As fantastical as such gossip sounded, Vincent had learned enough about foreign countries' history to know it was entirely true.

"Sorry for ambushing you like that, Azraq," said Oriana.

"I don't mind."

Perhaps due in part to Azraq being two years older than the rest of them, he never made an effort to get close to his peers. Yet, his face was relaxed as he gazed down at Oriana.

"Hold up! Why is Oriana with Zalena? *Hrff*—"

Vincent suddenly shoved the lollipop back into Miguel's mouth. He then promptly grabbed his friend and dragged him behind a pillar to hide. Once Vincent was sure they were out of sight, he pricked up his ears and listened quietly.

"You're always looking after Lady Yana for me," Azraq continued. "Anytime you need anything, just say the word."

"Ugh, I really *am* sorry for troubling you. I know it's super clichéd, but all my clothes got blown off the clothesline last night. I tried looking for a janitor, but I'd no idea where I might find one! And I couldn't very well borrow a ladder."

"That explains it."

"And if I left everything as-is, I was afraid it might fly off again. And, I mean, there's no *way* I could let that happen—you know, given the kinda clothing it was! You were the only person I could think to rely on."

"I already told you; it's fine."

"Seriously, thank you! Now I am indebted to you. I swear on my life, I will return the favor someday!" Oriana almost sounded on the verge of tears as she showered him with gratitude.

"You exaggerate."

Ambush? And Azraq was the only *person she could think to rely on?*

If her words were to be believed, she'd been hiding in wait for Azraq to leave the boys' dormitory, meaning she must have seen Vincent and Miguel as they walked out. Yet, she never even tried to approach Vincent. That could only be because she didn't want to depend on him. Or maybe she didn't think she could.

An emotion Vincent had never experienced before heated his entire body. His stomach twisted painfully, like someone had squeezed it. He wanted to charge over to her and demand she explain why she hadn't come to him first. He wanted to see the shock on her face, to hear the panic in her voice as she fumbled for an excuse.

No! Don't even think about it.

Vincent stopped his thoughts midway. He watched with a bitter look on his face as Oriana and Azraq walked away, then he spun around in the opposite direction.

Miguel, who'd been fully intent on chasing after them, stared after Vincent in surprise. "Wait, you're not going to follow her?"

"There's no need."

*No…*I'm *the one who isn't needed.*

The one Oriana wanted right now wasn't him. And that *really* pissed him off.

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"Viiinceeent! Morning!" Oriana waltzed into the classroom as if nothing was amiss. In fact, she was even more cheerful than normal—perhaps because she was relieved to have dealt with whatever problem had been plaguing her.

Ridiculous. Especially when she was almost in tears moments ago.

Thinking about how Azraq had been the one to help her in her time of need made Vincent want to click his tongue.

Oriana wandered inside and took her seat beside him. It was almost as if the chair were reserved specifically for her because, even when it was empty, no one else dared try to fill it in her place.

"Morning, Miguel. Do you happen to remember where we left off last time in class?"

"Morning. Pretty sure we were talking about supplemental decorations for magic circles."

"Oh yeah! That's right. Thanks; you're a big help!"

Although Vince was being cold and refusing to return her greeting, Oriana showed no signs of caring or even noticing. That was practically proof of how cruel he had been to her up until now, which only made his heart ache.

Since when did I become such a fool?

Vincent grew increasingly irritated as Oriana and Miguel bantered back and forth, with him sandwiched between them. He finally took out his textbook.

“As you’ve studied up to this point, one must use a circle to trigger magic. Leaves from the Dragon’s Tree are mixed with other ingredients to create magic paper, upon which we must write a specific rune before pouring mana through our wand to make it activate. People have studied the Kahn runes used to create magic circles for decades—centuries!

“But even with its elite mages, the Tower of Magic has yet to identify the most optimal way to use them. That’s also the reason why you all have to purchase new Kahn rune textbooks every year. But I digress. You can learn more about the specifics of that through your magic Kahn rune studies…”

The man standing at the front of the class with a tiny mustache—Professor Quicee—transitioned smoothly from one topic to the next.

“The runes you’ve learned up until now include…let’s see… ‘Light,’ ‘Fire,’ ‘Boat,’ and ‘Lance,’ among others. When we talk about supplemental decorations, we’re basically talking about things like prepositions, such as ‘on,’ ‘in,’ and ‘to.’ As I’m sure those of you with good intuition can already guess, we will begin combining two Kahn runes together to make multi-rune circles. *Gehehe*, I can see your eyes lighting up! Worry not; the fun in this class has only just begun.”

Their lesson was proceeding without a hitch. Since this was the students’ first time learning about multi-rune circles, they gulped as they listened, hanging on Professor Quicee’s every word lest they miss something important.

Beside Vincent, Oriana looked no more intrigued than if this were a standard lecture. Everyone else’s eyes were shining with intrigue, but she lacked that same spark of interest. It wasn’t as if she wasn’t taking the material seriously, but she wasn’t enthusiastic about it. If anything, her expression seemed to indicate that her thoughts were elsewhere.

Again?

Vincent had noticed this same behavior from her countless times before, ever since she began sitting beside him and he’d started paying attention to her presence.

She wears a look of solitude on her face. Like she’s the only one here living in a different world.

In these moments, she even seemed to forget that he was sitting beside her, despite all her claims of loving him. She looked so forlorn that he couldn't help wanting to proffer her his hand. Arrogantly, he assumed he was the only one who could fill the void in her heart.

But today, she wanted Zalena instead of me.

Vincent turned sullen the moment he remembered that, but then a shocking realization hit him.

Just today?

No, not just today. In fact, up until now, Oriana had never once relied on Vincent. She professed her adoration for him, but she never expected anything in return. It made sense why she never asked any favors or tried to rely on him.

Due to the obligation he'd been saddled with from birth, Vincent was accustomed to people depending on him. Today was the first time he'd ever thought of wanting to help someone of his own volition.

Although he spent the entire class period wondering what Oriana was thinking, Vincent couldn't shake the image of Azraq's face from his mind.

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VINCENT'S mood didn't improve even after morning classes had ended. Oriana had eventually caught on and was now walking on eggshells around him. That only made him feel guilty. Not wanting to humiliate himself any further, he informed Miguel that he was skipping lunch and slipped out to the courtyard while Oriana was busy talking to the professor.

He wanted to be alone to cool his head. In times like this, there was one place where he could seek refuge—his lounge in the corner of the eastern building.

"Vincent!" a voice called after him.

I thought she was better at reading the room than this.

The lounge was just a short distance away, but Vincent tsked and turned around to face her.

Can't believe she actually chased me down.

He turned to meet her with a disgruntled look on his face, not even bothering to mask his irritation. Oriana flinched, regarding him as one might a raging bull, and furrowed her brow in confusion.

“Did you not get the message?” Vincent asked. “I want to be alone for a bit.”

“…I just thought it’d be good for you to eat lunch… If you’re angry with me, I’ll keep my distance.”

“*Angry* with you? Why would I be? You’re too insignificant to have that profound an effect on me.”

If there was a God who punished people for the gravity of their lies, Vincent would’ve been struck down right then and there. Even he realized he was saying the exact opposite of how he truly felt.

“Yes, you’re right. I’m sorry,” said Oriana. “Still, I would like you to eat lunch. If you want to be alone, I can bring you something—”

“No need.”

Oriana gaped at him, shocked at how curtly he’d refused her. She swallowed hard and turned more solemn than he’d ever seen before as she peered at his face.

“Hey, Vincent…could it be that you’re not feeling well?”

“What?”

“You’ve been having trouble with something, haven’t you?”

“Yes…you could say that.”

At the moment, the biggest problems he faced were his own thoughts and the harsh words that spilled from his mouth. Being curt to Oriana hadn’t been enough to chase her off, which only made him more morose. He was the only one capable of realizing how feckless he was being, but it was too difficult for him to confront that right now.

“Have you talked to your family about it?” Oriana asked. “You may have some kind of serious illness and simply haven’t realized it yet. I think it might be a good idea for you to get examined.”

The way she spoke was so grim, it caught him off-guard. His sense that something was…*off* about her only grew stronger.

“I don’t think that has anything to do with you,” Vincent snipped.

“…Yeah. You’re right. Even so, I still think it’s really important for you to check.”

“It’s not my body that I’m having trouble with. There’s no need for an examination.”

“Y-You don’t know that for sure! Maybe you’re already having symptoms but haven’t realized that’s what they are yet. Remember how you were feeling so fatigued before?”

Vincent sighed. “Yes, I remember you making a big fuss back then, too. It was heat exhaustion, not a serious illness.”

“But you don’t know that for sure!” she bellowed.

His shoulders jumped. Vincent had taken a hostile attitude with her numerous times before, but she’d never raised her voice at him like this.

“Y-You don’t know,” she repeated. “You just don’t *know!* It could be… In spite of me trying to keep a close eye on you… There’s just no way to tell for certain!”

Oriana was so hysterical that she was babbling, like a child who couldn’t get their thoughts in order.

“I-I need to get myself together! I’m the only one who knows. No one else knows! And yet…I’m completely powerless! What has staying at your side even *accomplished?* Even from the beginning, I never felt confident I could protect you. Not even a little! But I knew I had to try—that I had to do everything in my power. But I’m so anxious…I can’t even *breathe* properly!”

Her voice trembled. No, not just her voice—her whole body was shaking. Vincent couldn’t tell if she was experiencing intense anger or fear now.

“Even though I’m right beside you, I’ve felt so uneasy this whole time. I was always terrified. What if you *do* have an illness and it’s getting worse without us knowing? Or what if the cause was something else entirely? I’m scared…really scared! I don’t want to lose you a second time… I never want to hold your cold

body like that *again!* No matter how annoying you think I am! No matter *how* much you hate me! As long as you're alive, that's all that matters!"

Oriana's voice gradually lost strength the longer she went on, and by the end, she was breaking into tears.

Vincent's voice was dry and scratchy as he croaked out, "What are…?"

What are you talking *about?*

For a while, Oriana clasped her hands together and trembled. But finally, she seemed to resolve herself and looked up at him. She opened her mouth and closed it repeatedly, clearly grasping for the right words.

"You're going to die…in spring next year."

Tension invaded the atmosphere, overwhelming Vincent.

Oriana continued, "On the day you died, I think *I* died too. And…my life rewound. I think it was the Dragon King's way of telling me to save you."

Vincent's throat grew dry. He couldn't laugh off her nonsense like he usually did.

"I woke up as my seven-year-old self and my life began all over again. The problem is, I don't even know *why* you died! Maybe someone murdered you, but the circumstances don't seem to support that. I'm convinced it must've been some kind of disease. Yet I've no conclusive proof of that either.

"I'm at a total loss. All I *do* know…is that I want to save you no matter what. That's why I stick so close. I may be completely clueless, but I'm the only one who knows…that after the ball ends that spring day…you'll die! I'm the only one who can protect you…"

Tears poured down her cheeks, as if a dam had burst inside her. It was proof of the years of suffering she'd endured by herself.

"I beg you… You don't have to believe me, but at least get yourself examined," Oriana pleaded. "If you don't want me around, I'll leave you alone. I'll watch over you from afar."

Vincent had no choice but to believe her; this was the first time she'd ever asked anything of him. He'd spent all morning torn up over the fact that she'd

never relied on him for anything. And yet, now that she *was* finally relying upon him, it was over something almost too ridiculous for words.

"Why…?" Vincent blurted.

Why are you putting that much pressure on yourself? Why would you go that far?

Most people wouldn't run themselves ragged like this over a classmate's death, would they? That weighed on his mind more than her shocking and improbable claim that he would die next spring.

Oriana seemed to read what was going through his mind. Her damp cheeks flushed red, and she smiled as if remembering the greatest love of her life.

No, Vincent thought. He wanted to clamp his hands over his ears. *I don't want to hear this.*

But it was already too late. There was no stopping it.

"Vince was…more important to me than anyone else."

Oriana didn't need to say anything else. That was more than sufficient to convey the deep love she still felt for Vince.

Is something so far-fetched even possible?

Vincent clenched his fists.

He understood exactly what Oriana meant. All the concern and kindness she had shown him all these years wasn't for *him.* It made sense when he really thought about it. He'd only been running from it up until now. After all, she'd already professed her love to Vince long before she ever met him. The affection she showed was never for Vincent.

I'm a fool!

He felt silly for letting her proclamations of adoration shake his heart so much. What an idiot he was to think she liked him more than anyone else! It was conceited of him to believe only he could fill the void in her heart.

She never wanted me*…!*

Oriana wasn't sticking beside him because she loved *him*. The only reason she

kept so close was to save the Vince she had loved. She'd no interest in Vincent. Once he had himself examined and they were certain there was nothing wrong with him, he feared she might decide to part ways completely. The whole reason she'd dedicated herself so much to her studies was so she could keep an eye on him and make sure he was safe.

It became so normal for her to sit beside me that everyone else started to regard that as her *seat. That* meant *something to me…but I guess it meant nothing to her.*

Vincent's heart filled with anger and something like loss that he couldn't quite put a label on. He closed his eyes and tried to suppress those feelings, but— *I'm* not *the one Oriana loves.*

It was painful to admit that. But he couldn't ignore the facts.

It's a good thing I didn't make a decision about my feelings for her.

Vincent cursed inwardly. If he didn't hold himself back, he might explode.

It's not as though I love her. Neither of us feel that way. How utterly foolish it was of me to consider prioritizing her over my other responsibilities. Dammit…

His anger wasn't abating. But that was no excuse for him to hurt her either. Although he wasn't *her* Vincent Tanzine, she'd still poured years of effort and endured such loneliness trying to protect him. Vincent couldn't fault her for that.

But still, it's agonizing.

It was as painful as being torn in half.

Even Vincent didn't know why he felt so betrayed. He kept his eyes closed and focused, trying desperately to quell his own raging emotions.

"But…you know…"

Vincent was too preoccupied with himself to notice that Oriana's sobs had softened into sniffling. It took every ounce of willpower he had to crack his eyes open.

"I really did…want to talk to you like this again."

“Yeah,” Vincent grunted.

Her lips quivered as another wave of tears hit.

Vincent was stunned for a moment but then reached into his pocket to produce a handkerchief, which he held out for her. He didn’t have the courage to wipe her tears himself.

“Thank you.”

“Yeah…”

Oriana started wiping away her tears with his handkerchief, but as she sobbed, her body trembled even harder than before.

“I really adore the way you say ‘Yeah,’” she said.

A shock ran through his body. Oriana had used the word “adore” with him many times before. Yet this one rattled him more than all the others.

“…If you say so,” he muttered.

“Say it again.”

“Isn’t it a bit awkward if I say it now?”

“But I really want to hear it,” Oriana begged.

After a short pause, he said, “Yeah…”

“*Hehehe!*”

The way the smile on her face grew reminded him of a flower blossoming. All of the anger that’d been surging around inside him evaporated in an instant.

Oriana Elsha was like a flower growing smack dab in the middle of the road—one he could never pull out and toss aside.

Chapter 5: The Night's Desert Star

***"IF** you don't want me around, I won't approach you anymore."*

Oriana reflected on the words she'd blurted out earlier as she sat in her room. Her heart was hammering, so she put a hand on her chest.

After her outburst, she and Vincent went to the cafeteria together, but he never said another word about not wanting her around. He was probably too overwhelmed by everything else she'd said and forgot.

Oriana thanked the heavens that he didn't seem to remember. She had one other thing to be grateful for as well.

I never dreamed *he would believe my story!*

After they talked, Vincent promised to have a thorough physical. He finally believed her story after calling it nonsense for so long. Oriana couldn't blame him for that; if someone had told her during her first life that she could go back in time and relive it all over again, she would've thought they were full of it.

Oriana was thrilled with how things played out—so thrilled, in fact, that she'd tried to show her appreciation by embracing Vincent. But he'd firmly rebuffed her.

That was a bit strange. Lately, he's pretty much resigned himself and let me cling to him.

For a while, Oriana had sobbed in front of him, longing for his scent and his warmth. He stared down at her all the while, completely apathetic. That saddened her. She wished he'd give in to her more. Yet, she loved him all the same.

I'm so glad things worked out.

There had never been any guarantee her hard work would pay off. But since she was doing it all for Vince, she'd never considered it exhausting labor. Having Vincent understand where she was coming from after all these years was a much bigger relief than she'd ever imagined.

All that effort…was worth it…

Oriana wept again and her tears of happiness showed no signs of stopping any time soon.

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"HEY, Oriana." Yana blinked over and over, her long, thick lashes fluttering.

Oriana jumped, having been lost in a reverie about Vincent, and stared at her friend. Yana took a seat on the sofa and placed something in her lap.

"What's that?" Oriana asked.

"Someone gave it to me a minute ago. Weren't you paying attention?"

The spacious lounge they were in was located inside the same building as the cafeteria. They'd retreated here to take a break after their meal. With a full belly came drowsiness, sinking Oriana into thoughts of the past. As a result, she apparently didn't notice that someone had approached Yana.

"Sorry," said Oriana. "I was daydreaming. *Ooh,* those are fireflies!"

"Fireflies? Are they really *that* impressive?" Yana furrowed her brows.

An insect cage made of domed glass sat in her hands. She was so accustomed to receiving gifts by now, and yet, although she'd accepted this one, she wasn't sure what to make of it. Should she be happy? Or was this some kind of prank?

A group of fireflies was nestled inside the cage, and although they glowed in the dark, they looked like your average insect in the light. Judging by Yana's reaction, they probably didn't have fireflies in her hometown. No one could blame her for being perplexed at receiving a box full of bugs.

"Well, *I* think it's impressive. I love them," Oriana gushed.

"All right. In that case, I'll have to be sure to thank the person when I see them next." She turned to Azraq, who was, of course, seated right beside her. "Azraq, do you remember who gave this to me?"

He nodded, as if there was no way he wouldn't remember. "Kaspar Haapoja, a fifth-year student. I'll call him over the next time I see him."

"Thank you. Please do." Yana lifted the cage and stared through the glass.

“They seem to be glowing faintly. Is that the work of a magic circle?”

“Nope, these bugs are…uh, how to explain this…”

Pretty sure fireflies glow to signal their desire to mate, Oriana thought. *That must mean this Kaspar wanted to express his interest in Yana, right? But to think he’d hand her such a bold gift in front of her bodyguard… He* has *to know that Azraq has been fighting all these other boys who want to win her hand, right?*

Perhaps Kaspar had gone for the romantic approach because he wasn’t confident in winning her through strength alone. Either way, he had *some* guts.

As Oriana struggled to explain, Azraq hopped in to help her.

“I have heard it’s a part of insect copulation. They glow as a way of signaling their interest in one another.”

Oriana awkwardly cleared her throat. She *was* a commoner, but she’d still been raised in a sheltered environment. “Copulation” wasn’t a word she heard very often.

Just recently, some of her underwear had flown off the clothesline, and with nowhere else to turn, she sucked up her embarrassment and enlisted Azraq’s help. He retrieved her undergarments without so much as raising an eyebrow.

She thought he was maintaining a poker face for her benefit, since she was bright red at the time. But maybe, it was because such things simply didn’t bother him. His expression betrayed nothing, but the atmosphere around him wasn’t of someone naive and inexperienced. If anything, it was dangerously sensual.

Amazing what a difference being two years older than the rest of us makes…

Although when she took her previous timeline into account, she was actually older than him.

“Oh, I see. That must be difficult for such small creatures.” Yana stared blankly at the fireflies. It was too unnerving for Oriana.

“H-Hey, Yana, since you received such a great gift, why not take it outside? The fireflies will look even more enchanting in the dark.”

“Really? I would like to see that then.” Yana smiled and lifted herself off the sofa, flipping the tail of her robe back. Her every movement—even down to the way she bent her fingertips—was so graceful and fluid As the two girls walked side-by-side, Azraq followed after them. He was almost always with them when they were outside the girls’ dormitory, and they always kept this same formation. It had flustered Oriana in the beginning, having him tail them, but after eight years (her time at the Academy in this life and her last), she shamelessly enjoyed his presence for the sense of security it afforded her.

They left the cafeteria building and continued walking, only stopping once they found a random bench to sit on. Yana lifted the cage in both hands.

“Oh my,” Yana gasped.

“It’s beautiful!”

Inside the glass enclosure, the fireflies gave off a captivating yellowish-green glow, standing out starkly against the darkness as they fluttered around. Yana brought the dome close to her face, examining the insects so closely their brightness was reflected in her black eyes.

“They truly *are* gorgeous! It’s as if someone trapped the stars in here.” It was only after Yana blurted that out that she finally realized the arrogant message Kaspar had intended to send. She snickered. “The boy who gave me this must have been naïve if he thought he could put me in a cage.”

“Pretty silly,” Oriana agreed. “After all, we’re talking about a tomboy who was adventurous enough to leave her own country to study here.”

“Haha.” Yana caressed the cage, her pearly white nails brushing over the glass. “I will be sure to give him a heartfelt thanks for showing me something so beautiful.”

Oriana nodded. Though she knew nothing of Kaspar save his name, gathering up so many fireflies on the school grounds had to be a tough task.

“Oriana,” Yana said, interrupting her thoughts, “I would like to release them. Would it be all right if I do that here?”

“You’re really going to let them go?”

“Yes. Small creatures like this have such short lives. Their whole reason for glowing is so their species can continue on. I don’t want them to stay trapped like this.” Yana smiled wryly. “That boy *truly* thought he could put me in a cage. Can you imagine the look on his cocky face when he sees them flying free?”

Kaspar would surely realize his feelings were unrequited once he saw them. Oriana pitied him, but it was even more painful to continue hoping for something when you were never destined to receive it.

Oriana and her friends made their way to a small stream beside the cafeteria building. Yana cracked the door of the glass cage open, and the fireflies eagerly escaped. It was a bewitching sight, like a river of stars trickling through the darkness.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it, Oriana?”

“It is. It’s thanks to you that I have the pleasure of seeing it.”

Yana giggled. “Perhaps I should kiss him when I thank him then.”

“Whaaat?!” Oriana gawked at her friend.

Someone suddenly stepped between the two girls, but Oriana didn’t even have to glance up to know it was Azraq.

“Pardon, but I don’t believe that man deserves such an honor.”

“Oh? Then what would you propose instead?” Yana asked.

“A small show of appreciation, such as calling his name, would be more than enough.”

“Then I should be sure to remember his name from now on.”

“No need. Merely speaking it one time in his presence is sufficient.”

Yana broke into laughter.

As the last of the fireflies faded into the darkness, Yana grabbed Oriana by the arm. The princess was so petite that even when she leaned on Oriana, she barely weighed anything.

Oriana had been so busy in her second lifetime between her studies and looking out for Vincent that she didn’t have many girlfriends. In spite of that,

just as in her first life, Yana took a liking to her and grew attached. It was an unexpected but happy coincidence.

“I wonder if we’ll be able to see these insects again,” Yana wondered aloud.

“Good question,” said Oriana. “Probably next summer.”

“Is that the only season they show up?”

“Yeah. They disappear if it gets too hot, but they always show up about this time of year. Although if you venture closer to the Dragon Tree, where the air is clearer, you might find more of them.”

“Interesting. I would like to see them again.”

Oriana nodded. “In that case, let’s go to the Dragon Tree together next year.”

“A splendid idea. Perhaps we should invite Mister Tanzine along as well.”

Normally, this was the part where she was supposed to squeal in delight, but Yana’s comment was so out of left field that Oriana simply froze.

Yana snickered, reaching over to stroke her friend’s head. “Oriana, when you stand on the stage, you need to continue playing your role until the curtain closes.”

Oriana had never communicated anything to Yana about this being her second life. It wasn’t strange for her to comment on Oriana’s affection for Vincent—she’d made such an open show of it—but the way Yana spoke implied she sensed something more.

Well, she’s rightly guessed I love him, but…what the heck is going on?! How did she realize there’s more to it?

Yana continued chuckling, and with no rebuttal readily at hand, Oriana could only mutter a weak, “Y-Yeah…”

❦ ❦ ❦

ONCE they arrived back at the girls’ dormitory, Azraq bowed, intending to bid them farewell.

Yana would normally thank him for his day’s work before wishing him goodnight. But today, she stopped him.

“Azraq.”

“Yes?”

“There’s something I wanted to ask you. Who *was* it that told you this story about the fireflies and their mating practices?”

The only lighting in the area came from the dorm, and the way it fell over them made it impossible for Oriana to see the expression on Yana’s face. Azraq likely couldn’t either.

He mumbled the name of a female student, one Oriana knew from her past life when she was also in Class 2, as Yana and Azraq were currently.

“I see. I assume that story isn’t *all* she gave you. Did you…take her up on her offer?”

“…Yes.”

“How *naughty,*” Yana said with a laugh. It was hypocritical of her to say that, given her popularity with the boys, but no one could argue that point with her. She *was* a princess. All Azraq could do was submit.

Oriana watched with bated breath, wondering if the two were about to start fighting. But Azraq suddenly smiled.

“I *did* tell you I would accept punishment for it.”

“My, you really *do* surprise me. What a *bad* boy you are!” Yana made a face of mock surprise before smacking Azraq’s forehead. It couldn’t have hurt much, but he pressed a hand over the wound and lowered his head. “I appreciate your hard work today. Please be sure to rest.”

“You as well, Princess Yana. See you tomorrow, Elsha.”

“Huh? Oh, uh, yeah. Sorry, um…my bad!”

Oriana didn’t realize she was intruding on the two until after Yana began affectionately rubbing his forehead. By then, it was too late for her to make her retreat.

It feels like this life has lasted an eternity, but there’s still so much I don’t know. I hope Yana and Azraq won’t hold it against me! I really do feel bad…

Chapter 6: A Storm of Hidden Emotions

EVEN after Oriana's far-fetched story of jumping back through time, Vincent was still outwardly spending his days at the school like always. He must've kept what he'd learned to himself since no one else—Miguel included—was treating her any different.

The days passed by peacefully until one Seed Day, when Vincent suddenly whispered something into her ear while she was hanging around him as she always did.

"Do you have a moment?"

He had to stoop to match her height and his hair tickled against her cheek. The caress of his hot breath on her ear combined with his low voice made her shiver. It was all she could do to nod her head up and down.

Vincent held his arm out and she tentatively reached for it. They barely touched, but her heart was hammering so hard, she thought it might leap out of her throat.

He's actually letting *me touch him!*

Oriana knew there was no deeper meaning to it. Escorting someone like this was a gentleman's duty, and Vincent was accustomed to exercising such manners when interacting with women. It had nothing to do with liking or disliking the other person. Her commoner upbringing aside, Oriana still knew that much.

Still, up until this point, Oriana had always been the one touching him, so for Vincent to actively give his permission made her feel like she was on cloud nine. She regularly clung to him, putting them in much closer proximity than they were now, but her pulse raced much faster than usual.

We're so close… I can even smell *him.*

It was that cedarwood scent—something she'd loved about him since her

past life.

When she'd first jumped back in time and become her seven-year-old self again, she'd missed Vincent so much that she'd had her father collect cedarwood colognes. Being a widely successful merchant, he was able to procure exactly what she'd asked for, in a large variety. The only problem—much to her disappointment—was they were all perfume for women.

Oriana tested and compared the fragrances, but she could find no mixture that perfectly replicated Vincent. Perhaps because his smell was a unique combination of his own natural body odor and cologne.

Catching a whiff of it made her heart swell.

Oh no, this is a long *hallway.*

Oriana was anxious for them to arrive at their destination. Her fingers were beginning to heat up where she clutched at him. She also had a growing urge to cling to him. But that seemed inappropriate, given he was going out of his way to escort her like this. She wanted to make the most out of the time he'd specifically set aside for her. Yet, as much as she tried to stay focused, she was just too jittery.

The two entered a deserted classroom, and once she was safely inside, Vincent slid the door shut behind her. Her vision suddenly went dark as he thrust a document in front of her nose.

"Huh?"

Vincent held it so close that Oriana didn't realize at first what she was looking at. She could tell someone with skilled penmanship had written on the paper, but her mind wasn't registering the words.

What is this? A promissory note or something?

Oriana had been more than happy to tag along when he invited her, but suddenly she turned apprehensive, wondering if this was a threat. A single bead of sweat trickled down her brow.

"I returned home this weekend and had an examination performed. This was the doctor's verdict. Read until you're content with the results."

Oriana's shoulders jumped. With a mix of tension and excitement, she reached for the paper. Her fingers trembled. Once she had a grasp on it, she started at the top.

Jargon littered the page. In her past life, it would've been too intense for her to comprehend, but since her return, she'd combed through a number of medical journals looking for symptoms of any potential sickness that could've caused Vincent's death. Although Oriana wasn't particularly smarter than other people and didn't entirely remember everything she'd studied, she still had a better understanding of what was written here than the average layman.

Each time her eyes passed over the results column, her heart beat faster. The examination was conducted with cutting-edge medical technology and magic. These tests were likely the most accurate that could be performed right now. Oriana's eyes practically bulged as she reached the final conclusion. When she saw the words "no abnormalities" written at the bottom, tears of relief sprang to her eyes. Oriana managed to hold her sobs in until she returned the document to Vincent. But then, she started weeping.

"I'm so glad," she choked out. "Thank *goodness…*"

Relief washed over her. At least for the moment, there was no imminent threat hanging over them. Vincent was fit as a fiddle. She was so overcome with the news that her body trembled with joy, and she sank down on her knees.

"I went through with the examination because you kept worrying there might be symptoms I simply hadn't noticed, but I never dreamed you would be *this* happy. It was worth the trouble then."

"Vincent, thank you!"

"Yeah…uh, no problem." Vincent's face flushed for some reason. He held a hand over his mouth and cleared his throat. "At any rate, I intend to do these exams regularly."

Oriana's eyes widened. "Oh, thank you, really! That means so much to me. Vincent, I love you!" Tears spilled down her cheeks.

There was a short pause as he waited, knowing she was crying for his sake, but then Vincent's expression hardened. "Now that we have that out of the

way, there's no longer any need for you to protect me."

Oriana's sobbing was finally beginning to subside. But now, a new tear trickled from her sky blue eyes, like a raindrop falling from a clear sky.

"I don't need your help anymore," Vincent reiterated.

Oriana gaped, her mouth closing and shutting as she searched for how to respond.

"You already said it wasn't murder, correct? Then there is nothing you can do. I refuse to have you involved in this any further."

Vincent's words were harsh. His gaze was sharp too, pinning her in place as if to say he wouldn't back down on this matter, even if she refused to heed him.

"I would at least like to know why," she said, gazing imploringly up at him.

Vincent shrank back a little, despite the unyielding attitude he'd shown seconds ago.

"Please tell me."

After a small pause, he explained, "Because I think this is for the best. Plus, I'm uncomfortable with things the way they are."

"Is my concern a burden on you?"

"Yes, that's right," said Vincent. "Also…"

"Also what?"

"I don't want to hear you say that you 'adore me' or anything like that anymore."

Oriana leaned up on her knees, leg outstretched as she tried to stand up, but she froze the moment he said that. Vincent often jokingly rebuffed her, but this was different. She never thought his rejection would hurt this badly.

"There's no need for this anymore, is there? You don't want me to die, and I'll be exercising extra caution from now on to ensure I stay alive. I believe this more than satisfies whatever objectives you may have. Or am I *mistaken*?"

Vincent's argument was sound. Even Oriana was perfectly aware after these past four years, that she'd been no help to him whatsoever. Nothing would

change even if she continued standing vigilantly at his side.

But…I thought the two of us had finally gotten a little closer.

When had he grown to hate her this much? Maybe he'd been holding it in this entire time, but after hearing her story about jumping back in time, he couldn't suppress his distaste for her anymore. Handing her these examination results must have been his way of cutting ties so that he could escape from her.

Oriana gazed up at him, unable to hide how hurt she was.

Vincent made a face and awkwardly averted his eyes.

After lifting herself back on her feet, Oriana stood in front of him. She tentatively stretched out her hand. Before she could touch him, she yanked it back, swift as an animal terrified of being burned by fire. Even she was shocked at her own reaction.

"I can't stay by your side?"

"What?" Vincent quirked a suspicious brow at her before scrunching his face. "If that's how you interpreted what I said, then maybe that's what you should do. After all, there's no need for you to be with me anymore."

"No need?" Oriana echoed. "That's not… I mean, I only want to be around you because I adore you."

"I already *told* you a few moments ago that I don't want to hear that anymore."

Oriana's lips pursed, stretching into a thin frown.

This whole time, Vincent had only spoken about how *he* felt. It was as though her feelings on the matter were completely irrelevant. That hurt her. Deeply.

Refusing to succumb to her own sadness, Oriana glared up at him. "That's *your* choice."

"What do you mean?"

"That if *you* get to be selfish, then so do I!"

She spun around and started toward the door.

"Hey!" Vincent barked after her.

But even he knew he couldn't stop her. There was no hierarchy here. Vincent might be a duke's heir outside the Academy, but inside, he was no different from any other student. He had no legal power to stop her.

"Do what you want," he huffed.

"I was *planning* to!" Oriana threw the door open and stormed out, leaving Vincent behind in the empty classroom.

❦ ❦ ❦

THIS was the first time Oriana and Vincent had ever fought, in either timeline.

"I don't get it! Three seconds before that, I was thinking what a pure, sweet angel he was."

Oriana broke into another sobbing fit. Her eyes already puffy and red, she was currently curled up tight on her bed, clinging to her blanket.

"Oh dear, we'll have to have an exorcism. A banshee has taken up residence in our room," Yana joked from the floor where she was stretching. An exotic rug was spread out beneath her, stretching all the way under their bunk bed. "Even Class 2 has heard about your dispute."

Not even a day had passed, and already the rumor mill was churning that the two were at odds. It made sense why it was creating such a stir; Oriana had always stuck to Vincent like glue during class hours, but suddenly, the two were working separately. Anyone would be shocked and wonder what had happened.

"Even girls from other classes have started asking what in the world is going on with you. They know how madly in love you are with Mister Tanzine."

"Sorry for causing you trouble," Oriana muttered between sniffles.

"Oh, no need to apologize! Once I told them they'd need to beat Azraq if they wanted to know the answer, everyone stopped asking."

Oriana questioned whether it was appropriate to make such a threat since Azraq's duels were supposed to be reserved for Yana's potential suitors. It seemed like it'd come back to bite Yana later, but Oriana was smart enough not to say so.

As Oriana continued balling her eyes out, Yana climbed up on the bed and arched her back over Oriana, continuing to perform her stretches just as dexterously as before.

“There’s nothing I could tell them, even if I wanted to,” said Yana. “You haven’t said a word to me about what happened yet either.” There was a chastising tone to her voice, which made Oriana flinch. Considering how their bodies were pressed against one another, Yana must have noticed. Her light-purple hair spilled over the mattress.

“Still not going to crack?”

“That sounds like something a villain would say,” Oriana mumbled.

Yana shifted, suddenly bearing down all of her weight on one spot of Oriana’s back.

“Ow, ow, *ow!*”

“This is how you deal with cheeky peasant girls.” Yana gave a princess’ smile as Oriana’s body went limp with resignation.

Since Yana didn’t know anything about Vincent possibly dying in the spring of next year, nor that Oriana had leaped back in time, Oriana had to keep her explanation simple. She merely said that Vincent had asked her not to profess her adoration anymore.

“You don’t have to tell me everything,” said Yana. “It’s not as though I *want* to hear all of the details either. All I want to know is how *you* feel about things.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s made it clear he’s uninterested in you romantically. I am asking if you’ve decided what to do next.”

Oof. When she put it like that, it only made the pain worse.

“Are you going to continue trying to be his girlfriend? Will you resign yourself to simply being his friend? Or are you going to distance yourself altogether?”

Oriana hesitated before admitting, “It seems like he doesn’t want me anywhere near him.”

“But those are *his* feelings, not yours. Correct?”

Oriana was at a loss.

Vincent had snapped at her and told her to do as she liked, but in all honesty, she’d devoted her entire life to Vincent ever since she’d leaped back through time. He’d been the center of her world for years. She’d no idea *what* she wanted to do.

“Yeah, but I don’t want to do something he’s uncomfortable with,” said Oriana. “I guess that’s my decision.”

“I understand.”

Their backs had been pressed against each other up till this point, but Yana suddenly turned around and curled up behind Oriana, fiddling with her hair. She continued stretching her legs, swinging them back and forth.

“You know, Oriana…”

“Yes?”

“I’m not trying to tell you to choose what path you want to walk right this moment. I just want you to know that when you feel lost, you have me here beside you.”

Yana slipped her arms around Oriana’s neck and buried her face in Oriana’s shoulder, trying to hide her own embarrassment at having said something so sentimental. Even if Oriana tried to glance back, she wouldn’t be able to see the expression on her friend’s face.

“Yana?”

“Yes?”

“Let’s have a pajama party soon.”

“That sounds lovely. Except instead of ‘soon,’ let’s do it tonight!” As she pulled away and slipped off the bed, Yana added, “I’ll have Azraq prepare us an enormous tub of ice cream, so large, you’ll have to cradle it in your arms.”

❦ ❦ ❦

VINCENT’S mood was abysmal the following day and even the next. However,

Oriana was the only one he ever took it out on. He was perfectly amicable when speaking with other students. Only with Oriana did all of his emotions evaporate into cold formality.

She summoned the courage to take her seat beside him once, but he never so much as glanced her way. He'd either face the front of the classroom or turn his gaze to Miguel, who sat opposite him. He'd ignore her when she tried to speak to him. Even when Miguel tried to mediate, he'd ignore her. It was almost childish the way he pretended she didn't exist.

Oriana thought being deferential might work, but that only seemed to incense him more. She knew the reason he was cross with her was because she'd refused to obey him, determined instead to do as she saw fit. Still, it wasn't as if she could obediently do whatever he asked. It was her choice if she wanted to stick beside the person she loved. Even so, her heart stung from how evident he made his distaste known.

Vincent told me he didn't need me anymore… He said to stop telling him how much I adore him too.

Oriana didn't want to garner sympathy by letting it show on her face just how depressed she was. She continued to sit beside him for the rest of the class, but it was too painful to keep doing next period, so she avoided him. The period after that, a different girl took her seat. Of all people it could be, it was a relative of his named Sharon Beezel.

Sharon had excellent grades and had been in the Special Class in their past lives as well. Due to the ties between their respective families, Sharon had been close to Vincent from a young age. Vince had actually told Oriana once that the two had been temporarily engaged.

When Oriana saw her seat had been taken, she felt both relieved and heartbroken.

It wasn't originally mine to monopolize. I should've realized that.

Even though Vincent had expressed his annoyance, she'd kept shamelessly occupying the desk beside his.

"Miss Elsha, over here!"

Oriana had been wandering around searching for a seat when a male student called out to her from above, beckoning her to the back of the class. This room was styled like a lecture hall, with connected desks that curved in a semi-circle. The seating in the first row was ground level, but the others gradually elevated the further you moved back.

“Mister Turkey, thank you.”

At least that solved her seating problem. Oriana made her way to Derek’s side. The two of them had spoken a number of times, since they were classmates. They weren’t quite friends, but she could at least consider him an acquaintance.

Since Oriana had devoted her life to nothing but Vincent this time around, she hadn’t really interacted much with her peers. The only person she could proudly call her friend was Yana. Miguel probably wouldn’t mind if she considered him more a friend than an acquaintance. Azraq would probably smile and not contest it if she called him a friend as well.

The moment she made it to Derek’s side, a number of other students surrounded her. As she froze with shock, they started shooting a bunch of questions her way.

“Hey, how come you didn’t sit beside Mister Tanzine?”

“Is he mad at you?”

“Did he break things off?”

“Are you guys just having a fight, or is this something more?”

“Don’t tell me—is Mister Tanzine dating Sharon now?”

Oriana shrugged at each one. It was hard to answer any of them, and frankly, she didn’t want to explain. The last question in particular hit her like a punch to the gut. She never considered that he might decide to date Sharon.

Now I understand… By virtue of me being beside him all of the time, I was crushing any potential he had for romance with someone else.

They’d been lovers in her past life, and she also had the duty of protecting him, so she’d never given their close proximity much thought.

Maybe that was part of why he didn't want me to profess my adoration or cling to him anymore.

Oriana continued smiling ambiguously throughout their interrogation.

Derek must've felt bad for her because he quickly chased the other students off by saying, "Okay, that's enough, guys. The teacher's coming."

"Oh, crap. You're right."

"Be sure to fill us in later, Miss Elsha!"

Once they were gone, Derek offered her an encouraging smile. He'd been kind enough to make an excuse for her, so she didn't have to answer them. "That must've been a shock, having all of them crowd you at once."

Everyone probably pitied her, seeing her as the girl Vincent had rejected.

"Thank you," said Oriana.

"Nah! I really meant it about the teacher coming. In fact, speak of the devil…"

"Quiet down, you mischief-makers. We're going to jump right in," Professor Ghislaine said as she strolled in. She was their astrology teacher.

"Shall we open our books?" Derek asked.

She nodded, glad to be on a different topic. "Yeah."

"Today," Professor Ghislaine continued, "we'll begin by diving into a bit of magic history, and…ugh, my head is pounding."

"Professor, are you all right?"

"Not even *remotely.* Stupid hangover." The professor pressed a hand to her head as she leaned forward, her enormous breasts plopping down on her lectern. The male students in the classroom sat up straight. Even Derek's posture stiffened.

Oriana glanced down at her own chest. She wasn't totally flat, but she certainly wasn't big enough that she could rest her ladies on her desk.

"Right, so where was I… Oh yeah, we'll be starting with mythology. I am sure you're all well aware of how intricately mythology is tied into astrology. You must also know that the 'Dragon's Trials' originally came from a story about the

constellations.”

The Dragon’s Trials was a legend passed down throughout Amanecer.

Long ago, despite benefiting from the dragons’ divine protection, the humans wounded the Dragon Tree—invoking the beasts’ ire. For their part, the dragons considered the humans to be somewhat like house pets. They generally didn’t lose their temper no matter what the humans did, but hurting the Dragon Tree was an assault on their pride. Thus, the dragons had put a pair of human lovers through a series of extremely difficult ordeals. But the couple had held hands and managed to prevail in the end.

The Dragon’s Trials was like one overarching story, with many smaller stories packed in, all based on tales of the constellations.

“The final ordeal involved the Waterfall Constellation, where a woman was said to leap down into the raging waters. To the left of the stars that make up this constellation…”

Oriana pretended to listen to the lecture as she dropped her gaze to the seats below. Vincent was sitting further down, and she could see the back of his head from here. He was sitting perfectly still, his attention focused on Professor Ghislaine. He showed no interest at all in Oriana. She was the only one bothered by their circumstances.

Once Vincent realized my motives, he must’ve thought he could shoo me off, as long as he had that examination performed.

Her heart panged. Beside Vincent was a head of long blonde hair that Oriana couldn’t ignore even if she wanted to.

This sucks.

It already bothered her that Vincent wanted to keep his distance, but she was also disconcerted at seeing another girl sit so close to him.

❦ ❦ ❦

IT took only a few days for Oriana to stop approaching Vincent completely.

When the two were lovers, Vince was always open about his affection for her. Oriana was intimidated at first, having such an amazing man fall for her. She’d

found him difficult to approach in the beginning, but it didn't take long for her to warm up. That was probably because Vince had gone out of his way to make her feel comfortable.

"I don't know. He's just kinda hard to approach. It's like he lives in a totally different world from the rest of us," her classmates had said to her before.

Oriana had responded, *"I don't think Vincent's any different than the rest of us. He's just like any other seventeen-year-old boy."* Having lived this life a second time, she truly believed what she'd said.

But now that she was no longer so close to him, she finally realized why people found him difficult to approach. Vincent felt distant and aloof to those who wanted to get close to him. From the outside, he seemed calm and elegant, perfect in every way. There was nothing else you could wish for in a person. No part of him was lacking. It really *was* like he lived in a different world, and that was why people were so intimidated.

In my past life, I'd never even thought about getting close to him. I watched him from afar, like a person might look up at the moon. Being so close to him and feeling his tenderness and warmth, I forgot how inaccessible he really is.

It was only when standing from afar that one realized how distant the moon was and how futile reaching your hand toward it would be.

Sharon was now completely monopolizing the seat that'd been Oriana just days ago. She'd thought other girls might also surge in to fill her place, but that didn't seem to be the case.

As Oriana was going over lesson material in the study hall, Vincent and Miguel waltzed in with Sharon. They took their seats at a desk far removed from hers, but even breathing the same air felt awkward. Oriana stealthily put her things away and slipped out.

I wonder if the rest of my time here will be this miserable.

She sank down on a bench she found out in the courtyard and stretched her legs, absently gazing up at the sky.

I guess if I can't be with Vincent anymore, there's no reason to force myself to study.

Oriana never liked studying to begin with. She lacked the natural curiosity, drive, and ambition that more intelligent people were blessed with. This whole time, she'd been pushing her tiny brain to its fullest potential, relying on the faint memories from her previous timeline as she struggled desperately to keep up with her classes.

Maybe I can stop studying, make some friends, and start using makeup more. I can go out to town with them and dive into club activities. It'll be just like my life was last time. And…

Oriana hugged her knees to her chest without even realizing what she was doing.

Anxiety was bubbling up inside her. She'd abandoned all that she'd cultivated in her previous life, setting it aside while she dashed straight ahead without looking back. Had that all been a mistake?

It's not good to focus on the pain. I wanted Vincent to live more than I wanted any of those things.

In fact, Oriana had already debated this same question in her head numerous times. She'd decided each time that she wanted to prioritize Vincent. She'd already come to terms with that.

I don't want to put all the efforts I've made to waste. Plus, I still don't know for certain that Vincent won't die this time.

If she did quit studying and her rank fell, they'd be in separate classes. And that'd end whatever tiny thread still linked them. If that happened, she would have no choice but to look on from a distance and pray that he survived the spring.

I can't do that. Even if Vincent avoids me and I can't make friends with my classmates, I at least still want to be in the same class.

"Oriana."

A voice called out to her as she was lost deep in thought. She jumped, turning around.

"Miguel?!" Oriana leaped to her feet and started toward him, shaking off the

loneliness that'd nearly brought her to tears a second ago.

Miguel was standing there with both arms wide open. She was tempted to fling herself into his chest, but while she was simple-minded, she wasn't naïve. She knew that flying into the arms of another man wouldn't give her emotional relief. Nor would others look upon it favorably.

Miguel strolled toward her, his red braid of hair swaying along behind him. His gentle demeanor often made her forget that he was as tall as Azraq. When he arrived in front of her, he frowned, causing the candy stick in his mouth to wiggle.

"You cold-hearted woman."

"…Sorry?"

"Even if you quit being friends with Vincent, you don't have to cut me off too, do you?"

"Oh, Miguel!"

Oriana was so starved for human warmth that she almost slipped and confessed her adoration for him. She'd the good sense to hold her tongue, but she wouldn't have hesitated if Miguel were a woman.

Grateful for his friendship, she motioned for him to join her on the bench.

"Did you come to see me because you saw how lonely I looked?"

"I came because *I* felt lonely," he said.

"Oh, right to the heart! They don't call you Romantic Veteran Miguel for nothing!"

"What the heck kind of nickname is that? Sounds like a book title." Miguel cracked a smile and laughed, his candy stick bouncing again. The lollipop itself was a beautiful sunset color. "Want some candy? Which'll it be, the one in my mouth or a brand new one?"



"…I'll take a new one." Oriana eagerly plucked one out from the vast array of colored lollipops he'd stowed in his sleeve. It was a flat, dark plum-colored one that looked particularly sweet.

"Well, go on. Stick it in your mouth," Miguel said.

"What? You mean *now*?"

"Eating sweets takes all your worries away."

That actually sounds pretty persuasive coming from Miguel.

Miguel, much like Vincent, was skilled at controlling his own mental state. Oriana had never seen him raise his voice or lose his temper before.

She removed the plastic wrapper and popped the lollipop between her lips. The sweet flavor spread through her mouth, prompting her eyes to well up. Her tongue moved around the candy, which was naturally causing her mouth to fill with saliva. That wasn't the only liquid it'd produced, however, as tears started streaking down her cheeks. Oriana furrowed her brows and glared at the air in front of her as she licked her lollipop.

After passing the sweet treat over to her, Miguel simply sat there without saying another word. He quietly remained by her side, waiting for her tears to stop. He never gave any indication that he was surprised she was sobbing either.

"I'm in hot water, Miguel."

"Yeah? Why's that?"

"'Cuz now I seriously want to invite you to our pajama party." Snot was beginning to drip from her nose, so she pulled out a handkerchief to wipe it away. It was ridiculously wrinkled but she didn't really care, as long as she could use it.

Miguel stared at her. She had a lollipop stick protruding from her mouth, tears running down her face, and her nose was bright red from how much she'd wiped at it.

He grinned. "Hey, I'd be up for it! Yeah, I'd totally love to go. I'll just have to pick up some cute PJs first."

“Yana and I will wear cute pajamas, we’ll braid your hair, and we’ll have Azraq bring us a huge tub of ice cream that we can share together. How’s that sound?”

“Sounds awesome,” Miguel said with a chuckle, as though he was genuinely looking forward to it.

“You know, you can braid my hair whenever you want. Here.” Miguel spun around as Oriana was wiping the tears from her eyes. He removed his elastic tie and let his locks spill down his back. Then he shook his head—like a dog—to loosen the braid.

“Really? You don’t mind?”

“Sure, why not? You don’t have a guy with you anymore, so there’s no reason to hesitate.” Miguel spoke flippantly, but his words hit her right where it hurt the most.

Oriana pressed a hand over her throbbing heart.

“*Ugh*, that was like a dagger,” she grumbled.

“Going to revoke my invitation to your pajama party now?”

“No, it’s fine,” she said, gritting her teeth through the emotional pain. “I’ll still send you an invite… Wanna wear fluffy pajamas to match Yana and me? They’re super comfortable…”

Oriana didn’t want to put his kindness to waste. She tentatively touched his hair. It was her first time ever touching a boy’s hair like this. Part of her felt guilty for doing so, but as Miguel had said, there was no point in her staying faithful to Vincent. She had no boyfriend who might chastise her for her infidelity.

She slid her fingers through his reddish-brown locks. Since it was summer, they were both sweating. The hair on his scalp was damp as a result.

“Hey, Miguel…why *are* you growing your hair out anyway?”

“Hm… Because with its length, I can tell how long I’ve been alive, I guess.”

“Huh?” Oriana’s hand froze. She hadn’t expected that kind of answer.

Miguel glanced back at her, flashing his canines as he grinned. “What about you?”

“Uh? Oh, right, you’re asking me. Um, I don’t really like how my face looks, but I *do* like the color of my hair. So, I’d rather grow it out and have people look at *it* more instead.”

“That’s a really weird way of thinking.”

“Hey, do you really have the right to say that to me?”

Oriana began braiding his hair. The strands were so coarse that it wasn’t working out the way she wanted. Miguel kept his head facing forward as she furrowed her brows and gritted her teeth, silently ordering his hair to cooperate.

“So, what are you going to do now?” Miguel asked.

“What do you mean?” Oriana managed to squeak out as she grappled with his unruly red hair, clutching it in both hands.

“I’m actually pretty lonely…”

Her hands froze in place. Once she had all of his hair gathered in one hand, he peered over his broad shoulders to look back at her.

“M-Miguel!”

“Heh, the same reaction again?” He looked genuinely surprised as he laughed. “Was it a pretty simple fight you had? Or a serious one? Hm, must be the latter since you both refuse to give in, despite your quirks.”

“What do you mean by ‘quirks’?” Oriana asked.

“I mean you’re Vincent-obsessed.”

Oriana knitted her brows, unable to argue. “Maybe I *am* being stubborn, but I think the case may be different for Vincent.”

“Vincent is kind to everyone, so he’s willing to put up with just about anything. He’s been pretty lenient with your antics ’til now.”

Again, Miguel had a valid point. It wasn’t a case of Vincent actively wanting her to be beside him or even consenting to it. He’d merely let it slide.

Oriana hesitated before asking, “So…you’re saying he finally hit the limit of his patience with me?”

“Hmm. I guess you could interpret it that way.”

Although Oriana already guessed that was the case, Miguel’s words still hit like a ton of bricks. She was totally discouraged as she used some bands to tie Miguel’s hair in place.

“It’s finished!”

There were a few loose strands sticking out here and there, but overall, Oriana was proud of how she’d pulled it together. Miguel was handsome enough that the braid didn’t make him look feminine. If anything, it actually amplified his natural charms and also matched his uniform.

“You look positively adorable! The biggest beauty in the boys’ dormitory,” she chirped.

“Sweet. I’ll be sure to show my hair off to everyone later.”

“Just be careful nobody drags you off to a dark room.”

He would’ve been even cuter if she’d inserted some flowers in his braid, but they could save that for next time. Maybe she could enlist Yana’s help as well.

Now that Oriana was done playing with his hair, an awkward silence hung in the air.

“Anyway, basically, I came here to lend you a hand,” Miguel muttered shyly.

Oriana dramatically dropped to her knees, clutching at her chest. “It’s over for me. My fuse has been lit!”

“For real? Well, if you blow up, there’s nothing I can do for you.”

“That’s why you’re supposed to use magic on me to make sure that doesn’t happen.”

“Never heard of such miracle magic before.”

When Miguel confessed he felt lonely without her, Oriana knew he was being entirely genuine. To resolve his own emotional turmoil, he wanted to help her and Vincent reconcile. She inwardly apologized to him for ever doubting if he

was a mere acquaintance. He was definitely a friend!

“Hey, are you trying to sidestep the issue?” Miguel must’ve grown impatient with her for not answering him seriously. He turned his body around and scrutinized her face.

“Uh, um, that totally wasn’t *not* my intention.”

“Does that mean you *don’t* want to make up with Vincent?”

“*Urrrrgh…*” Oriana groaned.

If I force Vincent to bend his emotions to my will so we can make up, I feel like it’ll just end with him continuing to begrudgingly put up with me.

What Vincent wanted was for her to keep her distance. That’d be impossible if they reconciled.

“If I was clever enough to know how to make up with him, I probably wouldn’t be in this mess to begin with,” she said finally.

Miguel lifted himself off the bench and reached over, mussing her hair. “Well, at least you know who you should invite to your girls’ party next time, should you want to.”

Miguel’s hair swayed with his every movement. He reminded her of a cat with the way he’d quietly waited for her to tie it earlier. He’d also been patient with her, trying to help her unravel the mess of emotions she was struggling to express. On top of that, he’d even told her to lean on him for help whenever she needed it.

“Yeah, I do. Miguel, let me say just one last thing.”

“*Hm?*”

Oriana leaped to her feet and clenched her fists. Without hesitating, she blurted, “I love you!”

“Whoa, whoa! You finally blew after holding it in this whole time, huh?” Miguel bit down on his candy stick, a grin stretching across his face.

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THE sunset was spilling in through the windows of Vincent’s room as he paced

from corner to corner. Anxiety swelled in his chest, weighing on him like a dark cloud.

Suddenly, the door burst open without so much as a knock. The only person it could be was his roommate, Miguel. He had returned with a sunny expression on his face.

“You’re sure in a good mood,” Vincent observed sourly.

“Sure am.”

When Vincent entered the study hall earlier, he’d known Oriana would be there. She was always there around that time, and he’d gone there knowing full well he’d run into her. Although she always clung to him incessantly, she never slacked off on her studies. Vincent had always liked that about her, but when he realized her efforts were entirely to ensure he didn’t die, he was overcome with guilt. Part of him even felt a bit alienated. It was like a rock had settled in his chest.

“That was probably the most fun I’ve had lately. And there was no fussy hen around to peck at me either,” Miguel said as he pulled his robe off and slipped it onto a hanger.

He was likely referring to Sharon Beezel, who’d been cozying up to Vincent lately.

“It’s not like I particularly *want* her around either,” Vincent grumbled.

The two had been engaged once before, due to their parents’ wishes, but it was so brief that almost no one outside their families knew anything about it. Due to their history, he had to give her more leeway than any other student. His parents had drilled it into him from a young age that he should not cause a lady undue embarrassment.

“If someone knows how to shut her beak, I’d gladly bow my head and ask them to teach me,” said Vincent.

“Yes, that! That’s exactly it! You’ll put up with almost anything, no matter how annoying it is.”

Vincent’s shoulders jumped. Miguel was subtly pointing out the exact reason

why he and Oriana were fighting. It was actually the first time in Vincent's life that he'd ever argued with anyone before. Thus, he'd no way of knowing how to go about reconciling with her.

When Sharon took Oriana's seat, and Oriana had said nothing, choosing instead to sit elsewhere, he realized he'd screwed up royally. He thought she would eventually retake her place beside him, but he was starting to think she never would. Sadly for him, that was turning out to be true.

Oriana had started hanging out with other friends, avoiding him completely. Vincent should have spoken with her the day after their fight, when she'd taken her usual seat beside him, but he'd realized that too late. He was the one who ignored her because he couldn't figure out how to approach her after their argument. His own childish hostility had pushed her away completely.

When he was younger, his tutor had lectured him over and over, "Don't let your emotions get the best of you." The traditionally-minded upper crust considered all emotions evils to be restrained.

When I was younger, I took such advice for granted and let it go in one ear and out the other. But as I got older, their every word started to seep inside my head.

Vincent had allowed the emotions he usually kept in check to control him, and in the process, he'd lost something precious. It was so ridiculous that he couldn't even feel sorry for himself. He was tolerant of other people, but for some reason, when it came to Oriana, he was always so clumsy.

"Did Elsha say anything to you?" Vincent asked. "About…wanting to fix things with me."

Miguel had made no comments yet on Vincent's tiff with Oriana. For Miguel to make such a cutting remark must have meant Oriana *had* said something. Honestly, there was a lot more Vincent wanted to ask.

Is she okay? Has she been lonely? Is our separation hurting her as much as it is me?

Those were all things he wanted to hear from Oriana directly—not Miguel.

"Nope. Not even after I offered to mediate for her."

And she wouldn't even take him up on it?

As selfish as it was for him to feel this way, Vincent was seriously depressed.

I guess I was right. She never really wanted to be with me to begin with.

Oriana had pretended to want him, but when he thought about it, she'd always toed the line and stopped when she was at the tipping point of provoking his anger. She'd never wanted anything from him badly enough to risk pissing him off, at least not until she demanded he have a health exam. All she truly desired was his safety.

Vincent pulled his chair back and slumped into it. He rested his elbow against the window frame and absentmindedly stared out of the glass.

When he gave her his exam results, he'd told her not to protect him anymore. Vincent couldn't abide by a girl thinking he was so frail that he needed her protection. His pride was as great as his high social status.

He also told her not to involve herself with his death, which she was so fixated on. Part of that was because of how relieved she was when she saw the results. He figured it'd bring her even greater relief if he continued the exams. If it brought her peace of mind, he could withstand being tied up for a couple of days and being probed by all manner of needles. It was a small price to pay.

The real issue was…what if Oriana was wrong? What if someone really *had* murdered him? If the culprit noticed her digging around, it might provoke them. Vincent risked putting her in more danger by leaving her to her own devices. That was one thing he absolutely had to avoid.

Put that way, it's actually a relief not having her nearby. At least now she won't be wrapped up in it if I do *die. Even if she can't save me, she surely won't be as heartbroken as when Vince died.*

That should've been reassuring. But instead, he felt an unfamiliar emotion roiling in his gut—something like anger.

Ever since he heard her story about jumping back in time, he couldn't stand hearing her talk about her adoration for him when he knew it was really Vince she loved, not him. He sensed her affection was a lie—a cover to allow her to stay close to him.

The one she really had feelings for was a version of himself that he didn't know and never would. Though it was a trifling lie not worth getting upset over, it still hurt each time she said it. Vincent was baffled by his own emotions, but regardless, he never wanted to hear it again.

At any rate, these were the three things Vincent had told her: Stop trying to protect him, stop worrying about his potential death, and stop professing her adoration. Those were his only conditions. And yet she asked, "I can't stay by your side?"

Vincent had never said anything like that. There was nothing that could convince him *to* say such a thing to her, in fact. Although unspoken, it was as if she saw no meaning in being with him if she couldn't do those three things.

The memory made him grind his teeth. He'd never felt more frustrated in his life.

For as much as she professed her adoration, she never actually had a shred of interest or affection for me, apart from Vince.

Now pissed off, Vincent raked his hands through his hair, making a disheveled mess of it. It stood in stark contrast to Miguel's beautifully braided red hair, which slipped into Vincent's periphery.

"Check it out," said Miguel. "Cute, huh? Oriana did this for me."

"I saw," Vincent huffed bitterly. Miguel didn't need to boast about it; Vincent had seen the whole thing play out through a window in the study hall. "You *knew* I was looking, didn't you?"

"Well, yeah. Pretty much."

Miguel had gone out of his way to face the study hall as he sat on the bench, gleefully showing off in front of Vincent. Oriana didn't seem to notice they were being watched, but Miguel was fully aware as he took advantage of the situation.

"Then did you also hear her say she loves me?"

"What?" Vincent's head jerked up. Miguel had a Cheshire grin on his face. Perhaps he was lying in order to gauge Vincent's reaction.

No, he wouldn't tell such an obvious lie. Which must mean…it's true?

"What?" he sputtered again, his voice coming out a pitiful squeak now.

Oriana…said that to Miguel? Said she loves him? Even though she's never said that to me?

Vincent froze up, unable to digest this new information. Miguel simply licked at his lollipop as he waited for his friend to speak.

"What will happen to your house?" Vincent asked finally. "You're heir to an earldom, aren't you? From what I've heard, your family isn't in such dire straits that they would stoop to having you marry a merchant's daughter. Elsha is a commoner. It'd be impossible for the two of you to wed!"

"Uh…now I think it's my turn to shout 'What?' back at you. Why are you jumping into talks of marriage between Oriana and me?"

Vincent was at a loss for words. He was so panicked that he started babbling. Inadvertently, he'd exposed the root of his own troubles.

That's because she kept going on and on about how much she adores me.

Naturally, at some point, he'd started to wonder if there was a way the two of them could be together.

"Besides," Miguel continued, "you have no right to say anything to me."

That was true, of course.

Vincent slumped against the window frame. He felt guilty for thinking this after how desperately Oriana had worked to save him. He wanted to crawl in a hole and die. Nothing was going at all the way he wanted.

He'd never intended to have such a huge fight with her. Nor did he mean for the two of them to separate. He merely wanted some space so he could cool down. Naturally, he assumed that, even if he did keep his distance from her, the two would go right back to normal. Even though Vincent was well aware the person she'd dated in her previous life was Vince and not him, he couldn't shake the sense that their relationship was special.

"Was Elsha being serious when she said that?"

Vincent was already having a hard enough time dealing with the fact she was in love with Vince. He didn't want to have to think about Miguel too.

"If she really *was* serious, I wouldn't be so heartless as to go blabbing about it to other people."

Vincent's lips thinned. Miguel had a point. Now he really wanted to find a hole he could crawl into.

"Do you *get* it now, Vincent? You're a hot mess."

"…I know."

And I'm drowning in despair besides.

Vincent covered his face with his hands. He didn't want to talk, see, or think about anything.

"I never thought you'd be this big of a wreck," Miguel continued.

"Strange as it is to say, neither did I."

Vincent always prided himself on being someone in control of his emotions. Someone who could always make the right decisions. It was only when it came to Oriana that nothing went as planned.

"That said, I like it best when it's the three of us." Miguel pulled the stick out of his mouth. The evening sunlight filtered through it, making it glimmer. Not much of the lollipop remained, now that Miguel had sucked on it for so long.

I feel the same way, Vincent thought to himself as he gazed out the window.

The bench where Oriana had sat earlier was now empty.

Chapter 7: An Ill-Fated Love

A wand is a mage's lifelong partner. One chooses their wand when they first begin learning magic, and they spend years with it. Each person's respective quirks have a way of shaping their weapon, crafting it into something uniquely theirs by the time they graduate.

It is up to each mage to personally craft their wand from a Dragon Tree's branch. As long as a person uses one of the fallen branches as the base of their weapon, they are free to add whatever adornments they wish. Some will craft theirs into an iron wand, others will top theirs with a gemstone, and others will decorate theirs with flowers. There is also a class at the Academy on wandmaking.

"Miss Elsha, what are *you* going to do?"

"*Hm…* I'm thinking about going with the ink type."

"Nice! No surprise it's one of the standard choices, since it's so easy to use."

Oriana was currently in the engineering lab for her Magical Item Crafting class. Since the tables in here were big enough for four people to work side-by-side, she was surrounded by three other classmates. The surface of the table was covered in a number of printouts and tomes. One was an open reference book with diagrams of different wands, complete with illustrations of historical examples and their owners' characteristics.

Once Oriana distanced herself from Vincent and Miguel, she thought she would be all alone. But her classmates weren't so cold-hearted that they'd leave her to fend for herself. They were kind enough to include her, despite how she'd chased Vincent all these years without regard for anything (or anyone) else.

You guys are angels!

Amanecer held those who'd inherited dragon's blood in high esteem, which

included Vincent. Yet none of Oriana's classmates blamed her for her lack of manners when it came to him. They did interrogate her about why the two of them had split, but that was only at the start. Now, they treated her like anyone else.

I thought I was picking Vincent at the expense of everyone else. I never dreamed a day would come when I would get along with everyone so well like this.

Little did she know that they were all secretly thinking, *Oriana's been completely obsessed with Vincent for these past four years. Seeing how quiet she's become is discomforting. Can't she go back to her normal, noisy self?* Oriana, oblivious to this, was so touched by their kindness, she almost started sniffling.

"How about you guys?" Oriana asked.

Derek answered, "I think I'm going to put a crystal in mine."

Dragons *loved* beautiful gems. One theory claimed that dragons actually ate them. That said, no one had ever seen a dragon; all stories of them were from days long past. That was enough time for people to no longer know whether they'd ever really existed or not.

"Awesome! Maybe that'll make it easier to borrow the dragons' power."

"I think I'll go for the natural type," said Marina.

Another male student, sitting beside Derek, chimed in, "I think I'll go with the composite type."

Wand adornments were broken down by types. The easiest and most common options were: ink type, gem type, natural type, blessing type, and composite type.

The ink type involved creating a compartment in one's wand where pen and ink could be stored. This made it the most traditional choice, since as long as a mage had their wand and some magic paper with them, they could draw a magic circle wherever and whenever.

The gem type involved embedding a gemstone into the tip of a crafted wand.

It acted as a beacon, making it easier for the dragons to sense its presence, in turn amplifying the magic flowing to the mage from the underground leylines. This was the favored option for those whose preferred occupation required precise control.

As the name implied, the natural type was a simple wand carved out of one of the Dragon Tree's branches. The school provided the facilities necessary for altering one's wand, but all supplies were out-of-pocket expenses. People who wanted to save money were generally the ones who opted for this type. Of course, there were also some that simply preferred their weapon the way it was and thus chose this option.

The next type was rather rare, but there were some who selected branches that were as tall as them. Those people were said to have received the dragons' blessing. It was considered blasphemous to snap these abnormally large branches in half, so those who did find one would instead devise a way to make it easier to carry. These were known as the blessing type.

The composite type was just as it sounded: a wand composed of multiple types. Generally, most people combined the ink and gem types. There were also many mages who initially picked one type, only to add another later.

"I figured you would go for the gem or composite type, Miss Elsha," said Derek.

Oriana pursed her lips. She had originally intended to go with composite, and in her past life, she'd actually chosen the gem type.

She shifted her gaze to the floor. "Well, you see… There was a…problem with the gem I ordered…"

Although she tried to play it off, the reason her plans had gone awry was immediately apparent.

"Ah," Derek remarked, scratching his head. "You ordered tanzanite, right?"

"*Urgh…*"

"Don't sweat it! People do stuff like that when they're in love."

"*Ughhh…*"

Derek’s attempt to reassure her only twisted the knife deeper.

Oriana sank forward, flopping her upper body over the top of the table. She’d asked her father to retrieve a beautiful purple gem known as tanzanite. The one she’d specifically wanted was about half the size of her fist, fairly transparent, and had a soft lilac color. Although rare for tanzanite, it had a beautiful inclusion in it that resembled a shooting star.

Oriana fell in love with it at first sight. The gem’s name was even similar to Vincent’s surname and had his eye color too. No one could really blame her for picking it, not with how besotted she was.

Despite the great lengths her father had gone to acquire it since she refused to compromise on anything else, Oriana had still hesitated over whether to use it on her wand or not. Ultimately, she’s decided not to for now.

After all that’s happened, I don’t have the courage to put it on my wand.

It was stashed inside the drawer of her bedside table, wrapped in countless sheets of cloth. She was basically treating it like a cursed item she had sealed away. Imagining what reaction Vincent would have when he saw was intimidating enough on its own. Whatever he did—whether he scorned her, ridiculed her, or ignored her altogether—it would be painful.

Maybe he wouldn’t even notice. Lately, our eyes don’t even meet anymore.

Not that the two had ever traded signals with their eyes or shared passionate glances to begin with, but the utter lack of eye contact was proof he was purposefully ignoring her.

Oriana remained plastered across the table, play-sobbing. Marina reached over and patted her on the head.

Marina, you are way too kind! You must *be an angel!*

“When times are tough, running is always an option!”

“That’s right. In fact, maybe this is the perfect opportunity. It doesn’t *have* to be Mister Tanzine.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it must be lonely for you. Especially given how quiet you’ve been.”

“You’re a cute girl, Miss Elsha. Why not look for a new boyfriend?”

“I’m sure you’ll find one in no time!”

Oriana had no idea what her classmates meant by perfect timing and her being lonely, but she did know that “new boyfriend” was a misunderstanding since Vincent had never actually *been* her boyfriend in this timeline. She lifted her head to say as much but stopped short when Marina’s hand froze on the top of her head. Across the table, the two boys were sitting perfectly still, as if they’d been petrified. Sweat was beading on their faces as they stared blankly forward.

Oriana tilted her head. She casually followed their gazes, which were pinned on something directly behind Marina. Her mouth began to shake, for there was a young man standing there with eyes the exact same color as the very gemstone she’d been discussing only moments prior.

Vincent may as well have had a piece of magic parchment tacked to him with the Kahn rune for “Frigid” inscribed on it, because the temperature of his gaze right now was absolute zero. It was the first time their eyes had met in a while. Oriana cracked her mouth open, racking her brain for what to say, but no words came out.

His handsome face remained perfectly still, showing no sign of emotion as he turned and left. With each step, his short blond hair gave a small bounce.

“Wh-What was that about…”

How weird, especially when he hasn’t even bothered to glance my way this whole time…

Oriana had no idea *why* he’d been standing behind their table, but she inwardly cursed him for his confusing whims.

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“…riana. Oriana!”

Oriana’s eyes flew open to find the Desert Star shining before her. Yana should’ve been fast asleep in the overhead bunk, but for some reason, she was peering into Oriana’s face instead.

“Yeah? Wh-What is it?” Oriana managed to rasp out, still tongue-tied from having just woken up.

“Are you unaware of the time? Normally, you would be finished getting ready by now.”

“What? You gotta be kidding me!”

“I certainly am not ‘kidding’ you. I tried to rouse you numerous times while doing my morning stretches.”

The blood drained from Oriana’s face. She scrambled out of her bed in a panic and raced to the bathroom to splash some water on her face and get changed.

“It’s rare for you to stay in bed this long,” Yana commented. “Did you have trouble sleeping last night?”

“*Uh.* Well…something like that.”

It wasn’t just last night. Ever since her fight with Vincent, Oriana had hardly slept a wink. Bitter memories flooded her the moment she closed her eyes, giving her brain no rest. Yana went to sleep first, which was why she never noticed Oriana turning over numerous times, unable to get any shut-eye.

Oriana plopped herself in front of the vanity and peered into the mirror. She gawked at herself.

“What a disaster. My eye bags are awful. If I’m to cover them with makeup, this may take a while.”

She removed the lid of a nearby porcelain container and dipped a thick brush in, coating it with a fine powder. This foundation was specifically created to match Oriana’s skin tone.

“Yana, go on ahead without me. I’ll skip breakfast today.”

“I agree in your pursuit of beauty, but skipping breakfast will only harm you in the long run.”

“Urgh,” Oriana groaned. “I want my future self to be beautiful too, but my first priority is doing something about my face *now!*”

“In that case, I will leave first,” Yana said with a shrug. It was fortunate that

Yana was so independent. Oriana liked that part about her.

Oriana stared at the mirror as she applied her foundation. It had crushed pearl in it, which made her skin glisten when the light hit it just right. As she layered it on the outside of her bottom eyelid, its dark circles became slightly less pronounced.

Oriana was better than other girls her age at naturally applying makeup, a small bonus of having leaped backward in time. She'd already gone through trial and error before, so she no longer shaved her brows down too far or strayed outside the lines when putting on her lipstick.

Since Oriana was a merchant's daughter, she was already accustomed to using the latest cosmetics. She'd made sure to bring her beauty supplies with her when she entered the Academy for the second time. Once a person gets used to applying makeup, they feel nervous without it. Plus, she *did* feel cuter when she wore it. It was only natural for her to want to be the cutest she could be when meeting Vincent.

Oriana was skilled enough at applying makeup that a number of other girls had come to her for advice. In spite of that, she was having no luck today. Her foundation even seemed to be standing out awkwardly against her skin.

"Oops, did I put too much on?"

She stared wide-eyed at her reflection. It'd been a long time since she'd committed such an error. Alas, while her makeup looked worse than normal, she didn't have the luxury of time to go about fixing it.

I want to be the cutest I can be in front of Vincent, even if he doesn't glance my way at all.

❦ ❦ ❦

"HEY, Miss Elsha, isn't this yours?"

School had already ended when Derek flagged Oriana down in the hallway to hand some materials over to her.

Flustered, she gasped. "Oh gosh, sorry. Yeah, this is mine. You actually went out of your way to hunt me down? Sorry for the trouble. And thanks." Oriana

had already made her way to a spot in the complete opposite direction of the classroom in which they'd just had their lesson.

"I figured you'd need it for our report that's due tomorrow," he said.

"Oh, right. I was actually thinking about starting on it now."

"You headed to the study hall? Mind if I tag along?"

"Not at all. You're more than welcome."

Going to the study hall without the materials necessary to begin her report would've been utterly pointless. Oriana was exasperated with herself.

What am I even doing? *All day long, I keep making mistakes.*

A cloud of gloom hung over her head and it even seemed to weigh her body down. Oriana forced herself to keep moving as she and Derek exchanged small talk.

As the two climbed the stairs, Vincent and Miguel came into view on the top floor. Oriana barely had the opportunity to register her surprise before her eyes flew wide open. As Vincent cut through the corridor, Sharon was glued to his arm.

Oh crap. Crap, crap, crap!

Something was wrong with her body. It froze in place and wouldn't move an inch.

"Miss Elsha?" Derek, who was climbing the stairs after her, drew his brows in confusion when he noticed she'd stopped moving. Curious, he looked up at the above hallway. "Oh boy…"

Vincent must've heard Derek calling her name because he glanced down the stairwell. Before she could glimpse his expression, Oriana turned on her heel. Her face was deathly pale and her mouth kept gaping helplessly.

Derek's face hardened with determination. "No choice, I guess. In for a penny, in for a pound…!"

She had no idea what he was talking about, but he suddenly grabbed her hand and whispered "Run" in her ear. He started back the way they'd come,

descending the stairs with her in tow. Oriana's brain was still frozen, so she'd no other choice but to follow.

Crap, this is…

Oriana was careful not to trip as she made her way down with Derek. The corners of her eyes were growing hot.

Crap. Just…crap!

All strength fled her body. Fortunately, they'd made it down the stairs at some point. When Oriana's legs crumpled beneath her, Derek reached an arm out to support her, worriedly peering at her face.

"Miss Elsha, are you all right?"

No, of course, *I'm not all right…!*

Still short of breath, Oriana managed to force a smile. "Yeah, I'm fine. Thanks. Sorry about that. I was just a little…surprised."

A pitying look flashed across Derek's face but quickly disappeared. He shook his head slightly and asked, "What do you want to do? Go to a different study hall? Or…"

"I think I want to be alone for a bit."

"All right. I know I'm being a bit nosy, but what about your things? If you're okay with it, I can deliver them to the dorm for you. Or I give your stuff to Miss Mahathin, she'll make sure you get it later, right?"

"Yeah. Sorry about this. You really don't mind? I appreciate it!" Oriana tried to keep her voice as cheerful as possible as she passed her belongings over to him. The materials didn't have much meaning to her now, since she wouldn't be able to work on her report anyway. Derek could obviously see right through her façade too.

"Also, sorry about holding your hand," he said. "I'm sure it must have caught you off guard, but I didn't want you to trip."

"It's fine. You did me a big favor. Anyway, I'll be going." Oriana scurried off until she was out of Derek's sight. Her legs caught beneath her, and she tripped, but she immediately pulled herself up and started running again.

There's no way I can see that and not cry.

Oriana kept moving, not even bothering to shake off the dirt stuck to her sleeves.

Despite all that'd happened, she still thought she was the girl closest to Vincent. She thought she was the only one allowed to be at his side, trade witty banter with him, and touch his body.

Even though he was cold sometimes, Vincent never truly rebuffed me even once these past four years. When we had that fight, that was the first time he ever truly rejected me.

"I don't want to hear you say that you 'adore me' or anything like that anymore."

Oriana had realized he was genuinely pushing her away, which was precisely why she backed off. Sharon, however, continued to be at his side. Today, she'd even clung to his arm.

Argh! No more, no more! Stop thinking about it!

Oriana continued charging blindly forward. There was only one destination she had in mind.

❦ ❦ ❦

WHAT? *Holding hands?*

Vincent gaped as he watched Oriana flee the scene with Derek Turkey at her side.

They were holding hands?

He stood there frozen, unable to digest the scene in front of him.

"Vincent, what's wrong?" Sharon glanced up at him innocently. She'd sprained her ankle a few moments ago and was leaning on him so as not to put weight on her injury.

Looping arms like this was merely a part of etiquette, as far as Vincent was concerned. While there was no hierarchy here at the school, the obligations they'd been saddled with at birth didn't simply disappear. Aristocrats were

expected to show due courtesy to others, which meant properly escorting a lady when necessary.

It didn't matter whether the two had attachments in the past—actually, no, it was precisely *because* they did that he needed to be more tolerant. Regardless, it was good manners to lend a girl a hand when she was injured.

"Nothing…" Vincent gave a short reply, unable to say anything else. His brain was still failing to absorb what he'd witnessed. The shock was so great, he didn't even realize his feet were rooted in place.

Oriana and Turkey… They were *holding hands just now, weren't they? But why? She never even held* my *hand. So why?*

Oriana had climbed on his back, latched onto his waist, and tried to loop their arms, but she'd never tried to hold his hand. Not even once. It was almost as if she were telling him not to get angry, since she was maintaining *some* boundaries.

Since they didn't wear gloves at the Academy, holding hands meant their bare skin would touch. Obviously, such a thing was extremely intimate. Oriana *had* to be aware of that. Even as a commoner, she was still the daughter of a rich merchant.

It's only been a few days since the two of us split. Is she willing to hold hands with just anyone?

As his mind spun in circles, his thoughts for some reason drifted to the other day when their class was in the process of wandmaking. Oriana had been cheerfully chatting away with those at her table, and Vincent had wandered over hoping to somehow strike up conversation with her.

His heart jumped when he heard her mention tanzanite. That was the Amethyst Dragon Duke's guardian stone. The stone she'd prepared was the same exact shade as his eyes, which Vincent interpreted as a positive sign. The issue was that when he did get close enough to her to talk, he wasn't sure what he should say. To make matters worse, her other classmates were recommending she find a new boyfriend.

Now he wondered… *Is* Derek *that new boyfriend?*

The joy he felt when he thought he'd found an excuse to approach her now turned to despair as reality hit him like a punch to the gut. Maybe Oriana had already forgotten all about him and was starting to take an interest in other men.

The pain in his chest was like a severe burn that wouldn't go away. For reasons beyond his own comprehension, he was totally depressed. No one was more confused than he about why this was hitting him so hard.

❦ ❦ ❦

VINCENT couldn't remember what he said to Miguel and Sharon as he parted ways with them. He was in a daze as his legs unconsciously guided him to the tiny lounge he frequented in the eastern building.

The moment he entered, he plunked himself down on the seat and hung his head.

She says Zalena is the only one she can rely on, then tells Miguel she loves him, and now she's holding hands with Turkey. All she ever felt toward me was concern I might die.

Vincent expelled a deep sigh. He leaned back, sinking into the sofa's cushions. When he lifted his head, he spotted two perfectly circular eyes staring at him.

Silence hung in the air between them.

"S-Sorry. It seemed like you were going to the study hall, so I never dreamed you would come here."

Those eyes were Oriana's. She was sitting in the armchair by the fireplace. She'd been so quiet that Vincent hadn't realized the room was already occupied when he'd entered.

So she finally came inside.

Ironic. Vincent had spent so long wondering when she would pass through that door. Yet, it was only once she'd no further need of him that she finally did.

"If you're using the room, I will excuse myself. You should rest here as long as you like," he said.

Oriana swallowed hard before pasting a smile on her face, one that looked

entirely unnatural. In fact, when he scrutinized more closely, he noticed her eyes were red.

She must have been crying here…all by herself.

Vincent wanted to help. He genuinely wanted to comfort her. The issue was that he didn't think he was the one she wanted to talk to right now.

He pulled himself off the sofa and made it a few steps toward the door. His hand came to rest on the knob, but he hesitated.

Vincent knew he was the one who had been obstinate and started the argument between them. In the aftermath, he also hadn't found a way to talk to her, and he'd started avoiding her, since he couldn't stand seeing her have fun without him. Even when he finally found the perfect reason to strike up conversation, he got pissed off hearing what their classmates were saying and stormed off. The blame for their situation was entirely on him.

No matter what he did now, Oriana probably wouldn't feel comfortable with it.

I realize that. I do, *but…*

He mustered all of the courage he possessed and spun around.

"Is there anything I can do?"

Most likely not. I already know that.

Still, he couldn't help asking.

I can tell by the atmosphere in the room that she wants me gone. That's fine. If she says as much, I'll excuse myself.

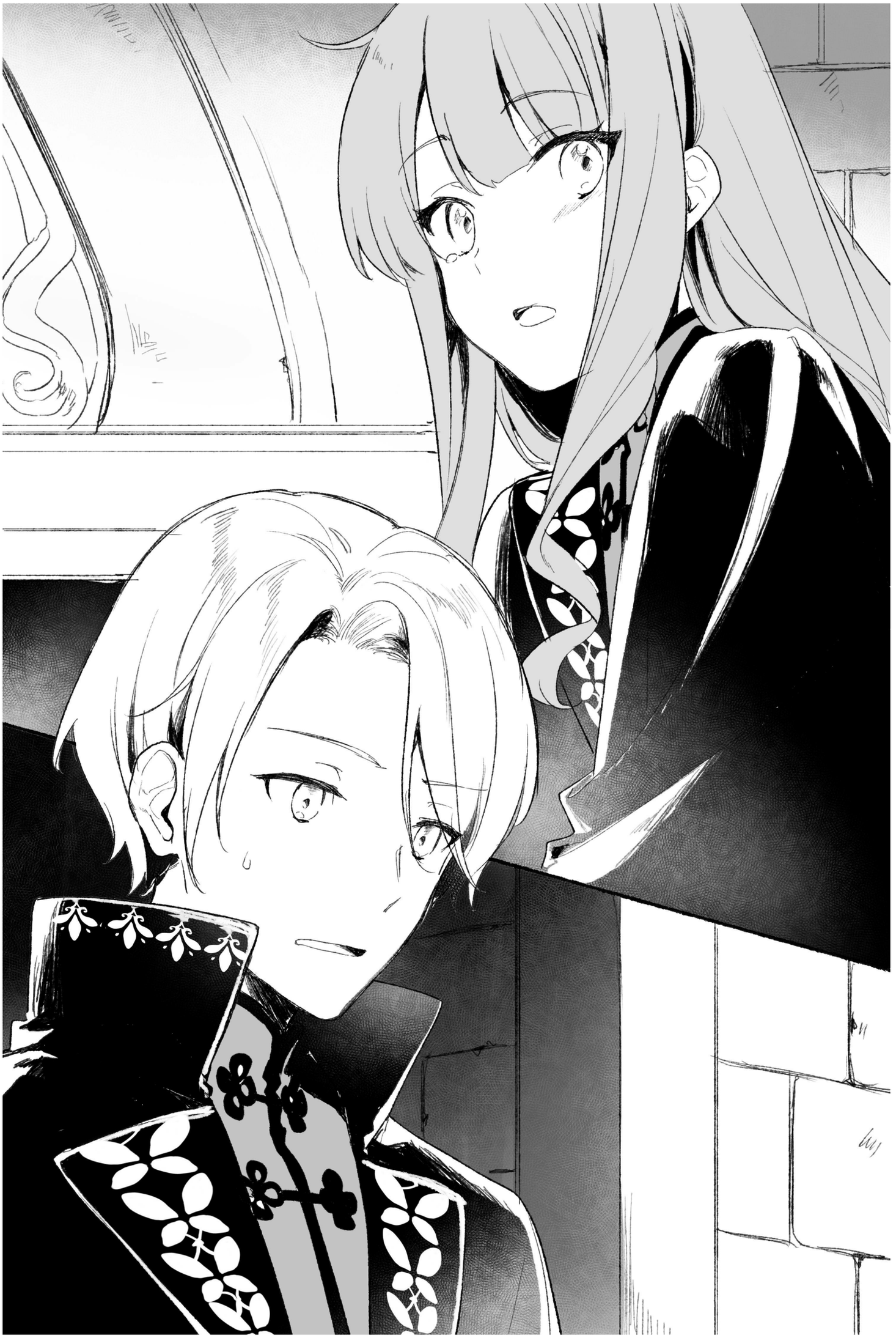
Oriana stared at him, face empty of all emotion, as if she was at a total loss herself. Her brows were furrowed and the corners of her eyes were red.

From the bottom of his heart, Vincent truly wanted to do something for her. He wanted to help her.

It's fine even if she turns me down cold. All I lose is a little dignity.

If there was something he could do for the girl in front of him trying desperately to hide her tears, Vincent would do so without complaint.

Oriana blinked at him several times, like she was having trouble processing that he had actually spoken to her.



After a pause, she asked, “Will you do me a favor?”

“Yeah.”

“Then…then in that case, don’t go.” Her voice strained, sounding more like a plea than a request.

Vincent’s heart trembled. If that was all she wanted, he was more than happy to oblige. He dropped his hand from the doorknob.

“All right. Where should I sit?”

“I guess…over there.” Oriana pointed to the armchair across from her. A table sat in the middle, separating them.

Vincent did as she requested and quietly sat down.

Oriana fidgeted awkwardly, as if she couldn’t quite believe he’d honored her wishes. Although she’d been standing since she noticed him on the sofa earlier, she finally sank back in her seat after an uncomfortable glance around the room.

Silence hung over them, but strangely enough, it was a pleasant one. This was the most relaxed Vincent had felt these past few days.

Moments ago, Vincent had been an ill-tempered mess, but now he felt miraculously whole.

He and Oriana were the only people here.

A thought suddenly struck him. Perhaps the reason he had pretended to sleep and waited each time hoping she would enter the lounge was because he wanted to show her he meant her no harm.

No, that’s silly. There’s no way that could be true. Oriana was the one causing all the harm. She would always cling to me and say suggestive things. That was why I came *here—to be alone.*

Vincent glanced at Oriana. She had her hands planted on either armrest as she stared down at her knees. The expression on her face was like a lost child, at a loss for what to do next.

The silence doesn’t bother me. But if it keeps up, she’ll probably feel awkward.

I want to say something to her, but I can't think of anything clever. I don't even know if it's all right to ask her why she was crying.

Suddenly, he was embarrassed. Vincent finally realized how difficult it was to show kindness to someone whose feelings he didn't want to hurt.

There's a mountain of questions I want to ask, like what she spoke to Miguel about, if she's really that close to Turkey, and if anything has been bothering her lately.

However, none of these seemed appropriate to bring up right now.

After going through the options in his head and dismissing one after another, Vincent finally licked his dry lips and nervously said, "In the herb field…"

"*Hngh?*" Oriana squeaked in surprise. Her whole body jumped, causing her armchair to shake.

In that instant, Vincent almost lost the heart to keep speaking, but he gathered the remnants of his courage and said, "Do you recall when we excavated the fields in herbology and found something?"

"Oh, yes. You were the one who found it."

She actually knew *it was me?*

Vincent wouldn't have thought much of it if she'd told him that before their fight. But now, he felt happy and proud.

"It wasn't part of a dragon," he said.

"Oh, so it wasn't."

"I was told it may be part of a unicorn's horn. The creature must have wandered here right as it was growing a new one."

Magical beasts, who rarely showed themselves to humans, loved the Dragon's Tree. They would occasionally approach it while being careful enough to go unnoticed. Once in a while, people would find hair or droppings near the tree.

"Oh wow, I wish I could have seen it," Oriana said.

"Not me."

Unicorns were holy beasts, both highly intelligent and very moody. They

almost never warmed up to men. They only allowed virgin girls to approach. If a man tried to touch them, they'd stab him with their horn.

"I can't let myself die yet."

Not until I make it past next spring so Oriana can have peace of mind, Vincent thought.

Oriana must have sensed something from his voice because she stared at him for a moment before peering down at her own hands. Her cheeks flushed.

The conversation ended abruptly. Vincent had intended for it to be a light topic, but now he regretted making such a careless remark. As he was racking his brain for other subjects, he heard a small hiccup.

He casually glanced over at Oriana, only to find tears pouring out of her sky blue eyes. They trickled past her cheeks, dripping from her chin. She had both hands clenched so tight the tips of her fingers were white. Her lips were pulled into a thin line as she tried to hold in a sob.

Vincent immediately leaped out of his chair but sat back down almost as quickly.

He had screwed up royally. It was time to surrender. He knew it was his own blunder that'd made her cry. Still, he couldn't think of what to say. What was a person supposed to say in this kind of situation anyway? "Don't worry because I'm not going to die"? Oriana was the last person who'd buy that. Even if everyone else in the world believed him, she wouldn't.

I actually believe *her story about jumping back in time,* he realized.

Vincent never intended to doubt it. Or more accurately, he had tried to believe it. The health exam was the first favor she had ever asked of him. Granted, if someone asked him if he really believed her from the bottom of his heart, he might not be able to nod his head.

"Why…" Oriana muttered through her tears.

Startled out of his reverie, Vincent stared at her.

"Why are you willing to believe me? Why are you *always* this kind?"

For the first time in his life, Vincent felt his entire body go cold. He leaned

back in his seat and closed his eyes, desperately trying to tamp down the raging emotions simmering inside of him.

Always? She says I'm "always" kind?

It had taken all his courage to sit across from her. He had battled with his own fears of her hating him in order to *finally* show some kindness. This was the one and only time he'd ever (and maybe *would* ever) worry about someone else to such a degree. Vincent had never been nice to Oriana before this, and yet…

"This 'kind person' you're referring to isn't me. You're talking about *Vince,* aren't you?"

Vincent had refrained from bringing that up, since he didn't want to pin the blame on her when she'd worked so hard by herself this entire time.

"The one you think is so kind is your lover from your past life."

The one you really "adore" is not me. I'm simply a standin for Vince.

Vincent continued, "The Vince you keep yearning for doesn't exist."

"Stop."

"He never existed in *this* world to begin with!"

"I said **stop!**" Oriana shrieked, voice shrill with grief. She hugged her knees to her chest and huddled into a ball. She looked like she was in so much pain.

Vincent gritted his teeth. He was the one who'd backed her into this corner, and yet he wanted to pull her close, stroke her head, and wrap her in a blanket of all the kindness he could muster. Alas, he could not. There was only one person she desired such things from and that was Vince.

I already knew *that, but it still hurts to be reminded.*

After holding it in for so long, he finally opened the floodgates and told her. Instead of feeling like a weight was lifted off his chest, he was instead crushed by regret.

I shouldn't have said anything.

Vincent never dreamed it would be this miserable. Part of it was how wretched he felt for hurting her, but another part was how wounded he felt at

not being the person she really loved.

I never thought I would fall for her like this.

Why did he have to realize his feelings for her *now*? It was heartrending. The one Oriana loved was Vince. He must have been a truly compassionate person. She must have been so disappointed when they met at the school entrance ceremony and he was cold toward her. Oriana had only stuck around Vincent because she had memories of Vince's kindness to encourage her.

He's the one she really loves, not me. I've been nothing but cold to her.

When he stopped to compare himself to Vince, all he could see were the awful parts of himself. Oriana must have had nothing but good memories with Vince. Vincent could take his whole life and never live up to that phantom.

I don't want to copy his behavior. The person standing in front Oriana right now is me*, not Vince.*

Vincent felt guilty for having hurt her, but his love for her made him want to comfort her. His jealousy toward Vince was mixed in as well. He could not even begin to guess how Vince might have called her name and reached out to her. Even assuming he could guess, Vincent had no intention of mimicking the other him. No matter how much she might long for Vince's kindness, Vincent was *never* going to give it to her.

After hugging her knees for a while, Oriana slowly fixed her posture.

"Is *that* why you said what you said before? Because you think I'm seeing Vince in you?" she asked.

After a pause, he answered, "Yeah."

Each time I say that word, I remember.

Oriana had said before that she liked the way he said "Yeah." At the time, his whole body seemed to tingle, overwhelmed with joy. It was a habit of his to say "Yeah" constantly during conversations. Perhaps Vince had done the same. Nonetheless, that was probably the first time Oriana ever looked at *him*—at Vincent.

"I'll admit, there were times when I unconsciously thought you and Vince

were different people. There's just…so much that separates you two."

"Judging by the way you're talking right now, I'm sure that's true."

There was a pouting tone to her voice, which flustered him.

"But…" Oriana continued, "I have feelings for you, too."

"Yeah, wonderful. Thank you so much. I am absolutely thrilled." Vincent turned his face away. He tried to sound as sarcastic as possible, masking his true feelings.

No man on this planet would be happy to hear that the girl he likes has feelings for him AND someone else too.

Vincent kept all of his cursing in his head, but he couldn't stop the emotions from showing on his face. He lifted an arm to try to hide himself from view.

Dammit.

All she had to do was mention liking him, and all of the frustrations he'd been building up inside vanished. It gave him hope, made him think maybe it was worth putting effort into this relationship. Perhaps there was a possibility that, in the future, she might come to love Vincent as his own person rather than a reflection of Vince.

"Vincent," Oriana said.

"What?"

"I'm sure it couldn't have been pleasant, feeling like you were a replacement for someone else. I'll be more careful in the future. So…" Her voice almost seemed to beckon, prompting him to turn his gaze her way. Her cheeks and lips were flushed a tempting shade of red. "Can we…make up?"

Oriana's trembling voice hit him right in the chest, and her big doe eyes were starting to well with tears again.

Now I finally understand why Vince worked up the courage to make her his girlfriend.

Considering they were still the same person at their core, Vince couldn't have messed with Oriana on a whim. It was much easier for a girl's reputation to be

sullied than a boy's, and there was no fixing it afterward. Vince must've been thinking of the long-term as well when he started dating Oriana.

Truthfully, he'd had a hard time believing he and Vince were the same person up until now because of that. Vincent had so much riding on his shoulders: his lands, the people living there, his parent's expectations, and his bloodline. He couldn't understand how Vince had compromised on all of those in order to date Oriana.

But Oriana must be my missing piece. She can fill the void inside me.

That was why Vince had made his decision.

People always want something from me, but she's the one and only thing I want for myself.

Vincent wanted so badly to wrap her in his arms, but he'd no right to do so. Wrinkles formed between his brows as he hung his head.

"I should've been the one to say that," said Vincent. "I apologize that you had to do it instead."

"Does that mean you're sorry?"

"I…suppose you could interpret it that way."

Hopeful, she asked, "So…we can go back to how things were then?"

"No, I don't want to go back to that."

Oriana's face contorted in surprise.

"As I told you before, I don't want you protecting me. I also don't want you involved in my possible death. And after thinking about it, I still don't want you to talk about having feelings for me."

Oriana pursed her lips, frowning now that she knew his demands were unchanged. "Then why did you even apologize?"

Saying sorry implied reflecting on one's bad behavior, which meant taking back what one had said. At least, that seemed to be how Oriana had interpreted it, based on the way she stared back at him questioningly.

However, Vincent refused to bend on this. He quickly turned his head away

and said, “I thought I should apologize because I didn’t clarify when you misunderstood me.”

“What misunderstanding?”

“I never told you not to come near me.”

His reply back then had been a small show of defiance. One that sadly spiraled out of control and landed them in this mess. That was why Vincent was being honest with her now, though he wasn’t exactly used to being so straightforward. He could feel his face heating up. It was hot enough to melt ice.

As the minutes trickled by, Oriana remained silent. Vincent finally turned his head, having grown suspicious.

Oriana was sitting stock-still, staring at him. Her cheeks were red and her eyes were welling with tears. She had such a sweet, soft smile on her face, as if all of the tension had left her body.

“Thank you, Vincent!”

Vincent sucked in a breath and immediately averted his eyes. There was no way he could look straight at her. He swallowed hard.

Dammit. I really, REALLY want to kiss her.

At some point, he’d started holding his breath, and when he realized it, he let out a discreet exhale. He took a few shallow gulps of air before turning his gaze back to Oriana. The moment his eyes landed on her, his racing heart stilled. Oriana was slumped over the armrest of her chair, leaning on it for support.

“What’s wrong?” Vincent asked.

“Not sure. Maybe it’s because I feel so relieved, but…my body’s so heavy.” There was a tremor in her voice.

Vincent jumped out of his chair and hurried over to her. “I’m going to check your temperature.”

She nodded, and he gently rested his hand against her forehead.

“You’re burning up. You have a fever, don’t you?”

“Oh, I didn’t realize,” she murmured. “I did think something had been kind of off since this morning.”

Her forehead was scalding and slick with sweat. Not only that, but her breaths were coming out in shallow, feverish gasps. Her hair was glued to the base of her neck, thanks to the sweat beading on her skin. The fever must have been the reason why her eyes were so misty and her cheeks and lips so red.

Vincent chased off his teenage, worldly desires as he asked Oriana, “Can you stand? Let’s go to the school infirmary.”

“I don’t think…I can right now. Let me rest for a bit, then I’ll go.” Her scratchy voice continued, “You can head back to your room.”

That pissed Vincent off. Did she *really* think he would leave someone in her current state behind and just head back to his dorm?

No, I can’t blame her. This is partly my fault for how I’ve treated her.

That said, there was no way he’d ever leave her behind like this.

Vincent knelt down beside her, peeling off his robe to drape over her skirt. “I’ll do my best not to touch you directly.”

“Huh?”

After wrapping his robe around her legs, Vincent slipped an arm under the bend of her legs and wrapped the other around her back, lifting her from the armchair.

“Huh…?!”

Oriana stared at him wide-eyed. Her face was pressed against his chest and her cheeks rapidly began to heat.

“Wh-Wh-what are you—”

“If you lounge about here, the infirmary will close for the day.”

“B-B-B-But still!”

Oriana thrust her hands against his chest. Vincent was thrown off balance, having not anticipated that she would struggle. Oriana took that opportunity to plant her feet on the ground, but her knees soon crumpled beneath her. If

Vincent hadn't panicked and reached out to grab her, she probably would've smacked her face on either the sofa or the coffee table.

"That was close," Vincent muttered. "What do you think you're doing?"

"Wh-What else did you expect?!"

"I expected you to stay still. You can't walk by yourself, can you?"

What nonsense was she spewing right now when she was always the one latching onto him? Exasperated, Vincent hauled her into his arms once more, draping the robe back over her legs. Oriana pressed her hands over her sweat-covered face.

"This can't be happening. I can't do this. I mean it. Oh, I have an idea! Miguel—get Miguel!" Oriana pleaded, her whole body trembling.

"What?" Vincent growled.

Oriana curled herself into a ball in his arms, as if completely ignoring the annoyance in his voice. "Put me down here. I'll wait. I promise, if you get Miguel to come here, I'll let *him* carry me to the infirmary."

Vincent's lips thinned.

"Please, I really can't do this. I mean it…!"

He silently started walking. Oriana must have realized they were moving because she started crying.

"I said I *can't!* I mean it! I can't do this!"

"Well, *I* can," he huffed.

What idiot would let another guy take care of the woman he has feelings for?

Vincent remained disgruntled as he stomped forward. He managed to keep his balance as he forced the door open and trudged out into the hallway.

"*Waah! Waah!* I don't wanna do this! I can't!" Oriana kept her face buried in his chest as she spoke.

A vein popped on Vincent's forehead. "It's hard to hold you like this. Put your arms around my neck."

“I can’t…I can’t…” Her continued protests made him freeze in place.

Vincent lifted a leg up, propping her against his knee, so he didn’t drop her as he grabbed one of her wrists. Her skin was scalding hot, but her arm was limp enough that he’d no trouble peeling her hand away from her face.

Vincent took one peek at her expression and gulped.

Oriana peered up at him, face too red for the fever to be the only cause. Her eyes were misty and her brows were furrowed. Those delectable lips beckoned him.

“I-I told you…I can’t do this.” The tears welled up again, spilling down her cheeks. “I-I haven’t fixed my makeup, and my foundation definitely looks awful. I’m sure the dark circles under my eyes are showing. A-And my hair desperately needs combing…”

“You always look adorable.”

“This can’t be happening! I always wanted to hear those words from you, but not like *this!* I know you’re just saying that to placate me. *Waah,* I hate this!”

“Don’t say that, please,” Vincent croaked out, still puzzled over how to console her. She looked so cute right now that all the irritation he felt before disappeared. “I understand. I will try my best not to look at your face, so wrap your arms around my neck. Okay?”

“*Ugggh*,” Oriana groaned as she obediently followed his instructions.

Vincent adjusted his grip on her, cradling her in his arms like one might a precious treasure, and slowly began walking again.

She buried her face in his neck, and her hot breath spilled over his skin. That, combined with the tickle of her hair, had his arms covered in goosebumps.

“*Waah! Waah!* Miguel…”

For the love of… He sighed internally. *Please, I’m begging you. Stop calling another man’s name…*

❦ ❦ ❦

AFTER tucking Oriana into one of the infirmary’s beds, Vincent plunked

himself in a nearby seat and watched her. Professor Cyrus, the school doctor, had left to make preparations for Oriana to spend the night there. Vincent was to keep watch until he returned.

Oriana had fallen asleep in Vincent's arms before they arrived at the infirmary. Professor Cyrus was surprised to see Vincent carrying the sleeping girl, but after checking her symptoms, he had a bed prepared for her. What she had was an ordinary cold. The doctor suggested it was the result of prolonged physical and mental exhaustion, which made Vincent's chest ache. He knew how much stress the discord between them must have caused her.

Despite being fast asleep, Oriana's breathing was erratic. Vincent diligently mopped the sweat dotting her brow with a damp cloth. When he was in the midst of wiping behind her ears, she suddenly seized his wrist. Vincent was so caught off guard, he almost yelped. His eyes wandered to her face. She was staring back at him, her cheeks rosy.

Oriana was still gasping for air, her brows knitted in painful concentration, and yet for some inexplicable reason, she was grinning like she was the happiest person in the world.

"Vince."

His lungs stopped working and his whole body froze.

"Vince…"

Oriana tried to sit upright. Vincent sprang into action, pushing her shoulders back down and pinning her to the bed. Her hair spilled across the pillow. Their awkward positioning—with him looming over her from above—only made it seem more sensual.

"I finally get to see you again. I've *missed* you…all this time…"

Oriana continued clutching his wrist, dragging his hand up toward her lips, as though she was trying to absorb every bit of him that she could.

Vincent's heart was a fractured mess. He didn't want to believe that their earlier conversation and shared vulnerability had been for nothing. Yet as much as Vincent prayed and pleaded for it, there would probably never come a day when Oriana wouldn't long for Vince. The reality of that was painfully clear.

Vincent let her do as she wished, unable to untangle the knot of emotions within him. He resigned himself and reached his hand toward her, shutting out his own emotions. Her hot breath crawled over his skin as her moist lips brushed over him, teeth scraping each time she talked. Vincent didn't want to savor any part of this experience; he was too busy trying to swallow back all the pain and heartbreak.

"Vince, I'm sorry," Oriana said suddenly. Her chest rose and fell in an erratic rhythm beneath the blanket. "I'm so sorry I couldn't save you." Her voice strained with emotion, trembling. The words themselves spilled out between thirsty gulps of air. "I should have…gotten to you faster… Vince…oh, Vince…"

He couldn't take it. Seeing her heartache made his chest pang as well.

I'm not *Vince*, he thought. And yet…

"Oriana."

It was the first time he'd ever called her by her first name, but much to his surprise, it felt so natural on his tongue.

"There's nothing to worry about. I'm right here."

"Vince…"

"That's right." Vincent clasped her hand in his, using his other hand to stroke her hair. He spoke to her as softly and sweetly as he could so as not to cause her any fear or anxiety. "It's okay. Shh… Close your eyes and go to sleep."

"Vince… Vince…"

"Yeah," he said, pausing once before repeating it again. "Yeah…"

He squeezed her hand.

This is what I should've told her before.

His own cowardice made him nauseous.

"It's not your fault I died," Vincent finally managed to say. He kept his touch as gentle as he could, stroking her hair and cheek. "You have no obligations to me. Even if you did jump back through time with your memories intact, you've no duty to do anything for anyone. You need only worry about your own

happiness. That's all I want for you, Oriana."

I'm the only one who can tell her this.

The tears continued streaming down Oriana's face as she slowly lifted her lips into a smile, closing her eyes. Vincent waited to see if they might open again, but they didn't. Her breathing was still erratic, but she must've fallen back asleep.

Vincent finally let out a breath. A long, heavy one.

He continued stroking her hair until Professor Cyrus returned, praying only that Oriana would have some peaceful sleep.



Chapter 8: The Best Birthday

“H-HIS reply came…”

Today, Oriana welcomed her seventeenth birthday. She was currently staying at the Elsha estate, located within the capital.

Gentle autumn sunlight streamed across the floor of her room. Oriana’s sky blue eyes lit up as she clasped the envelope with trembling fingers.

In accordance with Amanecer’s social customs, Lagen Magic Academy had a long three-month break from mid-autumn until the start of winter. This was the only opportunity for students, who came from far away to attend school, to return home and visit family.

Most traveled via a magically powered ship. Instead of sailing the high seas, this vessel chugged along tracks laid out across the country. It was known as the Enchanted Voyager, and its accommodations were separated into three levels: elite class, first class, and second class.

Thanks to being magically operated, the Enchanted Voyager made for a smooth, speedy ride. Since its viability didn’t hinge on weather, it was the country’s primary mode of transportation, used far and wide. Its path didn’t encompass every corner of the nation, but the tracks were laid out in such a way that it stopped by all major towns. Naturally, there was a station in the Amethyst Dragon Region, where Vincent lived.

The letter Oriana had received must’ve ridden the Enchanted Voyager all the way from Vincent’s homeland to the capital.

“Oriana, do you have a moment? Oh, is that a letter?” Yana asked as she stepped inside the room.

Even on the Enchanted Voyager, a roundtrip would take a substantial amount of time for an exchange student like Yana, so she didn’t return to her homeland, even during these long breaks. For the last couple of years, she’d been spending

her holidays in a hotel, but this year, Oriana had invited Yana to her family's estate since it'd be their last break before graduation. Thus, she and Azraq were both staying with Oriana.

"*Ehe… Ehehehe*," Oriana giggled, unable to restrain herself.

"Oh ho ho," Yana snickered. "I see Mister Tanzine's reply finally arrived."

Oriana grinned and nodded.

Yes, Oriana had spent her break diligently writing letter after letter to Vincent, and his response had finally come—today of all days! What a wonderful birthday this was turning out to be! Oriana was already happy enough with the well wishes from Yana and her family—as well as the mountain of gifts they'd given her—but this letter was by far the best present of all.

Oriana never expected Vincent to reply. She'd grown accustomed to the silence, having repeated this same cycle the past four years. Plus, there was never anything particularly important in the letters she sent him.

Most of all, she was shocked at who had delivered his reply.

"Miguel delivered it personally," boasted Oriana.

"Mister Ferveira? How lovely! Well, you should take your time reading it then. I'll go keep him company in the meantime."

Indeed, Miguel Ferveira *had* hand delivered Vincent's letter to her. His family reigned over the Hydrangea Earldom, whose lands were adjacent to the Amethyst Dragon Region. Since the two were childhood friends, it made sense they'd communicate frequently, even during break. Oriana had no idea whether an errand had brought him here or he was simply bored of the countryside. Either way, Miguel had returned to the capital first, bringing Vincent's response along with him.

"Thank you! Oh, *bless* you, Yana! I adore you!"

"Haha! And I you." Yana left the room, a bounce in her step.

It *was* poor manners to abandon one's guest and retreat to one's private room, but the only reason Oriana had done so was because Miguel had graciously urged her to go and read the letter. She'd protested at first, although

her feet had a mind of their own as they brought her to the door. Miguel had waved her off, and once convinced it was all right, Oriana had dashed upstairs.

Oriana used a letter opener to break the seal. There was a dry, crinkling sound as she pried it open.

Miguel must've brought it all the way to the Elsha estate so she could read it for herself before anyone else glimpsed the contents. Normally, if one sent something through the post, it wound up in the butler's hands, since he managed all incoming mail. It was an important part of his job to confirm the contents of any correspondence. Oriana took no issue with that. However, as a girl in love, she wanted to be the first to read Vincent's letter.

Things had been going pretty well since the incident in the lounge, at least as far as Oriana knew. Granted, the last things she could remember were Vincent carrying her to the infirmary and feeling so embarrassed, she'd wanted to dig a hole and burrow into it.

Things hadn't entirely gone back to the way they'd been before, but their reconciliation had given birth to a new relationship between them. Vincent had begun calling her Oriana and treating her like a friend. With that, she was over the moon.

Vincent had stopped treating her coldly, and she'd taken his requests to heart. There were still times when she'd look at him and remember Vince, but she was comparing the two less and less. Now that they were friends, Oriana felt more comfortable acknowledging Vincent *as* Vincent.

They were getting along well. Vincent showed her respect, and since the two had already discussed their feelings, they'd stopped walking on eggshells around each other. This was especially true in Oriana's case; she no longer spent all day and night keeping watch, trying to protect him.

The sense of urgency that'd weighed on her so heavily finally felt so much lighter. Maybe that was because she'd shared the burden of her knowledge with Vincent. Instead of navigating the darkness blindly by herself, Oriana now had him walking beside her, holding her hand. Just that was enough to put her at ease.

Filled with a sense of satisfaction, Oriana pulled out the letter.

Dear Oriana,

Are you faring well? Thank you for your lively letters. I am sure you must be enjoying yourself, completely oblivious to the fact that you caused such a fuss here at home for me by sending letters every single day.

"Yep, I sure *am* enjoying myself!"

Apparently, her unending stream of letters had forced his hand to where he'd no choice but to write to her. Oriana had no idea what fuss it must've caused, but surely *someone* must've scolded him for not responding after seeing how frequently she wrote him.

Ah, what a good feeling!

Oriana smiled to herself and continued reading.

Thanks to you, now the entire region is interested in my reply. I suspect the contents of my correspondence would be exposed to the entire country if I were to send it through the post as one normally does. Since Miguel is headed to the capital anyway, I have entrusted it with him. I trust, for your benefit, he won't try to open it and read it for himself.

Oriana paused to recall how she'd left Miguel behind in their parlor, sipping a soft drink. She spun around, facing the direction he was in, and put her hands together in silent thanks.

I will leave my grievances with you at that for now.

I confess that the reason I didn't write to you sooner was simply because I did not know what to write. My days aren't filled with entertaining anecdotes like yours, and I don't anticipate you want something formal and obligatory. In fact, I didn't even know if you wanted a response at all.

Vincent may have had a point about it being difficult to reply to the letters she'd sent to him. From what she could remember, some of the topics she'd covered included: making juice, getting some textile she'd been wanting for a cheap price, the type of noodles she'd eaten that day, how a five-year-old local boy had professed his love for Yana, how Azraq had witnessed the scene and then tried to duel the boy, that she'd gotten better at painting her nails, and how her father's pearl aquafarming business was gaining momentum.

But even she didn't always have something interesting to write every day. Nonetheless, she was overjoyed at how genuine he was being in his reply.

On another note, I've been receiving doctor's exams as I promised, to give you peace of mind. So please don't worry.

I plan to return to the capital three days before the opening ceremony.

I will see you again at school.

***P.S.** I had a muffin with lemon on top for breakfast this morning.*

Oriana was thrilled that he was finally opening up to her about how he felt, although the conditions he'd given did sometimes bring her anguish.

"*Aah,* I do *so* adore you!"

Not being able to tell him as much directly had been difficult.

A muffin? she thought. *That's so* cute! *He's* killing *me! He actually went out of his way to write such a cute comment at the end of his letter? And even mention it had lemon on it? He must have* really *liked the lemon I put in his pasta before. Ahhh, cuteness overload!*

Her eyes swept over the postscript again.

P.S. - I had a muffin for breakfast this morning, with a slice of lemon on top of it.

"*Gaaaah!* Too adorable! You're the best, Vincent!"

Oriana squirmed in place, clutching the letter.

❦ ❦ ❦

"MIGUEL! Thank you so much! And again, welcome to my home!"

As a consequence of her reconciliation with Vincent, Oriana had also resumed her friendship with Miguel as well.

She skipped down to the guest room as soon as she finished reading her letter. Since this was her family's home, she made no attempt to suppress her joy. The staff were already accustomed to how energetic she was.

"I said as much earlier, but it's good to see you in such high spirits." Miguel

stood to greet her as she waltzed in, his attire perfectly suited to the friendly nature of his visit.

Oriana pinched the edge of her skirt in a curtsy, and in turn, Miguel put a hand on his chest.

“Yeah, I’m feeling great! Every day’s been a blast with Yana and Azraq here! Go on, have a seat!”

Miguel grinned as he plopped himself down on her sofa. He didn’t have a lollipop stick protruding from his mouth today.

“So, Azraq is here too,” he remarked.

“He *has* to be, since Yana’s here. I think he’s probably out in the stables right now, isn’t he?”

“That’s correct,” said Yana. “He has been learning your methods for rearing horses. Azraq enjoys being around them. In Ete Karima, he rode constantly.”

Oriana took her seat beside Yana, who’d entertained Miguel in her absence. A servant brought an extra cup of tea for her.

“So what brings you here, Miguel?” asked Oriana.

“My dad sent me on an errand. Going all the way back home again seemed silly, so I decided to stay in the capital. Anyhow, I was surprised by how new and enormous your place is. I mean, my family’s place is pretty huge, but we’ve been using it for centuries, so it’s ancient.”

The wealthier a family was, the more weight they placed on old customs. One of the most famous examples was how the opening of the Enchanted Voyager had been delayed because aristocrats with ancient bloodlines had stubbornly opposed it.

The Elsha family was what most people called new money. However, her father didn’t feel inferior simply because of his profession as a merchant. Whether the nobles reviled him for his greed didn’t concern him; he had builders employ the most cutting-edge architecture when erecting their lavish mansion.

“*Ehehe*,” Oriana giggled. “My daddy works hard. If you’d like, I’d be happy to

let you meet him. I'm sure he'd be delighted too."

"Oh! Certainly, I'd welcome the opportunity. Will you introduce me as your future husband?"

Oriana clapped her hands. "Now *there's* an idea! We can put a blond wig on you, and you can tell him you're Vincent Tanzine! *That* should speed our union along. What do you think?"

"I think your plan is full of holes…!"

The three enjoyed some tea and sweets as they continued their cheerful banter, but after a short while, Miguel began staring at Oriana.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Actually, Ori, I didn't just come here to deliver Vincent's letter."

"You said your father sent you on an errand, right?"

"That's why I returned to the capital. It's *not* why I came to your house." Miguel continued staring straight at her.

Oriana peered back at him. Miguel was no less handsome than Vincent; his looks were good enough that the Royal Theater Company could easily make him their leading man. His gaze was so heated that it was starting to unnerve her.

"Um…then what could you have possibly come here for?"

"Oriana, I have an embarrassing confession to make. Would you mind listening?"

She jumped. Beside her, Yana's eyes were gleaming.

"*Uh…um…*sure," Oriana finally managed to eke out.

Miguel kept a solemn expression, eyes still fixed on her.

Um, what's up with his face? D-Don't tell me by 'confession' he means… No, no, no! No way! *I've* never *sensed anything like that from him before. What's going on here?! And Yana's right here! We're in the middle of the parlor! No, don't tell me… He can't be…*

Sweat poured down her forehead. On the off chance that he really was about

to profess his love, she'd lose a precious friend.

"I…" he began.

Crap, what do I do?! If he's about to say what I think he is, I'd rather leave my seat. I know it's disingenuous, but I just want to stay friends!

"To tell the truth…"

"Miguel," she interrupted, "*um…*"

"I brought them. Pajamas, I mean."

Oriana jerked her head up. The moment she saw him grinning from ear to ear, she realized she'd been had. She clenched her fists.

You jerk! *I knew you worded it purposefully, so I would misunderstand! That's the only explanation!*

Although Oriana wanted to smack him over the head for his mischief, she restrained herself. She prided herself on her kindness, after all.

"*Hm?* Pajamas?" Oriana tilted her head, still incensed at his little game.

Miguel mimicked her, cocking his head as well.

Damn him, he's too cute!

Seeing how adorable he was triggered a memory of something he'd said to her before.

"Well, at least you know who you should invite to your girls' party next time, should you want to have one."

"Oh!" Oriana exclaimed. "Miguel!"

When she had that blowout with Vincent before, Miguel had gone out of his way to seek her out—to assure her he'd have her back. All the emotions she felt back then welled up again and she began trembling.

Miguel grinned shyly. "I didn't get an invitation, but I came anyway."

"Don't forget, Miguel. While we're on break, I'm just a merchant's daughter, while you're the eldest son of the esteemed Earl Hydrangea. I can hardly send you an invitation to a girls' party, when your status is leagues above my own."

Although there was no hierarchy at the Lagen Magic Academy, the same wasn't true once they left for break. Oriana would need to climb a whole Dragon Tree (metaphorically speaking) to be on the proper footing to send such a personal request to the heir of an earldom.

"I'm happy you came, though," she added. "What do you like to drink? Champagne? Wine? I'm happy to offer whatever you wish—even brandy from my daddy's private collection." Oriana grinned.

Thus began the Elsha estate's first pajama party.

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A carpet was laid out in the garden and numerous sheets were hung from a tree around it. The ground was covered in flower petals and the burbling of water could be heard from the nearby fountain.

The servants hauled a long sofa out from the mansion, as well as a table with an overflowing assortment of desserts and snacks. A mixture of sweet and spicy scents filled the air: the former from the vibrant fruit cocktails and the latter from some foreign incense. Magic lamps were strung about the tree branches and partitioning screens, giving the area a subtle glow.

Oriana had made a casual request to her father about having a pajama party, but the affair turned into something much more lavish than she'd intended. It was hardly a surprise, though. Her attendees included the heir of an earldom and the princess of a neighboring country. If they were going to call this a party and it had the Elsha name attached, it needed a fitting degree of extravagance.

Still, it was a *pajama* party, which meant it would be odd to hold it in the same venue as one would a banquet or ball. Yana suggested they have it in the garden at sitting tables, similar to how they did back in Ete Karima.

Both Miguel and Yana seemed pleased with how everything had turned out.

After placing down some cushions she'd collected from the house, Oriana—now pajama-clad—plopped down on the carpet that'd been laid over the ground.

"Happy birthday, Oriana!"

“Yes, happy birthday!”

“Thanks! I never got to see anyone from school before on our breaks, so I was happy enough being able to visit with you both. But I’m even happier I get to celebrate my birthday with you like this!”

They clinked their cocktail-filled glasses together before drinking.

“You look adorable in those pajamas,” said Yana.

“I brought out my newest ones for this occasion!” Oriana flashed a grin at her friend as she stood up, spinning in a circle to show off her nightwear.

The fabric was baggy on her, making it hang from her body. The older, more conservative generation would probably raise their brows at the design, but for a seventeen-year-old girl, nothing was more important than being cute. She wore a white nightgown with a blue collar.

Yana was clad in an elegant maxi dress-type gown, which suited her slender, toned body. She was wearing a thick cardigan over it—something Azraq had forced on her—but it only accentuated her subtle charm.

“You both look really good in your pajamas, too,” Oriana told her friends.

Miguel was fiddling with his hair, which Oriana had already braided for him. His pajamas had an androgynous design that didn’t quite seem like ordinary men’s nightclothes. Knowing Miguel, he’d probably chosen them out of consideration for her.

“Hey, Miguel,” said Oriana. “You’re tall, attractive, considerate, *and* an earl’s son. How come we’ve never heard of you dating anyone?”

Given his age, it was almost unnatural how there were no signs of him being romantically involved or even interested in anyone. Even when there were rumors, it was little more than exaggerated gossip. Oriana had thought he already had a fiancée, but apparently, that wasn’t the case.

“Is it because you and Vincent are always attached at the hip?” Oriana guessed.

Yana put a hand to her mouth. “Oh dear! Miguel, are you going to be our poor little Oriana’s arch-rival?”

If *that* was the case, Oriana wasn't confident she could beat him.

As she deflated, Miguel laughed. "I'm rooting for you, Oriana."

Oriana lifted her glass to her lips. She got the sense Miguel was evading the question, but maybe he didn't *want* to discuss his own love life. For the sake of their friendship, she decided to change the topic.

She swirled the cocktail in her glass around as she said, "It's too bad Azraq wouldn't join us for our pajama party—or PP for short, as I'm going to call it." The drink's sweet scent tickled her nose as she took a drink, the fruity alcohol pouring down her throat. "His hair would've been perfect for braiding."

"Come now," said Yana, "it would be cruel to expect Azraq to be as affable as Mister Ferveira."

Oriana glanced at the bodyguard in question, who'd excused himself the moment he'd heard they were having a girls' party. He was standing a short distance away with the other servants, keeping watch.

So he refuses to participate himself, but he won't stop Yana from joining us, Oriana mused.

Azraq wasn't affable, admittedly, but he was accommodating. He wasn't like your stereotypical hardheaded bodyguard. It was also clear how much he cared for Yana.

"Since we're all at this party together, I'd prefer if you called me Miguel."

"Thank you, Miguel. You may call me Yana then, if you like. We should get along swimmingly, since the two of us get to be Oriana's first."

"Yana," Oriana scolded. "Watch the way you word things! You make it sound… inappropriate." She blushed.

Yana was referring to being the first party guests Oriana had ever hosted, but the implication seemed almost sexual.

The princess snickered, playing it off.

Oriana reached toward the bowl of nuts. They were lightly roasted, making them fragrant and delicious. "By the way, Miguel," she said. "You're not going to challenge Azraq to a duel?"

She brought it up since she suddenly remembered how popular Yana's trial was among the male students. Yana generally bore witness to all of the duels. Although no real swords were used for these matches, that didn't make them any less violent. If Azraq ever suffered a wound, Yana would accompany him to the infirmary no matter how minor.

"Challenge him for Yana's hand, you mean?" Miguel asked. "I'm more the type that prefers for the cute girl to approach me for *my* hand, rather than the other way around."

"Oh?" Yana turned toward him. "Then you *won't* challenge Azraq for me? What a pity…"

"Princess, if *that's* your desire, I'd be more than happy to oblige you whenever." Miguel lifted his glass, and Yana laughed, clinking hers against it. The sound echoed through the dimly lit garden.

"In that case, allow me to give you a special tip on defeating my knight: Azraq's weak in the mornings. If you aim to challenge him, you'll want to do it early in the day."

So Azraq wasn't a morning person? Oriana recalled one early morning when she ran to him for help. Wracked with guilt, she turned her apologetic gaze toward Azraq. He was standing upright, poker-faced and staring straight back at them.

"Yet you *still* believe he can win even if you divulge his weakness. Now *that's* love," Miguel said, voice barely above a whisper so Azraq couldn't hear.

Oriana glanced at the princess. Yana was wearing the softest, gentlest smile Oriana had ever seen. The lamps around them bathed her in a soft glow.

"Yes," said Yana. The effects of the liquor filtered through, infusing her voice with a sweetness, but there was also a tinge of agony as well.

Oriana knocked her drink back, downing her cocktail as she pretended not to notice the feelings Yana wanted to keep hidden.

❦ ❦ ❦

"MY lady, there is a guest at the front entrance for you," the butler said

anxiously.

Despite the late hour, Oriana was still in the garden nursing her drink.

“A guest? At *this* time of night? For me?”

“I tried to gently turn him away before offering to let him wait in the parlor, but he declined, stating he wouldn’t stay long.”

“All right. I’ll go see him now then.” Oriana lifted herself from the sofa, the alcohol making her legs unsteady as she walked.

Yana stretched a hand out after her, concerned. “Are you sure you can make it by yourself?”

“Yep. Sorry, but I’ll have to excuse myself. I’ll be back in a few.”

“Take your time,” said Miguel.

“Aww, don’t tell me you guys plan to do fun stuff without me?” Oriana left them with that comment, laughing as she followed the butler into the house.

❦ ❦ ❦

“NO wayyyyy?!” Oriana let out an earsplitting screech as they were halfway to the front door.

Shocked, the butler froze in place. He spun around to face her, but Oriana was already long gone—having leaped as swiftly as a rabbit, jetting right past him and straight toward the door.

“Vincent?!”

“Oriana, what *are* you wear—”

“What *is* this?! Why are *you* here?! Oh, this is so great! Woohoo! I can’t believe it!!!”

Vincent caught Oriana in his arms as she flew at him. Flustered, he patted her on the back before grabbing her by the shoulders and peeling her off. Oriana tried to cling to him again, but he forced her back. Although they’d become friends, she was still generally barred from excessive physical contact, but he would occasionally allow her to latch onto him. Today, however, was apparently not one of those days. He wore a stern look on his face and his arms stubbornly

kept her at bay, refusing to bend.

Oriana clicked her tongue and backed down. Vincent's shoulders sagged with relief. He pulled off his jacket and draped it over her shoulders, as if to cover up her pajamas. Oriana had entirely forgotten *what* she was wearing up until that point. She pulled the jacket open to show off her clothes.

"Take a look! Pretty cute, right? It's brand new!"

"Yes…very cute," he said, turning his head away and closing his eyes.

Oriana pressed closer. "You're not even *looking*, are you? Come on, turn your eyes toward me!"

"I already *saw* enough. You're adorable. Now…*please* close the jacket." He chanced a glance through half-hooded eyes before closing them again.

Left with no other choice, Oriana obeyed. Although she *was* wearing pajamas, they weren't particularly revealing. It was no different than loungewear.

Darn him! He never *gets to see me in my nightclothes, so I was hoping this'd be my chance to show off to him.*

Oriana's reluctance shone through on her face. Once she'd firmly shut the jacket, Vincent flashed her a troubled smile.

"Sorry for coming without warning so late. I heard Miguel was still here…"

"You're more than welcome whenever," said Oriana. "Did you need Miguel for something? Should I go get him for you?"

"That fool! So, he really *is* still here… My apologies. I'll drag him home with me immediately."

Then he really must *have some kind of business with Miguel,* she guessed.

Oriana turned to the butler waiting behind her, shooting him a look. He quickly excused himself and headed toward the garden.

"Let's wait in the parlor until Miguel comes. Would you prefer something warm to drink or something cold?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, I'll be out of your hair momentarily."

"Are you in a hurry?"

“It *is* late, after all.”

“That’s fine with me.” Oriana shrugged.

“Well, it shouldn’t be.”

Vincent didn’t seem willing to bend on the matter. Oriana took a seat on a nearby bench and patted the spot beside her. Resigned, Vincent plopped down.

“Hey, so when did you eat that lemon muffin?” Oriana asked, kicking her feet back and forth. Until Miguel came, it was just the two of them.

Vincent’s eyes widened. The bench wasn’t very wide, so there wasn’t much space separating the two. When he turned his head toward her, their shoulders brushed.

“You already read my letter?”

“Of course. I was overjoyed to get a response. Thank you for that, by the way.”

Vincent was caught off-guard; apparently, he hadn’t expected her to read it so quickly.

“Yesterday,” he answered haltingly. “I, uh…ate it yesterday.”

“Really? Then your trip here to the capital must’ve been pretty sudden.”

“I suppose.” Vincent screwed up his face and grunted.

According to the letter he’d written to her just yesterday, he’d originally planned to stay in his region for two more weeks.

“Did something come up? Something you need Miguel for?”

“You could say that.”

“There you go, giving me vague answers again.” Oriana sighed, puckering her lips in a pout.

Vincent recoiled, flustered by her reaction.

Before their conversation could continue any further, the butler reappeared with Miguel.

“Hiya, Vincent.”

“Miguel! What are *you* doing in nightclothes too?!” Vincent jumped to his feet, holding his head in his hands as Miguel confidently strode up in his pajamas.

“You got here faster than I thought! I didn’t figure you’d make it today.”

“I squeezed myself onto the Enchanted Voyager as it was making its last trip for the night.”

“Aww, there’s no fire! You didn’t have to rush.”

“You’re the one who sent me a letter saying you’d be staying at the Elsha residence! I figured you were here stirring trouble…”

Apparently, that was the reason for his hasty visit.

That’s it? *He came all the way from his region just for* that?

Oriana gaped at the two boys. True, she’d kept Miguel here so he could stay the night. In high society, regular balls and evening parties were the norm. It wasn’t unheard of for someone to stay the night at someone else’s estate. Even during the off-season, people would often stay with friends for a month or two at a time.

That said, staying for a prolonged period with a friend of the opposite gender who’d yet to be married wasn’t a good look. Since Miguel had only barely made it back to the capital, Oriana suspected people wouldn’t pay his stay with them much mind if it was only for a day.

“Miguel, we’re leaving,” Vincent spoke in a low growl that she’d never heard from him before.

“Aw, no way! I already got permission to stay.”

“I *said* we’re leaving.”

“C’mon!”

Vincent fixed him with a silent glare.

“*Tch.*” Miguel pulled a face, spinning around to face Oriana. “Guess I’ll see ya around at school then. Say bye to Yana and Azraq for me.”

“Uh, okay. Sorry I wasn’t able to entertain you properly…” Oriana was still in a

daze, unable to digest the situation.

Miguel let out a strangled laugh as he stepped closer, leaning his face toward hers. His breath smelled faintly of alcohol as he whispered, “Happy birthday.”

Oriana blinked several times. It wasn’t until she registered the implication of his words that joy bubbled up from her chest, giving her goosebumps. “Oh, Miguel! You’re the greatest!”

“I know.”

She offered him the most affectionate smile she could.

He’s given me the greatest birthday gift ever!

Miguel’s present for her was luring Vincent there. Thanks to him, it was turning out to be a wonderful birthday!

Oriana had no way of guessing what must’ve been written in his letter that was so troubling, it’d convinced Vincent to come all this way. But there was no denying Miguel’s clever ploy had been successful.

Miguel whistled merrily to himself as he slipped out of the mansion. He was probably making his way to Vincent’s carriage, which was parked at the end of Elsha’s porch.

“I should be off too,” Vincent said curtly. Her secretive exchange with Miguel had clearly put him in a bad mood.

“Wait, Vincent! At least let me see you off at your carriage,” Oriana blurted out.

I don’t want to part with him yet.

There were only a few dozen steps to the end of the porch. That didn’t buy her much extra time, but she wanted to be with him as long as she could. Oriana had called after him without thinking, but she knew he’d probably rebuff her.

To her surprise, he nodded. “All right, if you’d like.”

“Yes, I would!”

I never realized how much closer people get after they have a fight and

reconcile their differences. So this *is the power of friendship!*

It was only now that Oriana understood the difference; he'd never have permitted her to accompany him like this back when she stuck to him like glue without considering his feelings.

The butler brought Oriana a cardigan, which she traded for Vincent's coat, handing it back to him before they started out the door. Vincent followed a step behind her.

Outside, the frigid winter wind caressed her cheeks. Oriana was close to tears; a wave of happiness washed over her, spreading warmth through her chest.

Oriana was walking uncomfortably slow, but Vincent didn't attempt to hurry her along. He matched her pace, falling in step beside her.

Vincent peered down at her, brows drawn in confusion as he asked, "What in the *world* were you doing in those clothes?"

"Engaging in debauchery."

"D-Debauch…?!"

"I'm only kidding! We were having a feast in the garden, following the traditions of Yana's home country. Since it was also a pajama party, we were all in our nightwear."

Vincent was your stereotypical aristocrat. That wasn't a bad thing, of course, but he abhorred the violation of their cultural norms. Hearing of their party surely wouldn't please him.

As Oriana predicted, he was scowling. He opened his mouth to say something but quickly shut it again. Then he turned his gaze to her face, noticing the blush on her cheeks.

"Were you drinking?"

"Only a little," she admitted. "Us girls were only allowed to drink what my daddy permitted."

"Are you being honest with me?" Vincent asked, despite the answer being obvious. At seventeen, children didn't always follow whatever their parents told them. He knew *that* from personal experience.

“This stays between the two of us, but I actually had a teensy bit of the stuff he gave Miguel.” Oriana grinned at him conspiratorially.

“Despite not having a child, thanks to you, I now understand the anguish fathers all over the country feel.” Vincent smiled wryly. “I am sure he’d a good reason for keeping that liquor out of your hands.”

“Oh, *please!* Miguel was the only boy here, and besides, we had dozens of servants all around us.”

“If you’re with any man *other* than me, there’s no guarantee you will be completely safe.”

Vincent had a strange way of wording himself. That almost sounded like something a father would say.

“Fine,” Oriana conceded. “Then I’ll invite you next time.”

“Please do.” She expected him to give a snort of laughter at her offer, but he simply nodded.

Oriana stared back at him, wide-eyed. He was frowning, as if the only reason he’d agreed to her offer was because he had no other choice. It was the bitter expression you’d expect to see on a teenager’s face, but not Vincent’s. Oriana was at a loss for words.

“Uh…then no joke. I really *will* invite you, okay?”

“So be it.”

“So be it as in ‘Go ahead’ or as in ‘Don’t bother’?”

“Enough of your inane questions. I’m leaving.” Vincent had kept her piddly pace up until now, but he suddenly sped forward with long strides.

“Wait! Wait, hold up! That means I can go ahead and invite you, right? Thank you, Vincent! It’s a promise!” Oriana gave chase, grabbing his arm and using both her feet to slow him to a screeching halt.

Vincent glanced back at her with a soft chuckle. “Fine.”

“*Agh*, you’re gonna kill me!”

Crap. I almost blurted out my adoration for him. Do I really *like him that*

much? …Okay, yes, I totally do!

Oriana was prohibited from using the words ‘adore’ or ‘like’ around him, but at the same time, she couldn’t hide her feelings. Her hands twitched, her face contorted, and her body jerked. She was like a monster writhing in its death throes.

Vincent gave her an exasperated look. “So *this* has been the real you all along.”

“‘Real?’ What’s real?”

“I always thought you were exaggerating your affection so you could stick beside me.”

“You thought I was *forcing* myself to profess my adoration? That’d be quite the hurdle. It’s not a word to be used lightly.”

“Yes, you have a point.”

Judging by his expression, it didn’t matter whether she was forcing herself to say it or not; he still didn’t want to hear it. Although now that she thought about it, the adoration she felt for him wasn’t the same as it’d once been. Previously, she thought her feelings for Vincent were a given since she had memories of loving Vince in the past. It was different now. She found his every word and action endearing.

Well, whatever the case, the fact is that I like him and I still can’t tell him that.

If she wanted to continue being at his side, she had to maintain the boundaries he’d set for them as friends. The overwhelming joy she’d experienced a moment ago seemed to dry up in an instant.

There were only a few more steps until they made it to his carriage.

That’s it. Only another minute or two before we have to part.

Once he went on his way, they likely wouldn’t see each other again for a while. Oriana had never longed for the school’s opening ceremony this much before.

The driver cracked the door open for Vincent, and he took that as his cue to bid her farewell.

“I appreciate you accompanying me this far. It’s chilly outside, so please return to the—”

“Vincent!” Terrified at their impending separation, she blurted out his name to stop him. He’d already faced the carriage, but the urgency in her voice prompted him to slowly turn back toward her.

“*Hm?*” His voice was so gentle. It was probably the first time he’d spoken this softly to her.

Oriana’s eyes grew misty. Vincent was actually waiting for her to speak. She’d never realized before how precious, how valuable, and how tender these few seconds were as he focused all of his attention on her.

Desperate to swallow back the tears, Oriana forced herself to smile. “Um, actually…today’s my birthday.”

“It *is?*” Vincent looked genuinely surprised. He turned his gaze back to the carriage and Miguel, already seated inside, waved at them. Vincent frowned bitterly. “Now I see. It seems I owe Miguel my gratitude then. Happy birthday, Oriana.”

“Thank you. I’m glad I was able to see you today.”

“Me as well.”

“So, um… Could I have my birthday gift?” Oriana blurted the words out as a last-ditch effort to prolong their time together.

Vincent’s face sank with guilt. “I’m sorry. I didn’t bring anything with me when I came. I promise I will have something prepared for you in the next few days.”

“No. I don’t want that! It *has* to be today!”

He blinked at her, troubled. “Is there something specific you desire?”

His expression was so precious, it made her heart hurt. That by itself made it worth using her birthday as an excuse to keep him a little longer. As she stared at his furrowed brows, an idea suddenly struck her.

That’s right. There is *something I want!*

“Yeah!”

“What is it?” Vincent asked.

“Just for today, let me tell you that I adore you!” Oriana kept her voice as light and energetic as possible, feigning inebriation as she grinned up at him. She knew Vincent was a deeply loyal friend. Her victory was assured.

As she anticipated, he scowled, lips thinning into a frown. “You certainly know how to hit me where I’m weakest.”

“*Ehehe!*”

“I’m *not* complimenting you.”

“*Ehehe!*”

Despite his reluctance, Vincent didn’t refuse her.

Oriana stared down at her feet to hide the expression on her face as she grabbed his coat, squeezing the fabric between her fingers. If she leaned her head forward a bit more, she could bury her face in his chest. Sadly, that’d be a clear violation of the friendship boundaries.

“Vincent?”

“Yeah?”

“I adore you more than anything!”



“…Yeah.”

She infused as much emotion as she could into her voice. His acceptance of her affection was so moving. Her joy overflowed, bringing her to tears.

“Happy birthday,” Vincent muttered absently as he stroked her head. His touch was careful and delicate, as if he was weighing how much physical contact was appropriate between friends.

To make it easier on him, she bowed her head forward. Her whole body was trembling. Euphoria swept over her, running from the tips of her fingers all the way to her brain.

“*He he ehe…*”

Oriana laughed, if only to distract from the love she felt that threatened to spill out at any moment.

Oriana watched from the safety of the porch as the carriage pulled away. She waved after it.

This was the best birthday she’d ever had.

Chapter 9: A Dress, Love, and a Bouquet

AS the cold season reached its zenith in the middle of the winter months, it heralded the beginning of their final term at school. This also meant the school ball was fast approaching.

Every student in school had their minds on one thing: the ball, which was slated for the middle of the spring months. The venue for the event was furnished with luxurious decorations, including some that involved magic. Its beauty was like something out of a dream. Since it was such an important tradition, a professional orchestra was brought in to play music.

The only students allowed to attend were those in their final year at the Academy—in other words, fifth-years—and anyone they chose as a partner. Participation was optional, so some chose instead to laze about in their dorms. If one *did* wish to attend the ball, they were required to bring a member of the opposite sex. These partners could even come from other schools, which was part of why the entire student body was so restless leading up to the event.

This was the one time students could shed their novice magician robes for dazzling formalwear. It was such an anticipated occasion that some students prepared early, making arrangements an entire year in advance. A successful appearance at the ball held profound meaning for both the students and their families.

“Whoa, this is… It’s gorgeous!”

“Yes, truly! I must send my regards to the king,” said Yana.

They were both admiring the dress that’d been sent to the princess from her homeland, Ete Karima. It was every bit as impressive as you’d expect for someone in Yana’s position. To create this masterpiece, the country had spent a year collecting the necessary textiles and had the royal seamstress sew it.

As Oriana grasped the fabric in her hands, she realized immediately that the back was completely see-through. The fabric was thin and had a large, complex

pattern woven into it using beads and gemstones. In fact, these jewels seemed to line the dress' entire back, making it a luxurious, if not bold, piece.

"I bet Azraq will make you wear a cardigan again," Oriana teased.

"Haha, I'm sure you're right. When the time comes, I will heed his request and wear his jacket."

Yana already had a partner for the dance. Given the trial she was undergoing, it'd only create problems if she were to pick anyone other than Azraq, so she really had no other option.

"I'm so jealous! Must be nice to already have a partner."

Other students milled about the school grounds like a bunch of lost first-years who'd yet to pick the branch needed to craft their wand, too anxious to relax. Whether they were waiting to invite someone or to be invited, people were more conscious of the opposite sex than ever before.

The whole issue of choosing a partner displeased Oriana enough that she was tempted to skip the ball entirely. The nervous anticipation in the air had her stomach twisting in knots daily, and she could barely handle it. It was tradition for those who couldn't take the pressure (like her), couldn't find a partner, or otherwise didn't possess the finances required to prepare an outfit for the occasion to spend the day of the ball eating an enormous chicken in the dorm commons.

"I wish I could go enjoy chicken with the rest of them," Oriana said wistfully.

As the daughter of House Elsha, her attendance was a foregone conclusion. Her father had had a dress specially made for her with the most cutting-edge techniques, and he'd given her strict orders to show it off at the ball.

"You aren't going to invite Mister Tanzine?" Yana asked.

"What? Of course not, don't be silly." Oriana waved her hand dismissively as she lounged on the floor. The carpet under her was something Yana had installed so she could do yoga, and as a result, footwear was expressly forbidden in their room.

I remember trying to invite someone in my past life. It wasn't Lucian. Was it

Kai? No, Kai was…

Oriana softly closed her eyes, trying to remember the friends she'd once had.

Ah, that's right! Just as my stomach was beginning to knot up with dread, Vince made his move pretty quick and invited me. I didn't have to hang in limbo worrying about a partner for very long.

As soon as the new term had started, Vince had come to her with a bouquet in his arms, requesting her as his partner. She'd only known him as Miguel's friend up until that point. She wasn't even that close with Miguel back then, but she still felt closer to him than she did Vince. The two had only exchanged a few words in the hall, so she was shocked when he invited her to the ball. The way his ears turned deep red had made affection well up inside her chest, and so they'd begun dating.

Now that she thought about it, they'd only dated for three months—from the middle of the winter months until the middle of the spring months. It was such a short time, but enough to experience things she never had before. She'd learned what it meant to love someone—the tenderness, the strength, and the bitterness that came with it—as well as the grief of losing it all.

Oriana didn't share the same excitement for the ball other students did because in her previous timeline, Vince had died shortly after. No matter what she did, she couldn't shake that association.

"Why aren't you going to invite him?" Yana pressed, interrupting her thoughts.

"Huh?" Oriana jerked upright. "Oh, well, Vincent said he doesn't want me to profess my feelings for him anymore. Asking him to be my partner is basically telling him I like him."

"Oh? Azraq and I aren't lovers, but we are still going together."

Please don't put us in the same boat. You two have no choice but *to go with each other.*

Yana laughed as if she could read Oriana's thoughts. "Why not take a chance and invite him. See how it goes? The worst that can happen is him telling you he doesn't want to hear about your feelings again and rejecting you."

"*Mm*," Oriana hummed in thought. "I'm not sure my heart could take it if he acted uncomfortable and turned me down." She flopped back onto the floor again.

Back when I was desperate to stay at his side no matter what, I could've made excuses for asking him. There was no sense weighing the pros and cons; I needed *to be with him, so I'd invite him. That's how I reasoned with myself back then, but now…*

To begin with, Vince had never treated Oriana coldly. She loved him with all her heart and he felt the same for her. Having that same man brush her off had been more painful than she could've ever imagined. She endured it because she had bigger priorities than her own misery to deal with. Namely, keeping Vincent alive.

Things were different now that Vincent was cooperating with her. His safety was no longer the major concern it once was. He was being more vigilant and more cautious about his own health too. With the situation now, there really was no help Oriana could provide. He'd be safe enough without her sticking to him, and regardless of their proximity, he was still treating her like a good friend.

Back when she'd tried to force her affection on him to close the gap between them, she'd only driven Vincent's heart farther away. Oriana was depressed when he first told her to stop saying she adored him. She'd interpreted that as him spurning her feelings.

When they next spoke, she finally understood his discomfort came from feeling like she was mixing him up with Vince. Oriana tried to convey her affection for him specifically, but even that didn't go over well. Professing her feelings any more than she already had would be harassment at this point.

Nonetheless, Vincent had forgiven her indiscretions. He'd turned a blind eye to her sidling up and clinging to him, even though it was a physical manifestation of the affection she couldn't contain. As long as she didn't use the words "like" or "adore," she could wiggle in close to his heart.

So things are fine the way they are. I get to be closer to him now than if I were a stranger and he even lets me get away with some things. It's a blessing.

“Yana! Yana, Yana, Yana, Yana!”

“Yes, I hear you. What is it, you big baby?”

Oriana latched onto Yana, who was sitting nearby, and nuzzled her face against Yana’s lower back. The two had grown close over the years. Yana had even come to stay during their long break, and they’d talked about romance with each other. Even so, Oriana still didn’t know what their boundaries were. How selfish could she be before she crossed the line? As was human nature, her only option was to test the limit and see.

“Can you and Azraq dance?”

“Only a bit. Although I don’t really care about whether I can dance or not. Parties are for sampling delicious foods.”

“If you want to practice, *I* can be your partner,” Oriana offered.

“Thank you. But lately, Azraq has been a bit busy—”

“He’s what?!”

Azraq? Busy? That was the first time Oriana had heard those two words used in the same sentence. It wasn’t as if she thought him lazy, but she never dreamed he would prioritize anything over Yana.

“How come?” Oriana pressed, curious.

“It seems we’ve been getting a lot of letters lately from Ete Karima. It’s not out of the ordinary for such correspondence to come in, but the frequency is worrying.”

“So that means he’s preoccupied writing replies?”

“Yes. He also seems to be a bit on edge, as if something is troubling him.”

Azraq actually worries about things other than Yana?

It was insensitive for her to even have such a thought.

Yana softly patted Oriana on the head. “I don’t want to add to his burden,” she said.

“Yeah, I see your point.”

Oriana nuzzled Yana's lower back again, hoping to somehow relieve her friend's worries, even if only a little.

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"MISS Elsha? Do you have a moment?"

After school was out, some female classmates beckoned Oriana to meet with them behind the school building, which was the most stereotypical place for a person to be called out and bullied.

Seems a bit late for them to act now, when I've been sticking to Vincent like glue for four whole years already. I even stopped confessing my feelings for him. Why now?

Oriana stood with her back plastered against the wall, cold sweat gathering on her forehead as the girls circled around her. Whether they knew what was going on in her mind or not, they were all glaring straight at her.

"Miss Elsha!"

"Yes?!" she squeaked, intimidated.

As Oriana trembled, the girls suddenly lowered their heads.

"Please, we beg you to help us!"

Caught completely off guard, Oriana had to blink at them a few times as her mind registered what was happening.

"Uh…with what?"

"All of us worked hard, taking dancing lessons over the long break, but with no teacher to instruct us, we didn't make much progress."

Marina Leroy, who had been in the same class as Oriana for years, acted as the group's representative.

The students were taught the basics of dance and etiquette as fourth-years, but any further instruction was left to individual discretion. Since the Academy was once a place solely for nobility, and aristocrats typically underwent instruction from an early age, the class itself was fairly shallow. Although Oriana was a commoner, she'd taken such lessons in dance and etiquette since she was

a child. Unlike her and the nobility, though, there were many students who couldn't digest all of the basics in just a few short lessons.

"I've confidence in my magical studies, but exercise is…something else."

"I wrote a petition to the professors asking for special lessons, but I couldn't get approval because it's 'not customary to offer such lessons.'"

"Yeah, they told me to just practice with my partner."

"But if we can't dance, how're we supposed to even *think* about inviting anyone to the ball?"

"We're students here just like the nobles. We want some fond memories before we graduate, too! That's why we want to go to the ball so bad!"

Their eyes sparkled with hope as they desperately gazed at Oriana.

Aha, so they weren't trying to bully me, threaten me, or shake me down! Aw, you guys… I'm sorry for doubting you!

Nothing like this had ever happened in her previous timeline, so she was genuinely anxious. In Class 2, classmates were pretty tight with each other. Girls and boys hung out together. And when it came to practice for the dance, they showed little hesitation in asking one another for help. But the difference with the Special Class was that there were far more introverts. Simply put, these girls didn't have the courage to approach boys quite so casually.

"You're good at dancing, aren't you, Oriana? We were hoping you'd instruct us."

From her vantage point, she wasn't at a level where she could really teach other people. These girls had to be aware of that as well. They'd only come to her as a last resort.

"I'll…see what I can do," she said finally.

"Oriana!" Marina threw her arms around Oriana and squeezed her. The other girls soon joined in a group hug.

Oriana's lips flapped helplessly; she never dreamed she'd be able to have such normal teenage experiences in this timeline. She wrapped her arms around her classmates and hugged them back fiercely.

❦ ❦ ❦

"…AND *that's* why I was hoping to get the help of our male peers."

"Yes, now I understand the situation. But perhaps you'd like to explain why you elected to approach *Miguel* for help?"

The note of anger in Vincent's voice had Oriana trembling as she averted her gaze.

She'd visited Miguel after dinner to discuss the situation with him. He was sitting in a lounge, sucking on one of his lollipops as usual, and to no one's great surprise, Vincent was sitting nearby.

After seeking permission to sit beside them, Oriana relayed her request to Miguel. She explained that the girls lacked actual dance practice and that she was hoping to enlist some of the more experienced male students to instruct them. Statistically, more male students attended the Academy than female students.

Many of them would be out of luck getting a partner for the ball if they couldn't find someone among their underclassmen. That was why Oriana had passionately appealed that setting up a practice session would also help those male students who didn't yet have partners to find someone. All the while, Vincent was directing an icy glare her way.

Which brings us back to now… Oriana thought.

"I am loath to bring this up," said Vincent, "but it seems to me you rely a bit too readily on Miguel for help."

"Yes, you have a point," she conceded.

"What *is* he to you? Your brother? Your manservant?"

"You're right… I'm sorry…"

In the face of Vincent's legitimate criticism, Oriana could say nothing in her defense, instead shrinking back. True, she did try to seek Miguel out because she thought he'd be able to help her and because she didn't think he would refuse. That was, admittedly, selfish.

Her father had drilled it into her that there was no such thing as a free lunch;

all favors came with a price. Granted, the message he'd been trying to instill was that only family would help without ever asking anything in return.

"That's a silly question," Miguel chimed in. "We're obviously close; I *did* attend her pajama party."

Vincent's glare went from icy to subzero as it bored into Oriana.

"Miguel…! I didn't need your help *there!* I'm sure you said that on purpose, though. That's the kind of person you are…" She avoided Vincent's gaze as she shot a look over at Miguel. He beamed back like he was having the time of his life.

Damn you! Seeing that smile makes me want to forgive you!

"Oriana…"

She couldn't expect any further help from Miguel. The life raft he'd thrown her was essentially made of mud anyway, so it hadn't done her much good.

Oriana turned her head back toward Vincent, but she didn't dare lift her chin to look up at him.

"You need to use a bit more reason when you think."

"Yes, sir."

"The girls from our class are the ones who asked for your help, right?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then don't you think you should have consulted the class president?"

Actually, that never occurred to me.

Since she feared she might freeze to death if she admitted as much, Oriana pursed her lips. Unfortunately, her silence didn't save her; Vincent, who was their newly appointed class president, could already read her mind. His frigid gaze pierced right through her.

I'm turning into a popsicle. I can feel it! There's icicles covering the top of my head right now.

Oriana was genuinely puzzled as to why he was so outraged about this. Her whole body trembled as she replied, "But Vincent, I heard you declined the

position of prefect! I assumed you were busy, so…"

"I declined because the position carries great responsibility and honor. There were also others better suited for the task. In that regard, the class president largely runs miscellaneous errands for the professor, so it's a way for someone like me to still be of service."

Serving as a prefect at Lagen Magic Academy would earn one great prestige, something Vincent already had more than enough of. That was why he left the role to the commoners in their class, since they were the ones who often struggled when it came to job-hunting after graduation.

Vincent's subtle act of kindness warmed Oriana's heart. Derek was the one who'd become prefect, and although not part of the nobility, he was beloved by their underclassmen for his kindness and willingness to look after others. Everyone thought he was doing a splendid job.

After a long pause, Oriana said, "Okay. I think I understand now."

"Understand what?"

"Basically, you're telling me to go to Mr. Turkey instead, right?"

Silence stretched between them. After a few seconds, Miguel burst out laughing.

"You gotta give it to her. That was sound reasoning!"

Vincent reluctantly peeled his gaze away from Oriana, glaring briefly at Miguel before plopping down onto the sofa. He sank into the cushions, looking unusually exhausted.

Just to confirm her head hadn't really iced over, Oriana reached her hands up to check. Her hair was a disheveled mess, but she was otherwise unscathed.

"Yes, thinking most logically, that *would* be the correct choice," Vincent grudgingly admitted. Crestfallen, he peered at Oriana again. "Tell me, did it ever occur to you to rely on me?"

Unable to look him in the face, she cast her eyes down to her lap again.

Of course it did…

The idea of going to the class president had never occurred to her, but the moment she'd considered enlisting Miguel, she'd also thought briefly about asking Vincent as well.

I did want to ask you. I really did…

But she was afraid of him shooting her down.

It'd hurt her feelings if he refused her under normal circumstances, but it would be especially devastating in this case, since it was a ball only attended by partners. Then there was the added downside that without his aid, all the other girls would also resent her for failing to provide the help they sought. The shock from it all would be far beyond her ability to cope.

That was why, although she knew she *could* ask him, she'd opted to turn to Miguel instead. As underhanded as it was, she thought if Vincent overheard and showed interest, then she'd be safe asking for his assistance too. Oriana was normally a straightforward person, but she was willing to resort to trickery when it came to protecting her own lovelorn heart.

*But this is just…*weird*. Why is he acting so intimidating? And why is he so* angry?

No, perhaps the anger was entirely to do with her depending on Miguel too much.

"You mean since *you're* the class president, I should have turned to you instead?" Oriana asked.

"Correct. Why else do you think I bothered taking the role of errand boy?"

"Uh…to help out the class and professors?"

"Yes, precisely. That's *exactly* why," Vince muttered defeatedly.

Miguel broke into another round of snickering.

Oriana had no clue what he found so amusing, but she glared at him, cursing him in her mind.

I hope that lollipop gets lodged in your throat.

That only made him laugh louder.

❦ ❦ ❦

THE very next day, Vincent negotiated with a professor on Oriana's behalf, securing an empty classroom for their dance lessons. He even selected a number of upstanding boys from class that were interested and experienced enough to instruct everyone. Oriana couldn't thank him enough.

Derek, the newly appointed prefect, was among those participating. There were others who weren't confident in their dancing skills who also asked to attend, so the entire affair had a crowd much larger than anticipated. Most of the common-born male students also weren't sure they could dance properly, and without this opportunity, they probably would've never worked up the courage to ask the girls to help them practice.

Sadly, Oriana couldn't secure any female students who were talented at dancing, so while she wasn't the most skilled, she was prepared to offer herself up as a practice partner.

Vincent went out of his way to get a classroom for us to practice in. Bowing out would be irresponsible of me at this point. At least it works out; I can supervise while I help the boys.

It'd be impossible for her to give detailed advice to each one of them, but fortunately, most already had the basics down. They simply needed a little courage and to get used to leading their partner.

Miguel also offered himself up for practice. He was a handsome, sociable young man who was kind to anyone and everyone. When the girls heard he would be helping, they squealed with delight.

The issue…was with the other boy trying to help them—Vincent Tanzine.

"And so…Mister Vincent," Oriana started to say.

"What is it?"

"While I really appreciate your willingness to help out…"

"I can dance perfectly fine."

Oriana nodded reluctantly. "Yes, I'm well aware of your ability to dance."

"And you're also helping instruct them, are you not?"

“I am, but that’s only because there aren’t many female students who know how to dance well.”

“Then our circumstances are no different.”

“That’s not what I’m trying to say…” Oriana hesitated. “It’s more like, there’s a right time and place…”

“Then this fits the bill perfectly.” Vincent stared back at her, utterly perplexed about what she was trying to say.

There were female students hanging behind Oriana, audibly gulping as they watched. They shot desperate, pleading looks her way. She nodded at them, fully aware of what they were silently trying to convey.

There isn’t a single girl here who wants to unwittingly step on a handsome future duke’s foot!

Vincent was perfectly aware of the prestige and obligations his status afforded him. So why was he so oblivious to the girls’ aversion to embarrassing themselves in front of him?

It was very clear that Vincent was a special student. He was calm and cheerful, and he treated everyone kindly, whether they were aristocrat or commoner. If anyone *did* make any slight against him, he’d let it pass. Granted, his personable demeanor made it hard for anyone to ever do such a thing to begin with.

Simply put, although he was part of the nobility, Vincent wasn’t pretentious like the others. Yet, he also held the duties his position entailed in higher esteem than anyone else. He was intelligent and talented at magic, had a handsome face and muscular build, spoke in a measured tone, *and* had a strong sense of responsibility. If one were to equate him to a pair of shoes, he’d be the expensive low heel flats one saved for a special occasion, not like the slippers one would trot out in on a rainy day.

“Then you mean to tell me I’m to just stand around like a useless scarecrow and watch?”

“You’ve already been plenty useful,” Oriana countered. “You got this room for us *and* you called the male students here.”

“That’s the past. We’re speaking of the present.”

What is with *him? Why does he suddenly sound like a five-year-old protesting to his mommy that he wants to help out?*

The female students were stealing nervous glances at Oriana, terrified they’d soured Vincent’s mood. They were no doubt hoping she could find the words to soothe him.

Carrying the weight of their expectations on her shoulders, Oriana timidly said, “But there’s another duty you’re more suited to…”

“Which is?” Vincent glanced at her, a pouty look on his face.

Nooo, stop! That’s too adorable!

Now Oriana was flustered for a very different reason. She didn’t want anyone else to see him looking this cute. In order to distract him, she decided to voice the plan she’d secretly come up with ever since he volunteered to help.

“You see, I was thinking it’d be a good idea if you offered to dance once with whichever girl improves herself the most during these lessons, as a sort of reward.”

Vincent’s brows shot up.

Cheers of approval echoed behind Oriana. When she glanced over her shoulder, the girls were all staring at her, eyes alight with expectation as they clasped their hands in front of their chests.

“Miss Elsha, that’s a brilliant idea!”

“A dance with Mister Tanzine? At the ball?”

“We’ll stake our lives on improving!”

“I feel *so* much more motivated now!”

All of the girls were smiling and bobbing their heads up and down in approval.

“Th-There, see?” Oriana stuttered. “They’re all pumped!”

“I fail to understand how practicing with them is inappropriate, but a single dance at the ball somehow isn’t,” Vincent muttered.

The girls were more enthusiastic than Oriana had expected, but she knew exactly how they felt.

Vincent was no mere pair of worn-down slippers; he was a pair of fashionable yet comfortable flats you picked out for your first date while your heart was still hammering in anticipation.

Most of the girls balked at the idea of even touching someone as special as Vincent, but when faced with the miracle of having a dance with him as the result of their own efforts to improve—well, that was something so unfathomably amazing that it'd leave them with good memories for years to come.

It was no easy feat to inspire such longing in the opposite sex that they'd want to savor the memory of dancing with you, but one dance with Vincent Tanzine gave these girls hope beyond their wildest imaginations.

"There you have it," said Oriana. "Please offer yourself up as a reward for us girls."

"I am still not convinced this makes *any* sense. But if this'll *really* help motivate everyone, I will gladly volunteer myself." Vincent smiled reluctantly as he conceded.

The girls squealed in delight, thrilled at the prospect of having him to themselves for one dance, and soon set about practicing.

❦ ❦ ❦

"*UM*…huh? I mean, uh, what's with all the people?"

When Oriana visited the empty classroom where they were holding their dance lessons the next day, she had to tilt her head in confusion. There were clearly more people now than there had been. Specifically, the percentage of female students had inflated dramatically.

The room was packed with people split off into pairs. Among the new female students in attendance were some aristocrats. If the scene before Oriana were anything to go by, they were offering themselves up as practice dummies for the boys while also giving pointers to the girls who were less learned in the art.

Oriana was standing in the doorway, gaping at the scene before her, when a boy called out from behind her, “Would you mind moving?”

“Oh, pardon me.” She slipped out of his way and retreated to a corner of the room. As she went, she kept her eyes on the other students as they practiced, and in her distraction, she bumped into someone. “Oops! Sorry, I— Vincent? What are you doing in the corner?”

“The same thing *you* are, I imagine. Trying to stay out of everyone’s way.”

Oriana scrunched her face and laughed. Vincent was a future duke, yet he’d been relegated to the corner like an unneeded broom or dustpan. She wasn’t even sure how to comment on that.

“I wonder why there’s so many more people all of a sudden,” Oriana marveled. “Is everyone *that* eager to practice?”

“I haven’t the faintest idea.”

Although she proposed as much, she was convinced it wasn’t the practice attracting them. The majority of new faces were all women already plenty skilled in dance. As she observed the girls from her corner of the room, Oriana noticed many of them looking her way. No, actually, the focus of their attention wasn’t her—it was Vincent. They were all stealing glances at him.

That’s it! The reward!

They were after the opportunity to share a dance with Vincent Tanzine at the school ball. Naturally, the other female students must’ve realized that if they didn’t participate, they wouldn’t be in the running.

Wow, how greedy and calculating.

Still, they were doing a big service by helping the boys who couldn’t dance. Oriana could never have perfectly taught them all if she’d been the only one instructing. This was an unexpected development, but she was glad for the assistance.

“I’m guessing they all want a chance to dance with you.”

“Indeed.”

Oriana had only informed him because she thought he was unaware of their

aims, but he showed no surprise at the revelation.

"Wait. You mean you *knew?*"

"I am…*accustomed* to this sort of attention," Vincent said dispassionately as he leaned his back against the wall.

Oriana was at a loss for words. The expression on his face was not one she'd ever seen before—not even on Vince. This was probably Vincent-the-aristocrat instead of schoolmate-Vincent, and sadly, there seemed to be an air of loneliness about him.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't my intention to use you."

"I was there as everything played out, so I'm well aware that wasn't your aim. Besides, I know what my value is in the eyes of others. I'm too used to this for it to bother me. You needn't feel bad."

Oriana must have looked utterly dejected, because he turned his gaze to her and expelled a sigh before smiling.

"When you proposed the girls have a dance with me as a form of reward, I realized you really *are* a merchant's daughter." He continued, "Regardless of my personal preferences, I was taught to oblige whoever approached me. But you're different. You understand what it is people desire, and although perhaps unconsciously, you know how to garner their interest and get them engaged. There's no reason for you to apologize. You should be proud of yourself for possessing such a talent."

Not having expected such a compliment, Oriana was left staring back at him dumbfounded. Her cheeks heated. This was the first time she'd ever been complimented like this in her entire life—her previous one included. She pressed her hands over her feverish cheeks, inwardly squealing.

Vincent's voice turned solemn as he went on, "Anyway, I didn't really mind. I will admit to being frustrated that you disregarded our classmates' consideration and focused only on my value to them, but I only accepted because I thought this would yield greater benefits."

"Wait…you *knew* this would happen?" Oriana lifted her head in surprise—not at his resentful complaints but at the last few words he'd said.

Vincent kept his attention on the other students, not bothering to look her way as he said, “I told you. I *know* what my value is.”

“So basically, you knew this many girls would flock to our practice, but you accepted because you thought the pros outweigh the cons?”

“Correct.”

The shock hit her like a blow to the gut. Although, any surprise she felt at Vincent’s frankness about his sexual appeal soon gave way to sympathy as she realized the other common-born girls in the class would never get another opportunity to dance with him outside of this. With these new girls participating in their little contest, the chances of the common-born girls winning dropped dramatically.

If…if this *is how it’s going to be, I should be participating. I also want a chance to dance with Vincent—even if only one time…*

Oriana could empathize with the other girls so well because she felt exactly the same way.

“Y-You’re terrible,” she mumbled.

“Nonsense. I’m simply honest with myself.”

“But everyone’s working so hard just for the chance to dance with you…”

“You already stated that the one who improves the most will win. Those who are already skilled at dance aren’t going to dramatically improve and become masters in this short amount of time.”

It reassured Oriana to know he was showing such consideration to the common-born girls.

“*Hm?*” Oriana tilted her head. “Hold on. Then why are you so happy about there being more female students participating?”

Vincent *tsk*ed. Oriana couldn’t believe it—Vincent, the well-mannered duke heir, clicking his tongue? She had to do a double-take.

“Because I realized my mistake,” Vincent admitted reluctantly. “By which I mean, bringing those boys who also needed dancing practice. I wouldn’t say I regret it because they *do* genuinely need help. But, on a personal level, I found

myself wishing I had left them be."

"What? *Why?* Everyone was so happy to have the opportunity to practice."

Vincent scowled as he stared straight ahead, refusing to look at her. "You're the only girl among them who can dance, right?"

"…Right."

"Teaching that many people by yourself would be difficult."

"Oh, I guess I see your point…? Thanks. That was sweet of you to show such consideration for me."

"What I'm trying to say is I did this out of my own self-interest," Vincent said awkwardly, cutting their conversation off.

Although she was grateful for his thoughtfulness, Oriana couldn't keep up with these strange changes in his behavior. She stared at him, blinking several times in confusion. Seconds later, the door beside her burst open, causing her shoulders to jump in surprise.

Miguel and Yana strolled in with Azraq and the teacher of magical history, Professor Wilton, behind them.

"Goodness. What is this?" Professor Wilton muttered in mute amazement as she stared at the classroom of thirty or so students.

All of the students who'd been practicing noticed Professor Wilton and turned their attention toward the door.

"Who among you is responsible for these lessons?" the teacher demanded.

Oriana, who'd been leaning against the wall, stood up a little straighter. If a professor had come all the way here, there had to be some kind of problem. Perhaps they were in for a scolding because there were more students present now than when they submitted forms requesting approval to borrow the room. Whatever the case, Oriana was the one who'd proposed the arrangement.

She stepped forward. "That would be me, Professor Wilton. I called the other students together for this."

"I was the one who reached out to the male students, and I was also the one

who submitted the request to borrow the classroom," Vincent said, moving in front of Oriana as if to shield her.

"Oriana Elsha and Vincent Tanzine…" The professor's eyes grew misty and she pulled out a handkerchief to dab at them. "As embarrassing as it is to admit, I didn't realize until now just how many of our students needed this help…"

Oriana gawked. Apparently, their teacher wasn't angry at them.

"There's no way a classroom of this size can adequately accommodate you all," Professor Wilton said as she swept her gaze across the room. "I will request permission to use the assembly hall."

The students who'd been watching the exchange with bated breath cried out in delight.

"Moreover, I will negotiate to see if we can have a teacher help instruct you all until the day of the ball. I wish I could take on the duty all by myself, but alas, I've other classes and ball preparations to attend to. I'm afraid I won't be able to help the whole time."

It was a shocking level of accommodation, considering they weren't an official club or anything.

"That's still more than enough. We're *ever* so grateful for your help, Professor Wilton. Thank you," said Oriana, clasping her hands together.

The petite Professor Wilton only shook her head. "No, no. I should be the one expressing my gratitude. It should ordinarily be the adults' duty to respond to the students' appeals. Alas, we hadn't the time to adjust our curriculum before the ball this year. I will swear to you that we'll take the students' wishes to heart more starting next year, but I do realize that's a bit too late, since the lot of you will be graduating this year."

Although the professor had already seen hundreds of students graduate over the years, her eyes still filled with sorrow. But the emotion was gone almost as quickly as it appeared, and a smile stretched across her pale face.

"Now then, everyone, let's move this lesson to the assembly hall."

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“SO, Yana, *you’re* the one who brought Professor Wilton?” asked Oriana.

“No, just the opposite.”

The students were able to practice their dancing much more comfortably in the spacious assembly hall. Meanwhile, Oriana and Yana had taken some seats at the edge of the room where they could observe everyone else.

“I heard you were doing something that sounded interesting, and as I was headed to the classroom to take a peek myself, Professor Wilton snagged me. I’d no idea how much of the faculty’s approval you had for what you were doing, so I thought to shake her off. But Miguel, who was passing by, suggested we bring her to see you.”

“*Haah…* I owe more to the eldest son of the Ferveiras than I’ll ever be able to repay.”

“You can say that again.” Yana continued wistfully, “He really *is* observant of others. If I could manage to take him back with me to Ete Karima, I am sure the king would be delighted.”

Oriana froze like a block of ice. Even Azraq, who was standing nearby, turned his gaze toward Yana, wide-eyed.

She’s…trying to headhunt him!

That was a troubling thought. Miguel would inherit the Hydrangea Earldom in the future. All nobility in Amanecer, earls included, were given a seat in the House of Lords, in addition to their role of regional management and administration.

“H-H-Hold up there a minute! Our country *needs* him. I mean it! Well, more importantly, Vincent needs him.”

Miguel was necessary to the country as a nobleman, but that wasn’t Oriana’s true concern. He was the only person Vincent considered a real friend, so she didn’t want Yana to take him away.

Yana snickered, amused at how panicked her friend was, but she didn’t play it off by saying she was simply teasing as she usually did. Instead, she turned her gaze to Miguel, who was surrounded by a group of other girls.

“This dance is a waltz, yes?”

“Yeah, that’s the only dance we’re doing at the ball.”

“Very well.” Yana slipped out of her seat. “In that case, I think I will see what our intensely popular instructor can teach me.”

“Y-Yana?!” Oriana stammered.

Yana gave no pause, moving as softly as a tiny bird as she navigated through the waves of people. When she reached Miguel, the people crowding him gave way for her. She spoke only a couple of words to the boy before the two of them stepped away from everyone else.

Miguel placed his hands in the proper position and Yana smoothly pressed herself close to him. With his hand against her back, Miguel gently tipped her, and Yana leaned into his touch. The two moved in sync, as if it came as naturally as breathing to them.

In an instant, they had everyone’s attention. Neither paid the spotlight any mind, instead confidently continuing their display. They suited each other perfectly. From status to beauty to gracefulness, there could be no better match.

Although Oriana was captivated by them at first, she soon peeled her gaze away and turned to Azraq. He stared at them as one would stare at a bright, distant star, far beyond reach.

Oriana could find no words to offer him, and she didn’t really think it appropriate for her to do so in the first place. Instead, she returned her gaze to Miguel and Yana. He had his lips drawn to her ear and was whispering something—a joke, probably, to make her laugh. When they spun around, Yana’s face finally came into view, and it was bright red. Oriana had never seen her friend blush so much before.

What did Miguel say to her?

A loud noise drew Oriana’s attention to the spot beside her where Azraq had been standing guard. He was now moving toward the exit.

“Azraq…?”

“Sorry, Elsha. I just remembered there is something I need to do. I will be in the hall. Come find me if anything happens to Lady Yana.”

“…Okay,” she said after a pause. “Got it.”

It was normal for Azraq to take his leave sometimes; the two weren’t so conjoined at the hip that they stayed together day and night at the Academy.

But he’s a terrible *liar. If he really did have something to do, he wouldn’t have mentioned waiting outside in the hallway.*

Oriana clutched at her chest. She shared Azraq’s pain.

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THE students were in a tizzy following Yana’s dance with Miguel. They must’ve also thought the two looked like lovers. Yana usually maintained a constant poker face, so her rosy cheeks caught everyone’s attention. In addition to the freshly sprouting rumors about the relationship between them, there was another burden Yana had to shoulder: her trial.

“Enough!”

In the Academy courtyard, two men were facing one another. The boy serving as witness lifted his hand to stay the two. The duty of observing these duels was always entrusted to someone who could remain impartial. This time, like all others, it was an ordinary male student whose face the competitors probably wouldn’t remember the next time they met.

A fourth-year boy was kneeling on the ground, huffing and puffing as he peered up at Azraq. Though he’d a wooden sword in his right hand, his arm hung limp, unable to summon the strength to fight anymore. His other hand trembled as he clutched at his stomach, where Azraq had pummeled him moments prior.

“The match goes to Azraq Zalena!”

The observer’s proclamation caused a commotion among the onlookers. Applause and cheers soon followed.

Other boys had been challenging Azraq for six days straight now. As the day of the ball encroached, many made their move in hopes of securing Yana as their

partner.

A wall of bodies lined the area around Azraq and the fourth-year; students had crowded in, hoping to get a glimpse of the action. As soon as the match was over, Yana gracefully slipped over to Azraq, her face shining with pride.

“Splendid work, Azraq. Are you not injured?”

“I took a few minor blows. Nothing for you to concern yourself with.”

“Well, courtesy of your victory, I retain the honor of seeing you to the infirmary.” Yana grinned, but Azraq only offered a bitter smile in return. Considering how minor his injuries were, he was less than enthusiastic about going with her. Still, as always, he made no complaints.

Oriana watched them leave, having no intention of intruding. Once they were off, she started back toward the main school building. As she made her way down the roofed sidewalk, someone suddenly popped out in front of her.

“Oriana, did you see that match a moment ago?”

“Oh, Marina!”

Thanks to their dance lessons, the two had become close enough to refer to one another by their first names.

“From what I hear, it’s one of the customs in their desert country. Sure took me by surprise. Apparently, the boys already knew all about it,” Marina mumbled, eyes gleaming with fascination. She was the intelligent sort, and the topic of other countries’ customs probably fueled her curiosity.

Yana’s trial was something unknown to all but a select group of students, or at least it *had* been until recently. Thanks to the rumors of Miguel and Yana, word of her trial had spread throughout the entire school. This led to a dramatic increase in challengers approaching Azraq for duels.

“You know,” Marina continued, “I always got the feeling those two weren’t really the master-bodyguard type. Now it makes sense; she’s a princess and he’s her knight.”

“Aren’t those the same things?”

“Tsk, tsk! *Miss* Oriana, you really don’t get it, do you?” Marina wagged her

finger.

Oriana kept her lips pursed and leaned forward, silently encouraging the other girl to continue.

“Allow me to enlighten you. A princess is someone whose heart and body are protected by her knight. That’s the traditional definition everyone knows.”

“Right.”

“As for the knight, his job is to shred and dispose of any would-be suitors.”

“Azraq may dispose of challengers in the sense of beating them, but he doesn’t ‘shred’ anyone,” Oriana interjected.

“It’s a figure of speech.”

“All right.”

“Basically,” Marina went on, “Azraq Zalena is protecting Yana Nova Mahathin’s chastity. And he’s the one and only person who can keep her unmarried forever!”

“Um…okay?”

“That’s more realistic, passionate, and romantic than a promise of eternal love, don’t you think?”

As the implications of that sunk in, Oriana closed her eyes and let her emotions drain away, donning a mask of ignorance. Her face resembled that of a sunbathing cat, oblivious to everything else happening around it.

“What is it, Oriana?”

“I’m going to pretend I heard nothing.”

“What?”

“It’s going in one ear and right out the other.”

“You’re just repeating yourself now, but I get your drift.”

Oriana clasped her own cheeks and squished them. She didn’t think it was right to acknowledge Yana’s feelings until she confessed them herself.

“Well, since you seem to have your reasons for not wanting to talk about that,

let’s switch topics.”

Oriana nodded. “I would be most grateful.”

“In that case…”

“Yes?”

“When are you going to invite him?”

“Invite who?”

The conversation had changed course, but Oriana was having difficulty following along, staring blankly at Marina.

“Why, Mister Tanzine, of course.”

“What? Why? You mean invite him to try dueling?”

That was most certainly *not* something she wanted him to do. Oriana didn’t doubt Azraq’s ability, but on the off chance he lost to Vincent, she’d end up in a puddle of her own tears.

“Forget dueling. I told you I was changing the topic! In fact, this is the real reason I hunted you down. When are you going to invite him to be your partner?”

The moment Marina’s true objective became clear, Oriana’s face soured. She’d rebuffed a number of other students recently, all asking her the same question. In truth, she wanted to forget this partner business.

It’ll only make me upset if I think about it.

Everything that awaited them in the coming weeks and months were things she’d already been through in her previous life as Vince’s girlfriend. This time was different since they weren’t dating, but in her last timeline, this was about the time their relationship started. She couldn’t help but frequently recall memories of the day he’d invited her to be his partner. It was all so vivid—his voice, the expression on his face, the bouquet he offered, and his blushing cheeks.

But there’s nothing I can do.

She was deeply hurt and suffering because of it.

I couldn't get him to fall for me this time. And without love, there's no hope for us, is there?

Oriana wasn't particularly special. All of the girls who loved Vincent were steeped in anguish at not having their affections returned. The only difference was that this time, she counted herself among them.

In order to keep her gloomy tangle of emotions hidden, Oriana feigned cheerfulness as she blurted, "I'm not inviting him!"

"What? You're not? Why?!"

Oriana could almost anticipate her adding, "Seriously, after how much you cling to him?" No sooner had she thought that than Mariana hollered that very same line.

Nonetheless, Oriana said, "I simply have no intention of inviting him, and that's that."

"But you realize Mister Tanzine has turned down *every* girl who has invited him, right?"

Oriana screwed up her face.

Of course, Vincent being who he was, he was extremely popular. Still, she'd experienced for herself how unapproachable he could be when they'd had their falling out. She thought more people would be dissuaded from inviting him for that reason, but seeing as the ball was the school's biggest social event, people were eager to make lasting memories of the occasion.

Ordinarily, Vincent was like an ultra-high class decoration to be admired from afar, so it was only natural people would jump at the chance to have him for themselves, if even just once. It was almost like a prize for their long five years here at Lagen Magic Academy. That was probably part of the reason why Marina was so surprised Oriana wasn't throwing her lot in too; Oriana had the luxury of enjoying Vincent's company daily, but for whatever reason, she wouldn't even bring up the topic of going to the ball with him.

"If he's already refused everyone else, then all the more reason I shouldn't invite him."

She already knew her invite would displease him. There was no sense in going out of her way to get her feelings hurt. If today were her birthday, perhaps she could use that to her advantage to get him to accept. But alas, she'd already played that card before.

"Don't you think he's refusing everyone else *because* he's waiting for you?" Marina pressed her.

"*Ahaha!*"

If that were the case, Vincent would have already invited her.

After all, that's what he did in my last life.

The fact that he hadn't made his move proved he'd no interest in going with her. Oriana read his signals loud and clear.

Yes, but maybe…just maybe—*I mean, for argument's sake…*

She'd humored the idea he might invite her as a trusted friend rather than a romantic partner, but waiting around for him any more than she already had would only make her feel more pathetic. It was about time for her to look for a different partner.

"I am *not* going to invite him," Oriana declared. "And I'm not going with him to the ball."

"Okay… I guess he'll end up going with Sharon then."

"Miss Beezel?" Oriana's shoulders jumped. Sharon was the girl who'd stuck by his side in the wake of their fight. It was only after the two reconciled that Sharon had returned to being just another classmate, keeping her distance. At the very least, she hadn't approached Vincent while Oriana was with him.

"Before our long break, Sharon was talking about it. She said she'd already made a promise with Mister Tanzine that the two would go to the ball together. It was way too early for people to be deciding on partners, so I didn't really buy into what she was saying at the time."

Oriana swallowed hard. If Vincent were to partner up with someone else, she knew the odds were in Sharon's favor. The two *had* been engaged when they were younger. And even in her previous timeline, other students speculated the

two would go together.

So he's picked her…

Oriana was disappointed in herself for being so shocked over it. Nonetheless, she tried to put on a brave front.

"Well…that must be why he turned the other girls down."

"Maybe you're right," Marina admitted. "Sorry for asking, Oriana."

"Nah, it's fine," Oriana said. She tried to smile, but she had a feeling it looked as forced as it felt.

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AMIDST the dance lessons, exams, and the trouble surrounding Yana's trial, Oriana had completely forgotten to search for a partner. Her father had strictly ordered her to attend, and regardless of all else, she *did* want to see Vincent there in his formal attire.

If she had her druthers, she'd prefer to stare at him all night long, bathed in the gleaming light of the chandeliers. It didn't matter if Sharon *was* his partner. Vincent was still Vincent. She wouldn't overlook any opportunity to gaze upon his radiant form.

For that very reason, she needed a partner. The most obvious candidate was Miguel, but given how popular he was with the other students, she figured he was already taken. Vincent had also chided her before for over-relying on Miguel, so she hesitated to go straight to him for another favor.

Oriana was acquainted with very few of the male students. Strictly speaking, she did know some of them from her previous life, although they didn't know her. There were several more issues with this idea. Namely, they were all in a different class than her, and in this lifetime, she'd only spoken with some of them. Oriana could hardly even call them acquaintances at this point, so she was skeptical that any would readily accept an invitation from her.

Well, maybe *if I let Lucian grope my chest a little, he might*— No, *I still don't want to resort to that…*

Oriana recalled her former friend who'd a great affinity for women—mainly

their bodies, really—but she quickly shook her head, dismissing the thought. She valued herself too much to do that, and she'd be in a real bind if he somehow fell for her. Plus, given they were friends in her past life, she didn't want to start down that path.

"*Ughhhh*"

After groaning and racking her brain, Oriana was forced to soldier forward since it was time for their dance lessons.

❦ ❦ ❦

ORIANA poked her head into the assembly hall. Beside the open door sat the teacher who was supervising them. Today's coach was the chronically exhausted Professor Heinz.

"Oh, hey. It's our leading star."

"Yes, I'm here to help out again," Oriana said.

"If you're looking for Tanzine, he's over there." The professor puffed on a pipe as he nodded his head to a crowd of students. Vincent stood out among their group. He was explaining to the male students where exactly they should position their hands when holding their partner.

When Vincent glanced in her direction, Oriana promptly turned her head away, averting her eyes. She surveyed the room, and as soon as she spotted the person she was looking for, she hurried toward them, slipping through the sea of bodies.

There was a massive crowd in the assembly hall. After hearing that Professor Wilton had officially recognized these lessons, more students had flooded in. It left the place bustling with more activity than ever. If one looked closely, one would notice that people were beginning to partner with the same person for practice. If Oriana didn't make haste, she'd soon be scrambling to find anyone to take to the ball.

There was a table and chairs at the edge of the room, where Derek Turkey had retreated to take a break. Oriana quickly made her way over to him. She'd considered many possible candidates, but the only one she genuinely thought might accept her invitation was Derek.

That said, he might already have a partner.

Simple as he was, he was a good person and he was the current prefect.

At least if he's the one who turns me down, it won't sting at all.

Granted, it might make things a bit awkward for Derek, but that was hardly worth worrying about. It was no different than asking someone, "Do you have this item in your store?"

As Oriana booked it over to Derek, he noticed her. He dabbed the sweat from his face with the towel around his neck as he glanced up at her. "Miss Elsha? Did something happen?"

Derek most likely never imagined, even in his wildest dreams, that she was about to invite him to the ball. He simply assumed there was some kind of issue, and she'd come to report it to him.

Even he *assumes I would have no other reason for approaching him! I can't believe I'm thinking of inviting him after how little I've interacted with my classmates… This is what I* get *for talking about nothing but Vincent these past five years!*

Oriana furrowed her brows, the guilt etched on her face. "I'm sorry. It's not that anything happened, actually."

"Really? Well, that's good to hear."

"Um, so it's about the ball. Have you already decided who you're going with?"

"*Bwuh*?!" Derek squeaked. It was a sound only someone caught completely off-guard could ever make.

"I apologize for surprising you. I know the question is pretty sudden."

The way he gaped at her in disbelief said everything that his mouth wouldn't: he was puzzled as to why she was inviting him.

Now grossly uncomfortable, Oriana hurried to blurt out what she'd come to say. "Um, if it's at all possible—and assuming you don't already have someone to go with—I was hoping—"

"Oriana."

Derek’s face grew deathly pale, his mouth still ajar. If she didn’t know better, she’d have thought he’d seen a gruesome monster.

Oriana blinked several times before glancing over her shoulder. Vincent was standing there.

“Vincent? Did you call my name just now?”

“I did.”

“What is it? Did something happen?”

Oriana naturally assumed something was amiss. Curiously, it was the same question Derek had asked her moments ago.

Vincent scowled. “Apologies, but there’s something I need to confirm with you.”

“Is it urgent?”

“Yes. It is.”

Oriana hesitated, glancing between Vincent and Derek. It seemed awkward to invite the latter with Vincent watching.

“Could you wait just a moment?”

“No, I cannot,” Vincent said without missing a beat.

Whatever the situation, it must be urgent.

Oriana furrowed her brows—at herself, for following her own heart.

Her father had strictly ordered her to attend the ball, and she wanted to go so she could glimpse Vincent’s formal attire. To that end, she’d no choice but to invite Derek. At the same time, if she put that on a scale and weighed it against Vincent’s urgent request to go with him, her heart more heavily valued the latter.

“I’m sorry, Mister Turkey. If you wouldn’t mind, let’s continue this conversation later.”

“Uh, sure.”

“Excuse us. I will be borrowing her for a bit.” Vincent plastered a smile on his

face, and as if to express his own innocence in the matter, Derek raised both hands in surrender.

❦ ❦ ❦

ORIANA followed Vincent out of the assembly hall, but they barely made it a few steps before he was flagged down.

“Vincent!”

Very few students would call out his name like that here at Lagen Magic Academy. When Oriana glimpsed the person chasing after them, her body went rigid. It was Sharon Beezel who, like Vincent, had radiant blonde hair which streamed behind her as she walked. Her eyes were filled with panic.

Oriana didn’t particularly hate Sharon. The two had spent their last four years together as classmates. She knew enough about the other girl to realize she tried to be kind and considerate to everyone. She suspected that was a trait both Sharon and Vincent had inherited from family, since the two *were* related, after all.

The issue predated Oriana’s fight with Vincent. In her mind, Sharon occupied a special spot. She’d been engaged to Vincent when they were younger, albeit only for a short time. That was still something that’d weighed on Oriana for the longest time. Vincent assured her that it was an agreement their parents settled upon, but circumstances aside, Sharon still enjoyed a privilege Oriana would likely never have for her entire life.

“Impeccable timing,” said Sharon. “There’s something I wanted to speak with you about—”

“Apologies, but I’m in a hurry.”

“I need only a minute or two.”

The two spoke in clipped tones, accustomed to pressing the other person into acquiescing.

“Sharon was talking about it. She said she’d already made a promise with Mister Tanzine that the two would go to the ball together.”

Marina’s words echoed in her mind, unbidden.

Unlike Oriana's previous life, Vincent wasn't dating her. It was none of her business who he showered with kindness, spoke alone with, or invited to the ball. She'd no right to chastise him for it.

Perhaps Sharon had come to speak with him about the ball. If that were the case, it was a conversation Oriana didn't care to overhear. She slinked toward the wall.

Vincent immediately noticed her attempt to escape, pinning her with a glare. "Where do you think *you're* going?"

"I…uh…figured you guys needed to talk."

It would be agony to hear you and her have that conversation. It's painful enough seeing you speak to her right now. But I don't even have the right to say that to you, given we're just friends.

Oriana could *pretend* to be a spoiled child with him, but she dared not to actually presume on his kindness.

When we were dating, I took it all for granted—I thought it was natural for two people in love to be the way we were. Now I realize how much I was letting him spoil me.

Since Vincent was treating her as a friend, she couldn't bring herself to step over that boundary. A friend wouldn't talk about feeling agonized in this situation.

I can't cling to him, but I can't tell him to leave me alone either.

As Oriana retreated a step, Vincent glared at her.

"Do you really think I'd stop to speak with her? And do you plan on running off to Turkey in the meantime?"

Well, if possible, I'd like to go back so I can get an answer from him.

Although she was hesitant to interrupt him during dance practice.

As Oriana waffled back and forth without giving a definite answer, Vincent's eyes narrowed further. Beside him, Sharon gave her an apologetic look.

"I'm sorry, Miss Elsha. Would you mind if I… Just for a few minutes?"

“No, be my guest. Go ahead,” Oriana blurted instinctively.

That pause in the middle of Sharon’s sentence was intentional, and Oriana got the distinct feeling the missing words were not “Would you mind if I *borrow him*” but rather, “Would you mind if I *take him back.”*

Vincent glowered at Oriana, silently scolding her for answering on his behalf. “Wait here a moment,” he commanded.

“Uh, actually…”

“*Right* here.”

“Ummm…”

Oriana continued repeating the same noncommittal answer. She didn’t really want him to see how crushed she was that he was prioritizing Sharon, and she also didn’t want to obey his orders.

Plus, he seems angry. That’s unsettling. And now I *feel a bit annoyed. I just want to run away. If he wants to talk, we can do it later. Just let me escape for now.*

Wiggling her way back into his good graces could wait until later. For right now, she needed to put her own mental recovery first, lest she risk taking her emotions out on him.

“I *want* you to wait here.”

Oriana’s face puckered with reluctance. “Uh-huh.”

Vincent grabbed her wrist, and she heard a whistle of air being sucked between teeth. She didn’t register at first that it was her own teeth until seconds later. As far as she could remember, the time with her fever aside, Vincent had never once willingly touched her in this timeline. Left with no other choice, he’d fend her off when she tried to cling to him. But outside of that, this was the first time he’d ever grabbed her of his own volition.

Because he’s a gentleman. It’s not in his nature to touch a girl without getting her permission first.

Of course, that wasn’t a rule here at the school. Plenty of boys and girls touched each other on a daily basis which rendered the whole proper etiquette

point moot. Still, Oriana knew that Vincent held steadfastly to being a gentleman, no matter his surroundings.

Oriana stared down at her wrist, eyes wide as her brain struggled to process what'd happened.

Pleased to see her acting obedient, not unlike a freshly leashed dog, Vincent turned back toward Sharon. Sharon said nothing, and the two stepped a few feet away to talk.

Oriana tried to distract her thoughts, so she didn't eavesdrop on the conversation, but with them standing so close, it was impossible. The topic was the ball, as she'd anticipated. Apparently, Sharon wanted to ask Vincent's opinion on her dress. Vincent didn't see the urgency in the matter and was clearly disgruntled, but he kept up his polite pretense. Even though he was in a hurry himself, he was too much of a gentleman to dismiss a girl looking to him for assistance.

The conversation was totally private, which made it all the more uncomfortable to overhear. Oriana tried to turn away, but she could still feel the lingering touch of his hand on her wrist, which rooted her in place.

It wasn't like I was trying *to run away. And it wasn't like I was pretending so I could get his attention, either.*

Although she couldn't blame anyone for interpreting it that way. She'd probably looked like a sulky child throwing a fit to get her way. Sharon must have thought so, judging by the way her brows had shot up to her hairline as she'd watched the two.

Alas, Oriana had no choice but to wait for their conversation to be over.

Why're you making me listen to this?

She was on the verge of losing her temper with Vincent.

Is this your way of telling me I don't have a chance with you? You don't have to go that far! I'm not foolish enough to ask you to the ball.

"My apologies for interrupting you two, Miss Elsha," said Sharon.

As Oriana was busy spacing out, their conversation must have come to an

end. She jerked around to look at Sharon, but Vincent grabbed her and started dragging her away.

“We’ll be off then.” Vincent wasted no time bidding Sharon farewell before he left, and Oriana had no choice but to be swept along.

Since she’d tuned out their conversation, Oriana had no idea how it’d ended, but regardless, Vincent still planned to talk to her about something—whatever that was. He insistently tugged her along by the hand, which was very unlike him.

Oriana cast a glance over her shoulder. Sharon was watching them leave, her lips pulled tight.

Seeing Sharon on the brink of tears brought the anxiety flooding in. As Vincent charged on ahead, Oriana’s hand in his grasp, she glanced up at his back. Was the way he’d handled all of that really a good idea?

By prioritizing Oriana, he’d made it look like the two were more than friends. He’d effectively spurned the girl he was taking to the dance when all she wanted was to gush about the upcoming ball and the dress she planned to wear. What little conscience Oriana had ached with guilt.

I wonder if he explained things properly—that he only wants to confirm something with me, and there’s nothing more to it than that.

Oriana chastised herself for wasting her time thinking such things. Vincent and Sharon were close enough to be partners. They didn’t need her concern.

As they turned out of the hallway and cut across the garden, Oriana grew more anxious, wondering where they were going. Vincent didn’t stop until they were at the back of the school building, which was completely deserted.

After a small pause, Vincent explained, “The girl who interrupted us is my cousin.”

“Huh?”

“I owe much to her father. The two of us met often when we were younger, so she likely feels more relaxed around me. Although the type of dress she wears has nothing to do with me.”

“Okay…?”

Vincent must not have expected her to react that way because he frowned, his words running together as he hurriedly went on, “The two of us were engaged but only for a *very* short time—nothing more than a blink of an eye, I assure you. And that engagement has been completely nullified.”

“Oh, yes. I know that.” Oriana bobbed her head.

Vincent knitted his brows and stared at her. “Why? Only my closest relatives should be privy to such—” No sooner had the words left his mouth than the realization dawned on him. His glare turned even more hostile than it’d ever been before. “*Vince* must’ve told you.”

Oriana nodded.

A heavy silence ensued.

To Vincent, this was probably a heavily guarded secret. He’d probably hoped to elicit some sort of reaction from her by confiding it. Alas, since she already knew about it, he was left scowling.

“But Vincent, you *are* going to the ball with Sharon, aren’t you?”

“What, did Vince tell you that too?”

The two hadn’t spoken of the Vince from her previous lifetime lately. Now she realized that their relationship had been all the calmer for it. The passing mention of him was enough to get Vincent’s feathers ruffled.

“Then so be it. If *that’s* what you desire, I shall dance with her.”

Desire, my butt! I never said a word about wanting you to go with her!

Oriana’s brows furrowed at the cruel accusation. She was at a loss for words, unsure of how to respond—or even if she *should.* Her lips pulled tight as she kept her silence.

“By the way…” Vincent was the one who broke the silence, unable to let it linger between them. “Who did you dance with in your previous timeline? It seems only fair you should share, since you apparently already know who I danced with.” He spoke with bitter contempt, making it clear he had no real desire to hear the answer.

It wasn't as if Oriana had cheated and looked into the future. She huffed, "You."

"…Pardon?"

"I'm saying it was *you*—you were my partner in my past life!"

He gawked at her, brows drawn. "You mean to say Sharon and I did not go together?"

"No. I was talking about this timeline. The one you're going with this time is Sharon, right? Last time, *I* was the one you went with."

Oriana's cheeks flushed. Even the air felt hot as it rushed down her throat and into her lungs. Her inner voice of reason was chastising her for saying such a thing—and for the words that threatened to follow—but the anger boiling in her chest had nowhere else to go. Her raging emotions drowned out any logic she might have otherwise employed.

"Because…*you* brought me a bouquet! And told me how much *you* liked me!"

Her face was brighter than the reddest tomato by this point. Dying of embarrassment, she clapped both hands over her cheeks, writhing in place. Vincent must've interpreted her meltdown as gushing over nostalgic memories because he let out a long, drawn-out sigh.

"It seems I stand no chance of victory at anything when competing with Vince."

Oriana thought her words might provoke his anger—might make him disparage his former self, but contrary to her expectations, his voice sounded fatigued instead. She forgot her anger and embarrassment and scrutinized Vincent.

He schooled his expression, steeling himself with determination as he glanced her way. "You are to stay here. Understood?"

"Uh, what?"

"You are not to move from this spot. Not a single step."

"Um…"

“Please. I ask you to promise me you will remain here until I return.” His eyes were so earnest as they pierced right through her.

Timidly, Oriana nodded. She had no idea what was going on, but all she had to do was wait for him, right?

“Got it. I’ll stay here then.”

“I’ll return as swiftly as I am able.” With that, he turned, his robe fluttering behind him as he strode away. He wasn’t even trying to speed-walk—he was outright sprinting.

I think this might be the first time I’ve ever seen Vincent run.

Oriana leaned her back against the wall, miffed at herself for unconsciously finding him so attractive and annoyed at Vincent for being so appealing to begin with.

❦ ❦ ❦

WHEN Vincent returned, he held a tiny bouquet in his hands. Closer inspection revealed they were all flowers and wild grasses from the nearby forest. He was scowling too, as if disgruntled. Tiny beads of sweat were running down his forehead, and his normally perfectly groomed hair was disheveled. Even his pant legs were covered in mud and dried grass. It looked like he’d gone running through a field or something.

“This was all I could prepare,” he admitted bitterly as he thrust it toward her.



Although utterly bewildered at what was happening, Oriana managed to straighten herself and tottered forward.

“Now you will dance with me, yes?”

No sooner had Oriana accepted the bouquet than she fell to her knees, with such force that Vincent recoiled in shock.

“What’s the matter?!”

“*Nnngh…* I *will!* I’ll dance with you!” Oriana managed to squeak out, face puckered.

It felt as if Cupid’s arrow had struck her square in the heart. Her heart ached from the flood of emotion, leaving her utterly breathless—a sensation she’d never experienced to this degree before.

Vincent grunted in response, and even that was so adorable and endearing that she couldn’t handle it. She buried her face in the dirt below.

What warmed her heart more than anything was not that the two of them were partners again. Nor that Vincent had been the one to invite her as before. It was that he brought her a bouquet, like he had back then. That memory had meant so much to her, and rather than dismiss it as a thing of the past, Vincent had recreated it for her.

I want to throw my arms around him. I want to hold his hands. I want to kiss him!

True, Vince and Vincent were different in some ways, but they weren’t entirely separate.

That’s what makes it so difficult. In times like this with Vince, I could say whatever I wanted and he’d dote on me. Even now, he’s right beside me, and yet…

“*Haaah…*” She let out a long, long sigh.

Vincent, who’d been trying to pull her back to her feet, flinched. “Do you not think that reaction is a bit uncalled for?”

“Ugh, stop talking…”

“Enough.” He yanked her upright. As she stared absently up at him, he retrieved a handkerchief from his pocket and gently wiped away the bits of dirt on her face.

“Ughhhh…”

“Why are you moaning like that?”

“Don’t look so closely at my face…” Oriana mumbled.

“Again with this? I’ve already told you that you’re adorable.”

“*Gaaah!* Stop. No more talking. And don’t look! Don’t say anything!”

“Why? Because I have the same face and voice as Vince? I can hardly help that. We are the same—”

“That should be obvious! It’s because I’m *embarrassed!*” Oriana snapped, blushing as she snatched the handkerchief from his hand. Her mouth hung open, trembling, and tears began falling down her cheeks.

Silence stretched between them.

As her words sunk in, Vincent’s face slowly heated as well.

Another long pause and he finally muttered, “O-Oh…”

More silence.

“…Yeah,” Oriana eked out.

They both averted their eyes to the ground, and for a while, Oriana dared not lift her head.

Chapter 10: The Star's Protector

"OH my, so you and Mister Tanzine are partners now? How *wonderful!* Congratulations."

"Ehehe, thanks!"

The two girls were back at their room in the dormitory, where Oriana now recounted the day's happenings. Behind the curtain-drawn windows, night had already fallen. Sounds from the downstairs lounge echoed up through the halls.

Yana was on the floor practicing her yoga, listening nonchalantly to Oriana's story.

"So he confessed his affections?"

"No…he didn't."

Yana pulled a face.

Oriana similarly scowled at her friend as she protested, "B-But still, like you said, people can be partners without being in love."

"Yes, though the two of you seem more like lovers. Surely you must think he chose you for romantic reasons, no?"

Well, to be honest, yeah. I kinda do.

She glanced over at the bouquet he'd given her and pursed her lips in a pout. "But he didn't say a word about liking me," she muttered bitterly, unable to mask her dissatisfaction.

After the two had recovered from their blushing fits, they'd shared an awkward farewell and parted ways. Oriana had thought that was the best option at the time. Neither of them were in the right headspace to discuss their relationship and what this meant for their future.

"Can I let myself believe this means something? I feel like I can…"

She did when Vince invited her and that'd turned out to be the right choice.

Still, she wasn't clear on why exactly Vincent had invited her.

Judging by the way he talked, the most obvious motivation is the competitiveness he seems to feel toward Vince.

Oriana closed her eyes, humming under her breath in thought.

Yana sighed. "And what of the whispers that he's going with Sharon Beezel?"

"Those rumors made it all the way to your class, too? *Hm.* Well, I guess they must've been no more than idle gossip."

Vincent acted as if he'd no intention whatsoever of going with Sharon. Besides, he hadn't actually decided on a partner. If he had, then he wouldn't have threatened to go with Sharon when he and Oriana had started bickering earlier.

Marina had mentioned that Sharon had made a promise to go with Vincent to the ball prior to their long break, but perhaps that wasn't a school ball she was referring to, but rather one of the nobility's many social events or something. Were that the case, it made sense why Vincent stated her dress had nothing to do with him. The two things were entirely unrelated.

But if so, then why did Miss Beezel come to speak with him? Maybe she was bringing it up in hopes that he would invite her to this ball too…

Oriana and Sharon weren't on bad terms per se, but they weren't close either. Certainly not close enough to have a conversation about this topic, so all Oriana could do was infer.

"Men don't like women who ask incessant questions. That said, Oriana, wouldn't you like to have confirmation?" Yana stopped her yoga momentarily, directing a meaningful look at her friend.

"Maybe I don't, actually."

Of course she wanted to know, but the opposite words fell from her lips. As long as she didn't proclaim her own adoration, Vincent was kind to her. He let his guard down, helped her out when she needed it, and had even chosen her as his one and only partner. Plus, he called her adorable!

The strings of hope had been cut so many times, but a part of her dared to

hope again, thinking that maybe this time would be different—that maybe he would profess his love for her in this life too.

But what if he shoots me down again?

The very thought made her legs freeze, rendering her motionless.

Vincent still hadn't taken back his demands for her to stop sharing her feelings for him, so she didn't want to expect anything else. Keeping things vague guaranteed she could continue their current close proximity.

"What about you, Yana?"

"What *about* me?"

"Do you want confirmation?"

After a pause, she said, "I see your point. No…I don't want it either." Then she mumbled, "And that's why I'm here."

If they voiced the unspoken, the tenuous relationship they enjoyed now would crumble. Oriana and Yana were alike in that way; both were walking a tightrope.

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PREPARATIONS for the ball were progressing smoothly.

It took no time at all for word of Vincent and Oriana's partnership to spread throughout the school, but it created no great stir. Most students did little more than shrug and say, "Yep, that figures."

Their after-school dance lessons were also proceeding apace. A few days ago, Professor Wilton selected the student who would receive the prized dance with Vincent. She was a fifth-year in Class 2. Her father held a knight title, but she was only a commoner. Considering Professor Wilton had secured the assembly hall for them and provided so much support, no one dared protest her decision. Instead, they cheered on the victor.

Vincent would escort her to the middle of the dance floor and share the first number with her. She was tall and beautiful, and Oriana could imagine the two twirling together. No doubt it would be a sight to behold. In Oriana's previous timeline, she and this girl had been close friends, so she was genuinely happy

for her.

Although Oriana had already moved along preparations for her dress during their break, she added some revisions to her wardrobe to account for her partnership with Vincent. She switched her shoes to ones that would better match his attire. They were made of a dark-gray material with a fine polish that made light glimmer off them. They would glow silver under the chandeliers, which was the same color as the buttons on Vincent's vest.

For her dress, Oriana had merely requested that it be pink. She hesitated over whether it was the right decision, but it *was* a shade that veered closer to violet. Even though they had no plans of partnering up at the time, she still selected the fabric for her dress with Vincent's eye color in mind. She convinced herself it was all right because it wasn't *completely* purple, but if anyone who knew her gazed upon it, they would know instantly who she had in mind.

Her hair piece was fashioned after an iris. In Amanecer, the iris was the most traditional purple flower. Since it was a silverwork broach, the implied color wasn't readily apparent, but anyone knowledgeable about flowers would recognize it immediately.

I know it's a little late for this now, but even I'm embarrassed at how lovestruck I am!

If people were going to laugh at her anyway, best she save that for the day of the actual ball. She stowed away both the dress and the hair adornment in her closet.

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"…AND so, at the tender age of ten, Azraq mastered Ete Karima's four martial arts and became our country's strongest warrior." Yana wore the graceful smile of a princess, and behind her, Azraq kept his poker face, despite the small smirk on his lips that suggested how proud he was to hear her brag about him.

It was their lunch break, and after polishing off her meal, Oriana was enjoying some tea with Yana and Azraq. Her eyes sparkled as she glanced sidelong at Yana's bodyguard.

"Isn't he a little *too* amazing?"

“Renown is required of a princess’s bodyguard, but my relatives exaggerated my achievements,” Azraq said with a bitter smile.

“Not at all.” Yana shook her head. “Azraq really *has* been incredible ever since he was little. If only there were a potion to turn back time, I’d have him drink it and show you.”

“If you discovered a new potion like that, Professor Heinz would have you locked up until you coughed up exactly how you created it,” said Oriana.

“Oh, you’re no fun! Don’t you want to see what he was like when he was younger?”

Oriana set her teacup back down on its saucer and solemnly replied, “I do.”

Yana must have recognized how earnest Oriana was being because she grinned and nodded. “I would *love* to see him as a boy again too. He’s fully grown now, but back then, he was so slender and beautiful as a hawk.”

Oriana stared at Azraq, finding it difficult to conjure the image that Yana painted of him. Strangely, she *could* imagine a younger Vincent, and she had to shake her head to drive the image out of her mind. To distract herself from the awkwardness, she turned her attention back to Azraq and tried once more to picture him as a boy. Azraq was indifferent to her attempts, coolly sipping on his tea.

“So the two of you have been acquainted since you were children?” Oriana asked.

“That’s right. We’ve been together for as long as I can remember. When I was younger, I’d always chase him around.”

Instead of sitting back in her chair, Yana leaned her weight against Azraq’s shoulder as he sat beside her. The two were in shockingly close proximity, but Azraq acted accustomed to it, silently supporting her with his body.

“Then it would be wonderful if you could continue being together forever,” said Oriana.

“Yes, it would.” Yana smiled warmly, and Azraq glanced down at her for a brief moment. He looked away just as quickly, before Oriana could pick up on it.

Oriana had avoided thinking about her future, but in less than a year, they'd be graduating from Lagen Magic Academy. When the time came, she would have to part with Yana and Azraq. Unfortunate though it was, Yana *was* Ete Karima royalty, and she'd no doubt have to return there. At least when that happened, the princess would still have Azraq by her side.

I envy her for being able to stay with him forever.

"Oh, Miss Elsha! There you are!"

A familiar voice was accompanied by a flurry of footsteps as the prefect, Derek Turkey, weaved through the tables to make his way to her.

"Sorry for interrupting your break, but have you forgotten to submit your report for Magic Circle Research?"

Oriana gasped. "Yes, I…*have* forgotten. Sorry, I'll run back to my dorm to grab it. I'd feel guilty asking you to wait for me, so I will deliver it to the teacher personally."

"Professor Quicee already demanded I turn them all in together, so for my own sake, I'd rather you handed it to me."

Oriana paled as she shot out of her chair, banging her knee against the table in the process. It rattled her cup enough to send it toppling over, but Azraq managed to catch it before it shattered on the ground.

"Oh gosh, sorry, Azraq! And thank you!"

"Elsha, you've really been on edge lately."

"Yes, you're right… I'll try to be more careful." She pressed her hands together and bowed her head toward him before whipping around to face Derek. "Mister Turkey, I am truly sorry. I'll hurry back with it!"

"Nah, it's totally fine. I'll tag along partway."

"I really *do* feel awful about this! Yana, Azraq, excuse me for a bit!"

"See you later!"

"Take care."

Oriana gathered up her empty dishes and quickly returned them before

making her way back to Derek.

Since the equipment room for Magic Circle Research was in the eastern building, that put it midway between here and the girls' dormitory. It made the most sense for Derek to wait for her there.

"I really *had* forgotten until you told me. Thanks for giving me the heads up," said Oriana as they made their way toward the dorm.

"It's totally fine. You've done a lot for me, and I'm sure this is the first time you've ever forgotten a report."

"I'm so ashamed…"

Oriana had been strict with her studies so she could remain close to Vincent, but now that they were in their final term, perhaps she *had* grown a bit lax.

No. In truth, she knew the real reason.

I got carried away like a lovesick puppy.

Oriana had been walking on cloud nine in the days following Vincent asking her to be his partner. No matter what she did or who she talked to, her mind would always wander back to him.

Although she would often squee and fuss over Vincent, she'd maintained *some* level of professionalism, which was why everyone was surprised at her sudden transformation. The person most taken aback by these changes, however, was Oriana herself.

I could die *of embarrassment! I want to crawl into a hole and never come out.*

If Vincent were to call her name at the mouth of such a hole, she'd gladly climb out to meet him. But while she couldn't win against him even in her imagination, she didn't resent herself for it.

"You know, I sure am glad," said Derek with a great big grin on his face as the two walked side-by-side. They'd split the load, so Oriana was carrying one half of the reports, while he hauled the rest.

"Glad about what?" Oriana tilted her head in confusion. They were on their way to pick up the report she'd forgotten—what was there to be glad about with that?

“That things worked out.”

“Sorry?”

“That you have a partner now.”

Oriana tripped, sending the reports scattering through the air. She was so dumbstruck by her faux pas that she remained on her knees, staring absently. Derek, on the other hand, rushed to retrieve all the papers. When she finally regained her senses, Oriana blushed and scrambled up, helping him chase them all down.

“S-S-Sorry about that!”

After gathering the reports into a messy pile, the two pulled off to the side of the hallway to check through them.

Since Oriana had attempted to invite Derek to the ball, she’d let him know that she and Vincent were going together instead. He was genuinely happy for her and uttered not a single complaint about her abandoning him, despite being the one to invite him.

“Seeing how flustered you’ve been lately, the whole class has been talking about how happy they are that things worked out.”

“What?! The whole *class?!* Why?! Oh, God, please make it stop…”

If one could die from embarrassment, Oriana would’ve keeled over then and there. To divert her attention, she focused instead upon meticulously aligning the corners of each report.

“Ahaha! They were all overjoyed, saying, ‘Well, it’s about time.’”

“‘Overjoyed?’” Oriana gaped at him. “A-Are you telling me they’ve all been rooting for me?”

“What? You didn’t know?”

No, of *course* she didn’t know. She’d only ever had eyes for Vincent. She didn’t think she’d built up enough of a rapport with her peers for them to cheer her on. Perhaps they considered her more of a comrade than she’d realized. She was happy, but the ill timing left her flustered.

“Hold on,” she said. “Just so we’re clear, Vincent and I aren’t in *that* kind of a relationship. There’s nothing to celebrate.”

“If you say so.”

“I *do* say so!”

“All right.”

Derek appeared to be taking her words to heart on the surface, but she got the feeling he didn’t really believe her.

Besides, even assuming she and Vincent did somehow manage to become lovers, she wouldn’t be able to be with him for the rest of her life—not like Azraq and Yana. They would both have to marry for their respective houses after graduation. Forever didn’t exist for her and Vincent.

“Well, even though we’ve been in the same class for the past five years, I never dreamed a day would come when I’d see you like…well, this. You always struck me as mature for your age, like you were three or four years older than the rest of us.”

“What?! *Me?* Why?” Her eyes went wide.

“*Mm…* Something about the way you think about things is different from the rest of us. Like no matter what comes your way, you’re already ten steps ahead and waiting for it.”

“Huh…” Oriana bobbed her head, impressed by what she was hearing. She never meant to seem more mature than her peers, but perhaps it was a consequence of this being her second time through the same things.

“That’s why it’s so…moving,” said Derek. “Seeing you in love like this, I mean.”

“Please don’t be moved. And don’t say the obvious out loud.” Oriana held up the stack of reports in front of her face, muttering in a voice barely above a whisper.

“Can’t believe you’re blushing now after how unabashedly you proclaimed your affection for Mister Tanzine.”

She couldn’t argue that point, but his words only made it worse. The heat traveled all the way from her cheeks to her ears as she continued holding up

the stack of papers to block her face.

“Hey, don’t do that! You’ll crumple the reports if you squeeze them that tightly.”

“Ack, sorry! Ugh, I keep screwing up.”

Seriously! Nothing *is going right!*

Face pinched with dismay, Oriana quickly smoothed out the wrinkles on the reports.

❦ ❦ ❦

“HEYA, Oriana.”

After slipping out of the school building, Oriana and Derek cut through the courtyard on their way to the eastern building, where they were flagged down by Miguel.

“Miguel! Nice to see you. What are you carrying?”

At first, Miguel eyed the stack of reports in her hands curiously, but soon enough, he grinned, making the lollipop stick protruding from his mouth bounce. “Holy swords. I yanked them out of a rock.”

“No kidding? They look strong.”

“Pretty incredible, right?” He was carrying two wooden swords in one hand, which he brandished in the air for show.

“Are you planning on dueling to win Miss Mahathin’s hand?” Derek asked, his eyes lighting up.

“’Tis my duty as the prodigal son of an earl to ensnare the desert princess with my charms. Apparently, anyway.” Miguel spoke with such disinterest, like the matter didn’t even pertain to him.

Oriana laughed. “Well, there’ve been plenty of rumors about the two of you. There was one about how you’d already given her a wedding band and another about you dodging Azraq’s watchful eye to sneak out on frequent dates.”

“That *is* impressive. If I’m sneaky enough to dodge Zalena’s watch, I’d make a fine spy.”

“I heard you’ve already been summoned by her father to Ete Karima,” Derek remarked.

Miguel’s expression clouded over. “Not much worse than being summoned by someone’s father. Or your own, for that matter.”

“What’s wrong?” Oriana asked.

“Well,” Miguel explained, “speaking of fathers and summoning, mine sent for me. I had to go to the city.”

As long as students had permission, they were allowed to venture out to the city. This was generally limited to the weekends, but professors would allow it during the week if someone had a proper reason. When school was in session, most nobles took up residence in the city. Earl Ferveira was no exception and was likely living in the capital.

“Did you do something bad enough for him to drag you out like that?”

“You *truly* think he’d rake his prodigal son over the coals?”

The realization hit her and she gaped before asking, “Don’t tell me he’s heard the rumors too? And he *believes* them?”

The corner of Miguel’s mouth twisted. “It’s enough for my old man just for there to be rumors at all.”

In other words, since there was already smoke, his father had figured they may as well start a fire.

“Wait, so you really *are* about to challenge Azraq?!”

“Yep. I figure one match ought to be enough to convince my father to give up.” Miguel spoke as though his defeat was a foregone conclusion, not that Oriana could blame him; Azraq remained undefeated.

“*Aww,* I wanna watch!”

“You want to watch him wipe the floor with me? Oriana, please. You could at *least* cheer me on.”

“Oh, I’ll cheer you on! I promise! So, when are you going to do it?”

“Right now. Figure I’d better get it over with quickly, so I’m going to do it

while we're on lunch break. It was good timing that I found you, in fact. Do you know where the two of them are right now?"

So that was why he'd called out to her.

Oriana's shoulders slumped. She had to return to the girls' dormitory to retrieve her report and take it to the eastern building. That meant she likely wouldn't make it in time to see the duel.

"What a bummer. I won't be able to make it… Anyway, a few minutes ago, they were still in the cafeteria—on the right side by the windows."

"Thanks. See ya 'round!" Miguel leaned the two wooden swords on his shoulders and hurried toward the cafeteria.

"Too bad we can't watch," said Derek.

"Seriously."

After sharing their complaints, they continued onward.

❦ ❦ ❦

AFTER turning in the reports—hers included—with Derek, Oriana returned to the cafeteria by herself. She wanted to see how Miguel's duel had gone.

As she was on her way back to the spot where she'd parted ways with Yana and Azraq earlier, she heard commotion coming from the space beside the cafeteria. Oriana edged closer and found a crowd of students gathered in a single area. It immediately dawned upon her—this was where they were carrying out their duel.

Awesome! I actually made it in time!

She crept closer. Part of the reason she hoped it wasn't over was simply because she'd never seen Miguel in combat before, and curiosity had her itching for a glimpse.

Alas, since the initial stir from the crowd, everyone had gone still. It was so silent, one could almost hear a pin drop. Even if the duel was already over, it was strange for them to freeze up like that.

As she tried to peek through the gaps between the rows of people, some of

the bystanders turned to look at her. They all wore bitter, conflicted expressions on their faces. She thought it was because they resented Miguel for sneaking in a duel before them, but that didn't seem to be the case. The crowd stared at her in confusion before splitting to make a path for her.

Dread filled her chest.

Oriana's feet carried her forward through the ocean of students. She could see nothing yet, but the ill premonition had her heart hammering. When she saw the two in the middle, she gulped.

"Miguel?"

It seemed the match was over. Miguel was holding a wooden sword in hand, though his arm hung limply at his side. He didn't even glance her way; he was too busy gaping at the man kneeling in front of him. And that man was Azraq.

Oriana couldn't believe her eyes. Azraq was meekly bowing his head to his opponent.

"I underestimated you. Victory is yours."

For a moment, Oriana couldn't digest the words that tumbled from Azraq's lips. The shock hit her square in the chest, giving her no time to process it. She scanned the faces around her, looking for Yana. It took only a few seconds to locate her. People had vacated the area around her, as if she was volatile and they feared being caught in the explosion. Yet, at the same time, they looked at her with curiosity, wondering what she might do next.

Oriana rushed over to her best friend's side. She moved to throw her arms around Yana but froze. There was something so aloof and unapproachable about the foreign princess as she stood there.

Azraq turned toward them—or toward Yana, rather. Oriana was sure no one else even registered in his mind.

"I expended all of my power to best him, but it failed me. If you would order me, I would fight with my life on the line—"

"Enough," Yana replied curtly.

Azraq kept his head bowed, making it impossible to read his expression.

Meanwhile, Yana’s eyes looked as frigid as the desert night, belying no emotion.



“You’ve done enough,” said Yana. “Will you return to Ete Karima?”

“Only by your leave.” Azraq bowed his head even lower, enough that his forehead was nearly touching the ground where his knees were.

Despite the vast number of people gathered, no one dared speak. That wasn’t due to shock, but rather, because they were all awed by the sanctity of what they were witnessing.

“Azraq.” Yana kept her gaze glued to him, her voice deep and low.

“My lady?”

“You have fulfilled your duty.”

Those almost sounded like parting words.

Yana didn’t want to hear his reply; she spun around on her heel. Those who’d crowded behind her nearly tripped over themselves to make way for her. She kept her back straight, her chin high, and her expression dignified as she strode away.

Oriana glanced between her friend’s retreating figure and Azraq. Her gaze then wandered to Miguel, who was gaping in disbelief. It was only then that the latter recognized her presence.

“I’m going,” she said to him.

“Got it.”

It was a brief exchange but more than enough for the two of them.

Oriana chased after Yana.

❦ ❦ ❦

THE man who defeated the princess’s bodyguard would take her for a wife. Such a tradition, in an age where even nobility now married for love, seemed heavily outdated to most people.

Nonetheless, Yana had endured this trial for the past five years, with Azraq—a man she trusted more than anyone else—at her side. But today, he’d lost. Oriana hadn’t witnessed the match. But Azraq really *had* lost to Miguel.

Despite five years of grappling with their trials, neither Azraq nor Yana made a fuss when they came to an end.

It was unnatural. Heartrending.

“Yana!”

Midway, Oriana quickened her pace, but she only caught up once Yana reached the Dragon’s Tree. Yana probably didn’t even realize she was being followed. She was hugging her arms around herself, trembling. When Oriana called her name, she jumped. Slowly, she looked over her shoulder. Her eyes were round, and in them, Oriana could see her own reflection.

“Yana…”

Yana tried to plaster a smile on her face, but the shape broke as her lips trembled. Maybe she was loath to admit her true feelings. She was pursing her lips so tight they turned white. After two deep breaths, she managed to regain enough composure to speak.

“I am ashamed to have you see me like this.”

“There’s absolutely nothing for you to be ashamed about.”

Yana was trying her utmost to conduct herself like a princess. She didn’t let herself fall to pieces in front of anyone. She didn’t rebuke Azraq for losing, nor did she curse Miguel for winning. There was no one she could direct her pent-up feelings toward. And so, she’d retreated deep into the forest, where she held her arms around herself.

Oriana tentatively wrapped her arms around Yana’s shoulders. The latter went rigid, as if she didn’t know what to make of Oriana’s sudden warmth.

“I knew this day would eventually come,” Yana choked out, her breath hitting Oriana’s shoulder. “There wasn’t a day it left my mind. I thought about it every night, worried every morning—that today might be the day Azraq finally loses…”

A tremor ran through her voice as her breathing became more and more erratic.

“I was the one who asked for this trial. For five years, I monopolized him. This is my punishment. But please, Oriana…” Yana rested her forehead against Oriana’s shoulder. Her body was still tense. She focused all of her power on forcing out the words, “Please…I *need* to hear you say…that Azraq really fought with all his might…”

Oriana squeezed her friend. Stiff as she was, Yana trembled at the touch.

When Oriana first saw Azraq and Miguel standing opposite each other, she’d had a sense that something was off. Now she knew why.

Miguel did have a stunning physique. He was also tall like Azraq, which was admittedly rare at the school. The muscles in Miguel’s thighs far exceeded those of their peers, but even with all of that, Oriana still didn’t think he’d stood a chance at beating Azraq.

It went without saying that Yana knew even better than her just how strong Azraq was. The Desert Flower’s protector was without peer, and his power was so renowned that Ete Karima heralded him as their most powerful warrior.

It seemed impossible that Azraq would lose to Miguel if he truly battled with all his might. That could only mean that he’d gone easy on Miguel. He must’ve decided that Miguel was someone worthy of entrusting Yana to. Thus, by that judgment, he’d conceded defeat.

This was a devastating blow for Yana, given how much she loved Azraq.

Oriana couldn’t find the words to assure Yana as she desired.

“He gave our battle his all,” said a voice behind them.

Oriana flinched. Miguel was standing there. She squeezed Yana tighter. It wasn’t that she was trying to protect her friend from Miguel, but she didn’t think the victor of the duel should see Yana in her current state—regardless of whether Azraq fought earnestly or not. For both their sakes, she kept Yana hidden in her embrace.

“Zalena held nothing back. As the one who battled him, I can assure you of this.” Miguel’s voice held none of the playfulness it usually did; he was being entirely sincere.

Yana trembled in Oriana's arms.

"Miguel, why…?" Oriana asked.

"Surprised, right? I figured I'd give it a shot, doomed as my chances were, so I could shut my father up…"

No one would've expected that to lead to *this*. No one except Azraq, that is.

"…But much to my own surprise, I seem to be ridiculously powerful." Miguel grinned. He didn't have a lollipop stick between his lips as usual.

Miguel insisted Azraq had given him no handicap and that he won fairly. Everyone who watched the match would know otherwise, but still, he held fast to his version of events. That was most likely because he knew it to be the best way to shield Yana's heart.

"So…" Oriana asked, "Were things…okay on your end?"

"Yeah. Azraq exited the stage promptly. The other students were kicking up a fuss, though. I'm sure the commotion will be impossible to escape for a while. I told them to get to class for the time being. Thanks, Oriana, for going after Yana for me."

Those words surprised Oriana. Miguel already spoke as if she was his to protect—as if she were counted among the other responsibilities he was to inherit as heir to the Hydrangea Earldom. Thus, he had to thank Oriana since he'd entrust his own duty to her. She certainly hadn't expected to hear him express gratitude. In fact, she thought he'd come to refuse the honor of taking Yana as his bride—for her sake.

Miguel turned his gaze to Yana. "I'm sorry, Yana. I won't decline your hand. This is part of my responsibility as the eldest son of Ferveira." He wore a smile on his face, but he couldn't hide the guilt in his expression.

"Of course," Yana said, peeking her head out from Oriana's chest. Although not the face of a princess, she maintained at least some measure of dignity. "I apologize for leaving abruptly and not praising you more for your victory, Miguel. You fought valiantly. Congratulations. I am glad my champion is you."

Yana had likely practiced this same speech for the past five years so that she

could smile and laud the winner—whoever they were—without revealing her grief at losing Azraq. This conversation was one steeped in duty, where both parties were shouldering a heavy burden. Oriana could only look on with tears in her eyes.

Yana glanced back at her friend. “Oriana, thank you. You can go back now. Class will be starting.”

Oriana opened her mouth to protest but then closed it again. Finally, she nodded. Right now, she believed leaving them be the best choice—for Yana’s sake.

“Miguel, I congratulate you as well,” she said.

“Thank you.” He ruffled her hair.

As she headed back to the main school building, Oriana prayed that the same kindness she felt in Miguel’s touch would also help Yana heal.

❦ ❦ ❦

MIGUEL didn’t come to their afternoon classes.

When the chime sounded, signaling that school was over for the day, Oriana bid her professor a brief farewell before dragging Vincent out of the classroom. She brought him with her to the small lounge in the eastern building. Despite her actions being sudden and forceful, Vincent made no objection and was instead shockingly compliant.

Once they were safely inside the lounge with the door closed behind them, Vincent blurted, “What is this all about? Why have you brought me here?”

“I wanted us to be alone.”

“You wanted—”

Vincent’s words cut off abruptly as she grabbed his hand. Oriana knew he disliked excessive touch like this, but she hoped he might permit it right now. He gulped as she squeezed his hand in hers. Oriana had no idea how to cope with the rampaging impulses inside her.

Vincent went stiff with surprise. His other hand, which was free from her grasp, hovered awkwardly in the air before hesitantly clapping down where

their hands were connected. After a pause, he explained, “I think we should wait a bit longer before doing this.” His normally low and comforting voice raised an octave at the end, coming out a squeak.

Oriana shook her head. “I can’t wait.”

“Oriana…” Vincent murmured, stroking her arm affectionately.

She peered up at him, her cheeks rosy. “Vincent…”

“Yes?”

His voice tickled at her heart like a feather, prompting her eyes to grow misty. As her face contorted, he ran a hand through her hair, trying to comfort her.

“Um, you see, it’s about Miguel…”

“Come again?” His voice went rigid, as if he’d been rudely ripped out of a dream.

Oriana flinched in surprise, blinking up at him. “Wh-What’s wrong?”

“How does Miguel have anything to do with this?”

“Anything to do with what? Miguel is the whole reason I dragged you here.”

“You… So *that’s* what you wanted to talk about? Just the two of us?”

“Uh…yeah?”

He stared at her, looking as disgusted as if he’d swallowed a bug—or maybe hundreds of bugs, given the level of abhorrence on his face. Perhaps it was more accurate to say he was glowering at her.

“So what *about* Miguel?” Vincent’s voice was cold now, all of his warmth and gentleness forgotten. He plopped down in an armchair, and Oriana dragged a cushioned ottoman over so she could sit beside him.

“Okay, so you see, Miguel…”

“Yes?”

“Beat Azraq in a duel!”

Vincent gawked at her. “Miguel? *Our* Miguel?” Even he couldn’t have anticipated this shocking revelation. “Why would he even…”

“His father was on his case, apparently. And when he went through with the duel, he won!”

“Did you watch it play out?”

“I didn’t. I arrived as he won. Azraq was…” Unable to continue, Oriana shook her head. It made her chest seize, remembering Azraq on his knees in front of Miguel. “But no one wanted this,” she protested.

“It matters not whether anyone wished for it. It was fate. That trial was the very reason Miss Mahathin was here. Had she not undergone it, Miguel would’ve had no cause to challenge her bodyguard for her hand.”

Vincent likely realized Oriana was upset on Yana’s behalf, but his cool and detached commentary left her frowning.

“Have the two refused to accept this outcome?”

Oriana hesitated before admitting, “No, they’re accepting it. On the surface, anyway.”

“Then we have only to wait for it to sink in and become a reality for them. There’s nothing else the two of us can do.”

The tears she’d been holding back all afternoon came pouring down her cheeks. Her mind recognized the truth of what Vincent was saying, but her heart was struggling to accept it.

“Why is this happening…?”

“You needn’t be so sad. I’m sure the two of you will remain as close of friends as you always have, and Miguel will make a good husband for her. She’s been searching for a partner and she couldn’t do much better than Miguel.”

“That might be true, but…” Oriana’s voice trailed off as she struggled to come to grips with reality.

Vincent’s face hardened. “Then what? Are you *personally* dissatisfied with their engagement?” His voice was sharp and unforgiving.

Perhaps he was right. Since she couldn’t get over what was happening, she was taking it out on Vincent even though he had nothing to do with it.

“Who is your partner? *I* am—not Miguel.”

“We’re not *talking* about that right now,” Oriana argued.

“Yes, *you* are.”

“I am not! I’m talking about Yana! Azraq’s going back to Ete Karima now!”

Vincent pursed his lips, perhaps because the conversation had taken a turn he hadn’t anticipated. “Zalena is? Why? Is he not the princess’s bodyguard? I cannot imagine him leaving her side.”

“That’s how their conversation went after the duel. It’s like they were saying goodbye… Yana asked if he was going home and told him that he’d fulfilled his duty.”

Oriana lifted her legs onto the ottoman, hugging them to her chest as the tears poured out faster. “Yana will be so hurt, but she won’t show that to me.”

“Oh…”

“And if she doesn’t show me, I can’t comfort her.”

“True. I’m afraid I still lack awareness of Ete Karima’s customs, so I am not quite sure how that plays into this. But she’ll surely be lonely without him.”

“Yeah…”

“All the more reason for you to stick beside her closer than ever.”

“Yeah…” Oriana sniffled and nodded.

Yana had once told her, “I’m not trying to tell you to choose what path you want to walk right this moment. Simply, I want you to know that when you feel lost, you have me here beside you.”

So this *is how Yana felt back then. There’s still so much the two of us don’t know about each other. We’ve come this far without sharing. That’s why we can’t touch the deepest parts of each other’s hearts.*

Yana had promised to stay at her side. That was probably the best Yana could do, given Oriana was hiding the truth about this being her second life. The same was true for Oriana; since Yana had hidden the truth of her love, all Oriana could do was stick beside her.

“Wait, do you mean to say that Zalena and Miss Mahathin are…”

Oriana jumped. She timidly turned toward Vincent. He smiled wryly and spoke no more as he stroked her head. Tears welled up in her eyes again. She realized that Yana would never enjoy a warm caress like this on her head again.

❦ ❦ ❦

ORIANA had dinner with Vincent and Miguel, namely because Yana and Azraq were absent from the cafeteria.

Despite all the attention Miguel was drawing from winning the duel against Azraq, he acted no different than normal, much to Oriana’s surprise. He even brought the topic up without trying to purposefully avoid it. Oriana didn’t get the sense that he was forcing himself, and he did genuinely seem to be thinking about his future with Yana. She was grateful for that but melancholic all the same.

I feel awful for Yana, but I also wonder if this is really the best for Miguel.

Miguel had always listened to her problems, but Oriana realized she knew almost nothing about him.

Does he not have feelings for anyone else? Can he truly be satisfied, following his father’s wishes like this?

Asking as much would be an insult to the determination he was showing to see this through. Thus, Oriana swallowed down her cod roe spaghetti along with any words she might’ve otherwise spoken.

Even when Oriana finally left the cafeteria, Yana still refused to show her face. Worried that she might not have eaten anything, Oriana put in a request with the kitchen and received a sandwich, which she carried out with her in a small basket. Vincent and Miguel accompanied her until the girls’ dormitory came into view.

Once she was alone, she pulled her robe tighter around her body, chilled by the cold air. Right as she started regretting her choice not to wear a muffler, a shadow sprang out of the bushes around the building.

Oriana wanted to praise herself for managing to swallow back her shriek. Her

basket, sadly, was not so lucky; she'd flung it and probably made a mess of the sandwich inside.

"Oh gosh… Azraq!"

The man standing there, with his sun-kissed skin and black hair, was none other than Yana's bodyguard.

"I assume you want to see Yana, right?" Oriana excitedly sprang toward the front door of the dormitory. "Wait here a sec. I'll go get—"

"That's not necessary. I don't plan to meet with her."

She spun around to face him. "Azraq…" Seeing how earnest he looked, she stooped to grab her basket before turning her attention toward him again.

"I've already finished processing my withdrawal from the Academy. I will be leaving in a few moments."

So, he really did *mean it when he said he was going back.*

Oriana stared in mute amazement. His expression was so calm, like the still surface of a lake. She stepped closer, as if trying to cling to him. "What about guarding Yana?"

"No need to worry. I was never here alone. The Hidden—that is, other bodyguards—were lying in wait."

"Oh, I never realized…"

"Lady Yana is fully aware. But I have done you an injustice. While you were with Lady Yana, they were keeping an eye on you, too."

Oriana laughed it off. "They were guarding us, right? I should be glad for the protection then. Thank you." She smiled at him, and he drew his brows together, looking guilty.

"Elsha. I came to extend my gratitude."

His voice was so sincere that it made her jump.

"For these past five years, you've brought Lady Yana great comfort. I thank you from the bottom of my heart." His voice swelled with love for the princess.

Oriana bit down on her trembling lips and bravely lifted her face. "You're

making it sound like an eternal goodbye." She said it jokingly, but his face contorted.

"I will be leaving the country, and I doubt I will ever come here again."

"The country? You mean Amanecer, right?"

"No, Ete Karima."

Her jaw dropped. Not only was Azraq vacating the school, but he also never planned to return to this country *or* his own?

"B-But…isn't it an honor? Just because you lost, they're not going to get angry with you, are they?!"

"There is no way I could stay there." Azraq spoke with finality, self-deprecation seeping into his voice.

Oriana swallowed hard.

Azraq smiled bitterly as he said, "Sorry. Forget what I said."

Oriana grabbed a fistful of her hair. She *thought* she knew how Azraq felt, but his emotions likely ran far, far deeper than she could have ever fathomed—deep enough that he could not wait in Ete Karima, knowing Yana might eventually return with Miguel at her side.

"Elsha, I hope this won't anger you, but…"

"Yes?" Her voice hitched as she fought back tears.

Azraq pretended not to hear it as he continued, "For these past five years, I thought of us as kindred spirits."

"Then I hope you won't be angry either because I felt the same, Azraq."

Azraq had protected Yana physically, while Oriana had done so emotionally. No, she'd *tried* to. But she hadn't succeeded.

"I'm sorry, Azraq. I'm not worthy of being her personal attendant. I can't even get her to cry in front of me."

"There's no need for her to cry," he said. "The hurt she feels at my absence will soon disappear."

No, there's no way it will.

It would be so much easier for Oriana to blurt that out, but Yana had kept her feelings to herself up until the very end. Oriana had no right to speak of them on her behalf.

"Elsha, I hope you'll be friends with her forever. I hope you'll support her for years and years to come. This is a selfish request, I realize, but think of it as returning the favor you once promised me."

His words triggered memories of an earlier exchange they'd shared:

"You were the only person I could think to rely on."

"I told you already, it's fine."

"Seriously, thank you! Now I am indebted to you. I swear on my life, I will return the favor someday!"

"You exaggerate."

Back when she made that promise, she never dreamed that this future would await her.

Why are so many things happening this time that didn't happen in my original timeline?

Last time, Azraq remained undefeated up until Oriana's death. He and Yana went to the ball together, and as Yana predicted, they didn't bother dancing the waltz, instead opting to enjoy their food at the edge of the room. In the back of her mind, Oriana always thought their trial wouldn't conclude until much later.

This is my second life… Why wasn't I able to coordinate things better?

Regret bore down on her chest like a heavy weight. Even as she inwardly berated herself, she tried to smile, but it was strained and unnatural.

"I will be Yana's friend for as long as she allows me. But I would hate to break my word, knowing you might tell everyone the color of my underwear. So, even if she refuses to let me, I'll still cling to her 'til the very end."

Azraq grinned. Despite how serious and humorless he looked on the outside, he'd often smiled at her and Yana. He was two years older and had always

watched out for them, boisterous as they were. He'd always helped them when they needed it.

Azraq bowed, intending to part. "Please…" His voice trailed off, but whatever he wanted to say, Oriana was sure it had to do with Yana. That much was clear.

Oriana nodded to show she understood what he meant. The tears overflowed.

It shouldn't be like this. This is wrong! *All wrong!*

His figure began to recede, growing fainter and fainter.

"Azraq, we'll…we'll see each other again! I swear it!" she bellowed after him.

He glanced back at her once and waved his hand before disappearing into the darkness.

❦ ❦ ❦

WHEN Oriana returned to her room after parting with Azraq, she found Yana standing by the window, still as a statue.

"Oriana, I…can't look at your face right now."

Oriana froze.

Yana's eyes, black as onyx, were overflowing with tears. This was the first time Oriana had ever seen her cry.

"Azraq left, didn't he?" she asked. "He never even said goodbye to me…"

The window she was leaning on probably gave her full view of the event that had transpired moments prior.

Oriana blanched.

"I can't take it… The last person he came to see wasn't even me! Please, I swear I'll be back to normal tomorrow, but for now… I want to be alone…!" Yana trembled as she sobbed. She had a blanket wrapped around her and was pressed against the window, as if it was the closest she could get to Azraq.

I want to stay with her, but…maybe that's just me being selfish.

As much as Oriana worried for her best friend, she also understood how Yana

felt. She set the basket with the sandwich on a side table and said, “All right. I’ll leave for today.”

Oriana snatched her muffler from the wall and wrapped it around her neck. With her back facing the room and the doorknob in hand, she paused. “I know… this is me putting my nose where it doesn’t belong, but allow me to say what I’m sure you already know.”

Yana said nothing.

Oriana swallowed hard before continuing, “…Azraq spoke of nothing but you.”

Silence.

“He went on about nothing but you. You were the only thing—no, I’m sorry.” Oriana apologized as soon as she realized her mistake.

It doesn’t matter how much he cares for her now. Whatever feelings were there, he made his decision—and it was to leave her side.

The result was all that mattered. Azraq was no longer with her, no matter how much he might care. Trying to comfort Yana by saying as much would only drive her to the desperate question of why he decided to leave in the first place.

Oriana banged her forehead against the door. “I’m so sorry. I’ll leave now.”

She’s my best friend, and yet there’s absolutely nothing I can do for her.

As she turned the knob, a voice called from behind, staying her.

“Oriana…”

She kept her hand on the handle as she glanced over her shoulder. The movement made the door crack open.

“Oriana.”

“…Yeah?”

“Oriana.”

“Yeah…”

Oriana closed the door. She made her way over to the window and threw her

arms around Yana and the blanket wrapped around her. She squeezed tight enough to suffocate her friend, and Yana did the same in return. Her wailing felt like tiny knives that dug into Oriana's skin. Together, the two crumpled onto the carpet.

Oriana yanked her blanket off her bed. The two wrestled with it before curling up together on the floor, where they soon fell asleep.

❦ ❦ ❦

THE next day, Yana was back to her normal self. She smiled at everyone, ate her meals properly, conversed, and attended classes. It was shocking how ordinary things seemed to be.

The only difference was that Azraq no longer followed a step behind her.

Chapter 11: Shaking of the Shrubs

“DOES anyone have a hair iron?”

“You can use mine when I’m done with it.”

“Do you think this necklace looks better or this one?”

“It makes no difference! More importantly—”

“That’s a *beautiful* shawl! Let me try it on.”

“Hey! Do you know where my perfume went?”

“You should learn to take care of your belongings better.”

“No, no! I mean, it was here just a moment ago—”

“Hey! Don’t pull my corset so tight!”

“I have to…otherwise, you won’t fit in this dress! Don’t you think you put on a *bit* too much weight during our break?!”

“Urk!”

The girls’ dormitories were split into three buildings, but every single one of them was full of chaos. That included the dorm where Oriana resided; the lounge appointed to be their dressing room was pure pandemonium. All the fifth-year girls were gathered in one building as this was the only place with a dresser. While they all waited for their turns to retrieve their dresses, they set about other preparations, makeup not the least among them.

They crowded together, doing each other’s hair, tying each other’s corsets, helping each other put on shoes and dresses. The lounge was anything but spacious, and thanks to the perfume, sweat, and makeup powder filling the air, it was suffocating.

Yes, today was the day everyone had been waiting for. It was the twenty-third day of the middle spring month—the day of the ball!

The age of the students at Lagen Magic Academy—not including special exemptions—ranged from thirteen to eighteen. It was a period when most girls were preoccupied with fashion. Alas, they did not have servants here to look after them.

This was particularly difficult for those daughters of wealthy houses accustomed to merchants bringing their latest wares directly to their home and who had a maid to look after everything for them. The task of putting on a dress and applying cosmetics all on their own was a daunting one, requiring much effort on their part.

"Do I put this on *before* foundation or after?"

"After!"

"Pink or orange blush: which do you think would look better on me?"

"Let me see your dress… Pink!"

"My lips are all dry and cracked. I can't put lipstick on them like this!"

"Put this on for now and get your hair done first. I'll help you later!"

"Thanks for the brush. Here, eat this as your reward."

"*Amph*!"

"Oriana, help me shave my brows!"

"*Ohay*!"

Oriana had some knowledge of makeup, so many of the girls in the lounge were calling upon her for aid. She'd made no progress on herself other than putting her dress on as she shuffled from person to person.

It was a strapless gown with a large, open neckline. There was a lace collar and lacing in the back to keep it in place, but she hadn't tied it yet, so the dress kept sliding down her body, inch by inch. It had been a perfect fit when she'd had it made, but things had been so hectic the last few days that she'd lost weight.

Thank goodness for the laces, at least. I'll have Yana tie them up nice and tight later.

Since the day Azraq left, Yana hadn't shed another tear. In fact, she seemed so normal that the other students were oblivious to her sadness. Yana's act was so convincing that even Oriana occasionally forgot about Azraq.

The other students weren't terribly surprised or upset that Azraq had withdrawn from the Academy. He'd always kept a line drawn between them, always maintaining his position as Yana's bodyguard. Most people thought of him less as a fellow student and more as Yana's accessory. Perhaps they thought it only natural for things to end this way, now that the trial was over.

Oriana's chest ached each time she noticed that Azraq wasn't hovering behind Yana as he used to. She steeled herself enough not to let it show on her face, of course. As she lived each day to its fullest, Oriana gradually began to think of him less and less. Sad though it was, she soon became too consumed with preparations for the ball to let it weigh on her.

"My eyeshadow has no gradation! Miss Elsha, help me!"

"Ohay! Giff me a shec…"

Oriana finally swallowed the cracker one of the girls had shoved in her mouth a moment ago. Her tongue felt dry as a desert. She brushed away the crumbs around her lips and spun around. Her dress fluttered behind her, and the next second, a shriek split the air. A burning stench followed.

"Oh no! Miss Elsha, I'm so sorry!"

Oriana's heart sank. Hesitantly, she peered behind her. A school friend stood there, magic iron in one hand and the lace from Oriana's dress in the other, her face pale as a sheet.

"The instant I pulled the iron from my hair, you turned around…and the lace from your dress… I panicked! And…they got caught up…"

Oriana's complexion soon turned as white as the other girl's. She stared at the laces she'd neglected to tie. The once beautiful strings were now crinkled where the heat had touched them, leaving hideous creases. It was thoroughly singed. Replacing them now would be impossible.

Despite the clamor a few moments ago, the room was deathly silent now. The first one to speak was Yana.

“Could you hand me those?” Yana took the strings from the girl who’d burned them and, with practiced hands, laced up the back of Oriana’s dress, looping the burned ends in. The dress squeezed tightly around Oriana in the process, prompting her to groan several times.

“It’s fine,” Yana announced. “I managed to hide the burned parts from view.”

“Yana, you’re a lifesaver!” Oriana’s eyes welled with tears as she thanked her friend profusely, and she wasn’t the only one; the girl who’d burned them looked on the verge of sobbing too, relieved that the issue had been resolved.

“Thank you, Miss Mahathin. I was starting to panic.”

“The burnt smell remains, but it gives it a nice accent. Let’s spray you with a bit of perfume, so no one notices.” Yana reached for Oriana’s perfume and gave her a few spritzes. Then she directly slathered some on Oriana’s cleavage and her ankles.

“Wh-Why would you put it *there?*” Oriana blurted. She’d no idea how the nobles did things, but she was pretty sure that was unacceptable for a lady. It seemed sensual—obscene, even.

“You should remember that trick. In Ete Karima, women apply perfume like this before going out with a man they like.” Yana’s smile was so beguiling, so beautiful that it took people’s breath away. The nickname Desert Star fit her well.

All of the other girls reached for their perfume bottles. In an instant, the lounge turned into a pungent crucible, but no one spoke a word of complaint.

❦ ❦ ❦

ONCE they’d applied their makeup, Yana and Oriana left the girls’ dormitory. Other girls who’d finished before them were gathered outside. Those who came out after reconvened with their friends. Most of them were carrying small hand mirrors, checking themselves or their companions to make sure they had no blemishes.

Today, every girl was the heroine of her own story. A shadow of anxiety hung over their faces, but it could not obscure the joy that shined underneath.

The school was on holiday to give everyone time to prepare for the ball. When Oriana checked her watch, it was only a few minutes past three. The ball didn't begin until four and lasted until ten. Most balls in Amanecer started much later and lasted much longer, but since this was a party for students, the school staff had compromised on the schedule.

There was still time until the ball started. Oriana turned her gaze to Yana, wondering what they should do in the meantime.

Yana looked radiant in the sun's light. She was beautiful enough in her school uniform, but it could not compare to how stunning she was now. Her dress was made of layers of thin organdy, which enhanced her slender form, making it even more captivating. It might look like some cloth glued to a stick on anyone else with such a figure, but Yana wore it perfectly.

It elevated Yana's beauty in such a way that every single crease seemed designed to flatter her. The dress was also studded with jewels that glimmered like stars in the night's sky. She wore large, dangling, obviously foreign earrings. Her back was obscured by the shawl she was wearing, but underneath, the back of her dress was mostly transparent, with gems embedded in a lace-like pattern. Those were all that hid her skin from view, and the sight was so suggestive, it made even Oriana's head spin.

For as well as she wore such a complicated dress, Yana felt distant. She was undaunted and looked entirely at home here, but that was precisely what made Oriana's heart sink—that *this* was now her home.

"Oh, *please*, Oriana. Your heated stare's going to burn a hole right through my dress." Yana smiled faintly, but Oriana felt no sincerity in it.

"Sorry. I was just thinking that you still look as beautiful as a desert star, even in the daytime."

"Haha, you are all too easy to read. At this rate, how are you going to take the reins of any man like that? Not that I can hardly talk—seeing you managed to take mine." Yana took Oriana's gloved hand and nuzzled her face against it.

So cute!

Oriana's heart squeezed.

In Ete Karima, a woman's greatest achievement was her ability to win a man's heart. This was evident in how bold their style of dress was. It only made sense that this was the way of things there, since men were the only ones who could inherit wealth. This was what made the trials afforded to princesses all the more odd. Despite her status as a woman, the king's daughter was afforded the greatest luxury—a trial by which she could (to a degree) control what man she married.

Voices began picking up around them. Curious what all the fuss was, Oriana scanned the crowd. Boys who'd already finished their preparations were arriving to greet their partners. Even the boys who wore wrinkled shirts to school, never bothering to use an iron, were clad in crisp suits with freshly shined shoes. The sight stirred emotions that were difficult to put into words.

Relief washed over the faces of the boys who spotted their partners in the crowd. Those who were still waiting for their partners to finish getting ready were left to awkwardly fidget while taking a seat on a bench or on tree roots.

It was a bittersweet scene. Shameless as she was, given this was her second time going through all of this, Oriana was tempted to offer, "Hey, want me to go call your partner down for you?"

As she watched the boys with anxious looks on their faces taking their seats in the shade of the trees, the murmurs around her grew even louder. This time, they were accompanied by squeals. Surprised, Oriana turned her gaze.

"Oooh! Oh my Goooood!" Oriana clapped her hands together and nearly crumpled to the ground. She would have, if not for Vincent flying to her side to pull her back up.

"What is it? Did something happen?" he asked.

"Vin—oooooh!!"

It wasn't that *something* happened. "Something" didn't even begin to describe how serious it was!

"*Youaresohandsome*," Oriana blurted, her words running together.

Handsome did him a disservice—he looked *divine!* Oriana didn't think she could look upon him, least of all when he was so close.

Vincent pulled his hand away, exasperated. Without his help to stay her, Oriana slumped down.

“We have to call a painter here right now! I need to save this moment for the rest of my life… It would be a national injustice otherwise.” Her hands pressed against the ground beneath her as she sobbed out the words.

Vincent stared coldly down at her. Lukewarm though his expression was, it made her stomach fill with butterflies. In fact, it matched perfectly with his noble attire. Nothing could be more captivating!

Vincent was already refined and handsome in his school uniform, but he was a whole different picture in his tuxedo. He exuded such elegance one might be forgiven for thinking this was the castle garden rather than the Academy.

His blond hair glowed faintly in the light. The back was more meticulously groomed than normal, and half of his bangs were slicked back while the other half were combed to the side. Although normally straight, they had a loose curl to them now. She suspected Miguel must have used a hair iron on him. She was so grateful to Miguel, she could almost kiss his feet.

Vincent’s coat was magnificently embroidered and extended past his hips, clinging tightly to his body. Each time he moved, it left a ripple in his vest, giving an ever so faint outline of his abdominal muscles. His slender legs looked even longer than they normally did, and his shoes matched the color of the buttons on his vest and coat. An eye-catching blue cravat hung from his winged collar. He must have prepared it after they agreed to be partners, since it was the same shade as her eyes.

“Oriana, you will ruin your makeup.”

“Oh, darn, that’s right.” Oriana immediately sucked her tears back in and shot up straight, fishing a handkerchief from her bag. She was careful not to disturb her makeup as she dabbed away a few stray tears.

Vincent stared blankly as he waited for her to finish.

Oriana dusted the grass from the bottom of her dress. She grinned at Miguel, who’d accompanied Vincent. He’d also been worried about her ruining her makeup.

Miguel had gently turned down the girl he'd originally planned to come with, instead inviting his new fiancée. Yana agreed, so the two were now attending the ball as a pair.

"You look stunning too, Miguel. There's no better pair than the two of you."

His long hair was normally disheveled and thrown into a braid simply to keep it out of his face, but this time, he'd taken care to groom it so not even a single strand was out of place. Unlike Vincent, who was wearing a traditional tuxedo, Miguel was wearing quite the flamboyant attire. Since this wasn't an ordinary ball, and none of the adults would be judging their attire at the Academy, Miguel was free to let his fashion-loving spirit take wing.

Miguel's pants were as dark red as wine, giving him a classic feel without obfuscating his theatrical tastes. His white coat and vest were striking, leaving an immediate impression. Even more strange was his collar, which was pinned on, rather than part of the shirt itself. It was the same wine color as his pants, with an intricate pattern sewn into it, and hanging from it was a tassel encrusted with gemstones, its laces tied in a unique fashion. The standing collar looked foreign style-wise and was probably something he'd urgently prepared in light of his new partner, but it fit perfectly with the rest of his suit.

"Thank you," he said. "And you look as adorable as ever."

"Of course I do! *Ehehe…ehehe!*" Oriana puffed out her chest, only to feel something being draped over her shoulders. When she glanced back, she realized it was a scowling Vincent putting his jacket on her.

"What? I get to have your jacket? Seriously?"

"Well, you *are* already wearing it."

"Yippee!" She grinned from ear to ear as she slipped her arms through the sleeves. They were *much* too long for her, but she twirled them in the air before pressing them over her mouth to hide her mirth. "*Ehehehe!*"

While Oriana was in high spirits, Vincent looked anything but.

"Aren't you showing too much shoulder? And I can almost see your knees too."

“I’m surprised, Vincent! That’s so old-fashioned! Even my daddy doesn’t say *that* kinda stuff…”

Perhaps it was odd to compare an up-and-coming merchant to the heir of a dukedom with centuries of history behind it.

While she feigned shock at Vincent, she could hear Miguel in the background complimenting Yana’s outfit.

“It’s cute, right?” Oriana continued, “My father instructed me to show it off while there aren’t any married women present. He’s hoping to make it a hit with the nobles.”

“But I can see your knees.”

“Yes, that’s the whole point. They’re adorable, aren’t they?” Oriana spun around in a circle while Vincent scrunched up his face.

“I can *see* your knees,” Vincent repeated, as if she’d broken him and he could say nothing else.

“I told you; that’s the *point*!”

Besides, the skirt on her uniform was about the same length.

Oriana kicked her leg up, and Vincent hurriedly pushed it back down before reaching for the buttons on the coat he’d put around her, intending to fasten them.

“No!” Oriana gasped. “You can’t! My dress will get wrinkled.”

“Then please stop kicking your feet up at least.”

“Why are you acting so flustered? You *have* seen me like this before, haven’t you?”

“Of course not. This is my first time seeing you in this dress.”

Oriana shook her head. “Not the dress, I meant the length of the skirt. It’s no different from my uniform.”

“All of the girls wear uniforms of the same length so I never paid it any mind. But this is a *dress*, you realize? Normally, you wouldn’t be showing your legs off like this, would you?”

“I guess not…?”

In truth, Oriana had absolutely no idea what the difference was.

She looked down at her dress. The fabric had a beautiful texture to it, but the dress itself was rather simple. It was a draped garment that naturally flowed across her body, its only adornment the embroidery on the skirt, which reached down to her knees and otherwise had a very traditional, if not refined, design. The bust was sewn in a way that gave her dimension, drawing out her natural beauty.

Oriana didn’t wear a necklace or anything on her chest. She’d tried, but couldn’t find any accessory that would match the plunging neckline.

Vincent’s gaze traveled up from her legs to her hair which was gathered in an up-do. As she reached up to touch it, she realized his eyes were focused on her hair adornment, which was fashioned in the shape of an iris. Although she’d felt no shame in him glimpsing her legs, her cheeks suddenly heated. The color of her dress and the ornament in her hair were all things she’d chosen with him in mind.

But I didn’t think boys paid much attention to flowers…

The dress was purple, but the shade was light enough that she could pass it off as pink.

Vincent released the buttons on his jacket and reached up, his fingers grazing her hair piece. It was rare for him to ever touch her of his own volition. Each time she inhaled, her heart seemed to beat faster.

No matter what he says, even if he makes fun of me, I can handle it. I’ll play it off by telling him it has nothing to do with him. That this is simply my personal taste. Come on, hit me with your best shot!

Oriana mentally prepared herself, swearing she would never admit the truth to him. It wasn’t because she had any compunction about relaying her affections, but she did feel more embarrassment than most when her feelings shone through in ways she didn’t intend.

Vincent’s gaze went from her hair accessory to her dress and finally to her face. “You look amazing.”

Oriana swallowed a breath and stumbled. Once again, Vincent's hand shot out to keep her upright.

Th-This is cheating! I never dreamed he wouldn't *make a snide remark.*

Of course, Vincent knew who she had on her mind when she picked this dress—knew why she'd had the iris hair ornament made. He also realized there was no need to point it out or tease her; she was wrapped in a color that matched his eyes, and he'd accepted that. In fact, he'd allowed her to stand beside him. That on its own was the biggest compliment he could've ever paid her.

Still wrapped in his arms, Oriana peered up. Vincent's hairstyle and attire were so different from normal that it sent her heart racing.

"*Ehehe.* So my outfit is a success?" she asked.

"It is." He peeled his hands away from her waist and offered his arm. Oriana happily took it.

❦ ❦ ❦

THE venue for the ball was already bustling with activity. Students handed their invitations to Professor Quicee at the entrance before going inside. He was acting as steward for the day.

Professor Quicee nodded to himself, his mustache wiggling as his crisp voice boomed, "Lord Vincent Tanzine and his partner, Lady Oriana Elsha, have arrived."

The clamor inside died down instantly. Everyone turned their gaze toward the entrance, watching the pair.

The assembly hall was completely different now than when they'd done their dance lessons there. The numerous chandeliers hanging from the ceiling were all enchanted with magic, and for the rest of the night, the flames on them would burn ceaselessly. Bubbles also floated through the air, forever suspended, reflecting light throughout the hall.

Tables were lined up along the wall, all of them filled with piping hot buffet-style cuisine. They were already crowded by students who preferred filling their stomachs to venturing onto the dance floor. There was also a magic container

filled with cool desserts that were free for the taking. Oriana silently vowed to herself that she'd grab a bite later.

The hall itself was also enchanted to keep the temperature moderate so that students who wore outfits revealing their shoulders or legs could be comfortable. Oriana quickly returned Vincent's coat to him.

She snuck a glance at Vincent as he strode confidently forward. He was glimmering under the light of the chandeliers, almost blinding her.

This is like a dream.

It *was* a dream. One she'd already seen once before, but she was grateful to the Dragon God for allowing her to relive the moment.

Vincent died after the ball. Right now, there doesn't seem to be anything wrong with him. And I haven't noticed anyone that might be targeting him.

Even if Oriana couldn't show her concern outwardly, it still weighed on her. Vincent informed her of the results of his periodic examinations, but still, her anxiety smoldered, unrelenting.

Once the ball is over, I'll talk to him about it again. It's better to risk his anger than him dying again.

Vincent was the most handsome man here, and as Oriana looked at him, she cursed herself for remembering the very things she'd wanted to forget.

"I feel at a loss not having anyone to pay greetings to," said Vincent as he reached for a champagne glass from a nearby table. He must have noticed how rigid her body was because he passed it over to her. Oriana slowly gulped it down. As she continued clutching his arm, he patted her hand.

Vincent most likely thought she was nervous, overwhelmed by the people and atmosphere. It was true that, like many of the other students, she had no experience at all with high societal events like this.

"How about we chat until it's time to dance?" Oriana suggested. "Oh, and I want to try some of that dessert over there too."

"Before you eat a proper meal?"

"Do you really want to watch me slurp noodles in this dress?"

“Point taken. Let’s stick with your dessert idea.” Vincent chuckled and put the glass back before escorting her exactly where she wanted to go. He did it with such grace that she felt she was floating along beside him.

A large group had circled around the food tables, but as Vincent approached, they made way for him. They afforded him even more respect now than when he was in his school uniform. It was obvious they were all more nervous around him since he looked the part of a duke’s son.

Vincent smiled at them and said, “Hey there. We just arrived. Mind giving us food recommendations?”

Coaxed by his gentle voice, they crowded around him and started sharing what they thought was the most delicious of the cuisine.

“What would you like, Oriana?” he asked, flashing a troubled smile as he held up a plate covered in a mountain of food. Since everyone was kind enough to offer their opinions, he couldn’t refuse their goodwill.

The couple pulled away from the tables, taking seats at the edge of the room. Oriana sat her bag on her lap and took the plate from Vincent. She plucked up a pincho, which consisted of a thinly cut bagel on a skewer with shrimp, avocado, and cheese. Then she turned to Vincent and raised it toward his mouth.

“Say ‘ah,’ Vincent.”

He pursed his lips, the smile all but gone from his face as he stared at her with an aura that seemed to say, “Have you lost your mind?”

“Come on. ‘Aaah.’”

Silence.

“‘Aaah.’”

Although he glowered at her, Oriana refused to back down. She pressed her body closer, enjoying how Vincent grimaced, even though he refused to run away. The people around them were watching, murmuring amongst themselves. Vincent was *always* the center of attention.

If I push it any more than this, he’ll probably lose his temper.

Recognizing it was time to throw in the towel, Oriana pulled her arm back,

intending to eat the pincho herself. Before she could, however, Vincent's mouth flew open and closed around the toothpick. His lips brushed against her fingertips, and for a moment, she held her breath.

Vincent lifted his face away, his mouth closed as he chewed. Oriana stared wide-eyed at the bare toothpick he'd left in her hand.

H-He ate it?!

"Y-You ate it?" The words flew out of her mouth the moment they entered her mind.

The whispers around them grew even louder than they had been, spreading throughout the assembly hall.

Oriana's eyes remained glued to her hand.

That was quite a bit of food. But he took it all in one bite… His mouth must be huge.

She peered at his lips. "V-Vincent?"

Once he finished chewing and swallowing, he nonchalantly returned her gaze and said, "What?"

"Um…" Oriana swallowed hard. "Would you…like another?"

"Certainly."

Oriana's face lit up like a tomato. She started feeding him everything she had on hand, from finger foods like the pinchos to others that required a spoon. All the while, she grinned from ear to ear.

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A female student went dashing down the sidewalk. It was about a week before the ball. The glass door to the conservatory banged as she threw it open. Outside, the sun was beginning to duck behind the mountains.

Professor Heinz, the herbology teacher, jumped in surprise before pulling a face. "Are you trying to destroy the place?"

"Professor Heinz! I completely spaced out on turning in my report!" She thrust it at him.

After a pause, Heinz grunted, “Oh, well, thank you.”

He took the report from her and scanned the page. The letters were messy, but she’d sufficiently completed the assignment at least. In fact, with four days left until the deadline, there was no need for her to come storming into the conservatory so late in the evening.

“You shouldn’t be out this late. Hurry back to your dorm. I’ll go with you.”

“When you see your student in the dumps like this, shouldn’t you ask what’s *wrong?* You’re a professor.” She sniffled for show. She was a tall girl, which put her at almost the same height as Heinz.

He heaved a deep sigh and then, with no inflection in his voice, asked, “What’s wrong?”

“Okay, so listen to this… I have been *killing* myself taking these dance lessons. But it all paid off because I managed to win a dance with Mister Tanzine at the ball! The problem is, no one will agree to be my partner!” She clenched her hands. Given the look of her muscles, she could probably put a hole in whatever she threw her fists at.

Heinz knew she’d spent the last month or so attending dance lessons. His colleague, Professor Wilton, had even asked him to help oversee the students participating. The girl was lucky her efforts had paid off, but if she couldn’t snag a partner in time, she wouldn’t even be able to enter the venue.

Worried she might channel her frustration into destroying the conservatory, Heinz weighed his words as he said, “If you keep your mouth shut, you’re plenty beautiful enough to get a guy’s attention.”

“Sadly, there are too few men who realize my true charm.”

Her intelligence and conduct left something to be desired, but she was slender and had a beautiful face and an ample bosom. Her proportions were perfect enough to make her the envy of the other girls at school. If she was able to dance with Vincent Tanzine, they would make for a mesmerizing pair. Plus, dances left no room for chatting, and that would transform her from being a crude tomboy to a refined lady.

Unfortunately, it was precisely that which put so much pressure on the other

boys who were still in the throes of puberty. Heinz could relate almost too well. No one wanted to look like a miserable excuse for an escort next to a tall beauty like her. The contrast would be all the more intense after everyone watched her dance with Vincent Tanzine. No boy would be able to live up to the duke's heir. Particularly because the waltz revolved around a man's ability to lead their partner.

No matter how clumsy the woman was, as long as her partner was skilled, she wouldn't make a fool of herself. On the other hand, if the man was a terrible dancer while the woman was a genius, the result would be all too easy (and painful) to picture.

"Why don't you invite a guy who's good at dancing?" Heinz suggested.

"I'm afraid the men who're confident in their abilities are all sold out."

Whether it was her intent or not, Heinz immediately thought of a bargain sale where all the popular items flew off the shelf first. His self-control was all that stopped him from commenting as much.

"Well, that is a shame. Guess you'll just have to wait for the next opportunity to…" Heinz's voice trailed off as he realized, *No, there won't be a next time.*

This girl was a commoner. She would never have another chance—not for the rest of her life—to dance with Vincent Tanzine at a ball.

"Oh? The next opportunity? You *really* think I will get one?" the girl scoffed.

"Uh, well, no…" As Heinz mumbled his reply, the realization finally hit him—of *why* she'd come running here at this hour.

"So, Professor Heinz…"

"…Yes?"

"I have a favor to ask."

Heinz did not like where this was going.

He shook his head. "No can do."

"*Please!* There is no rule barring us from inviting professors, is there?"

"Not going to happen. You think I can do something as humiliating as going to

a ball with a student? Do you realize how many years it's been since I graduated?"

"I beg you! If you refuse, I'll have no choice but to threaten a first-year with a sword and *drag* them to the venue on the day of the ball!"

Since she *was* the daughter of a knight, she was more skilled with a sword than a wand.

Heinz cradled his head in his hands.

Thinking she only needed to push him a little more, she fisted her hands again and said, "Surely, you can be compassionate enough to give your poor student who is graduating this year an opportunity to make good memories that will last for the rest of her life, right?"

It sounded like a threat, but Heinz could already guess how much determination it must have taken for her to waltz in here and entreat him like this. He wanted to tell her no, he utterly lacked compassion. As a professor at Lagen Magic Academy, there was a limit to how much kindness he could show his students. Alas, that also meant he'd spent years here seeing students off, and he did want them to make memories that they could look fondly back on.

Heinz pretended not to notice the way her voice trembled and how white her knuckles were as she waited for his answer. He tugged at his mustache. Eager to let her—and himself—believe that her words had convinced him, he acquiesced. "Fine. Guess I have no choice."

After prying that agreement out of him, the girl proudly ran off to the partner registrant for the ball and wrote Heinz's name down before he had the chance to back out.

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THE orchestra that the school had called in to play during the ball slowly went quiet, indicating it was time for the first dance to begin.

Oriana and Vincent had finished polishing off their snacks. Sensing the moment was near, they stopped their conversation and turned their gaze to the orchestra.

“Do you remember the girl’s face?” Oriana asked. “Do you need to escort her?”

He knew immediately who she was referring to and smiled. “You needn’t worry. I do at least remember the face of the girl I am to dance with.”

“That’s good to hear. I was afraid you would pull a face when it came time to hand you off to her,” Oriana joked.

Vincent glided forward. He likely already knew exactly where the girl he was supposed to dance with was, despite the assembly hall being jam-packed with people. Oriana followed along until he located the girl, at which point, she breathed a sigh of relief. Since she was the one who suggested using Vincent as a reward, she felt it her responsibility to make sure things went smoothly.

The student in question was standing near the wall, enjoying a conversation with one of the Class 2 girls. The former—the girl who’d clinched victory in the dance lessons—was a friend who had helped Oriana in her previous life when she was feeling down. Her formalwear brought memories flooding back, and the emotions that came with it had Oriana smiling.

As they approached the girl, Oriana noticed the girl’s partner was nowhere to be seen. Where could he have gone? She scanned the area, but she didn’t see anyone. Maybe, whoever he was, he was being considerate enough to give her space for her first dance with Vincent.

“Well, I’ll be off,” she told Vincent, spinning around. “*Hm,* now who shall I dance with for the first song?”

Vincent grabbed her by the arm. “You’re going to dance?”

“Huh? Uh…yeah? This *is* my first proper ball. I’ve been looking forward to it.”

“They have your favorite pasta over there,” Vincent said in a low voice.

She blinked at him. “I thought we established earlier that you were opposed to me slurping in this dress?”

“It’s an emergency. So you can disregard what I said.”

“An emergency?” Oriana gasped, incredulous. No part of this struck her as any sort of “emergency.”

“Regardless,” Vincent tried to continue, but he was cut off when cries erupted at the entrance. More squeals of surprise soon followed.

Oriana and Vincent turned their gaze to the entrance. They didn’t have to wonder what was going on for long; students were making a path, dodging out of the way as hurriedly as if they had a unicorn in their midst. At the center of the crowd was a handsome man. He scoured the room before heading straight toward them.

It was clear he wasn’t a student. Not with the sensuality he exuded as he took long, confident strides across the dance floor. An air of confusion rippled through the hall. Like the rest of her peers, Oriana was drawing a blank as to who this man could possibly be.

Nearly everyone kept their eyes trained on the man as he waltzed past them. Even Oriana could not begin to guess at his identity. Remembering that Vincent still had a hold of her arm, she glanced at him.

“Hey, do you know who that is? Part of the orchestra, maybe?”

“No, that’s…” Vincent muttered to himself, brows furrowed. Judging by his voice, he was even more shocked than her.

A voice chirped from behind them.

“Professor Heinz?”

The one who had spoken was the girl Vincent was promised to dance with. The hall was so quiet that, even though there was some distance between them, Oriana could hear her clearly.

“*You’re* the one who told me to come.”

The man’s voice was indeed one Oriana was used to hearing for these five-plus years.

What?! He’s really Professor Heinz? Are my eyes deceiving me? Is this really the *Professor Heinz?*

Oriana’s eyes went round as saucers as she stared at the man. If he ruffled his hair, stuck a mustache on his upper lip, added some dark circles beneath his eyes, and a cigarette between his lips, then threw on some baggy clothes and

hunched over…maybe he would kind of resemble Professor Heinz. She could only vaguely imagine it—that was how dramatic his transformation was. He looked ten or even twenty years younger than usual.

Heinz slipped past her and stopped next to the girl standing by the wall. “I’m late. Sorry. Prepping the assembly hall took forever.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about,” the girl mumbled, dumbfounded. The other girls around her grabbed her hands and squealed, jumping up and down.

“That’s *really* Professor Heinz? Seriously?”

“So you transform into a gorgeous man simply by shaving? What kind of trickery is this?!”

“Hold on. How old are you, Professor? Don’t tell me you’re close in age to the rest of us?”

As the girls from Class 2 fussed at him, the professor patted them on the head. “You all look adorable in your dresses. Don’t ruin it by making rude comments.”

The girls blushed, staring blankly up at him.

Heinz turned to his partner and asked, “So did I make it in time for the first dance?”

“Uh, yeah, you did?!” the girl shrieked, as if annoyed he would ask when she was already slated to dance with Vincent. It didn’t help that she still hadn’t shaken her confusion at Heinz’s sudden transformation.

In order to dispel the awkwardness, Oriana stepped forward and said, “Professor Heinz, if it’s not too much trouble, would you share the first dance with me?”

“Elsha? Oh, that’s right. My partner’s dancing with Tanzine first.” He nodded to himself, glancing at Oriana and then Vincent.

“That’s right,” said Oriana. “And I was worried none of the boys would be interested in dancing with me in the meantime.”

“Nah, if there’s no need to dance then—” Heinz cut himself off, realizing what

she was doing. “Ah, well…if you’re throwing me a lifeline, I’d better take it.” He shuffled up to her and held out his hand.

Oriana politely placed the tips of her fingers on his palm.

“Not such a bad idea to drive off your other would-be suitors this way and put the future duke in my debt,” he whispered in her ear. His voice was low and husky, carrying the faint smell of cigarette smoke on it.

Oriana stiffened.

This is one heck of a trump card he had hidden up his sleeve all this time!

She scolded herself for feeling butterflies as Heinz escorted her to the middle of the dance floor.

The orchestra slowly started up.

A magic contraption on the ceiling released a flurry of different colored petals, which fluttered down around them, adding a beautiful flair to the hall.

Oriana let Heinz lead, following the steps to the waltz.

“Professor, you look incredibly handsome,” she said.

“You kids have no appreciation. I was *still* handsome even with my mustache and messy hair.”

His transformation was impressive enough, but he was actually a pretty good dancer too. He must have been incredibly popular when he was a student. In fact, maybe he was *so* popular, it negatively impacted him as a teacher.

“Maybe you’re right, but this has allowed me to see you in a new light. Still, no one is more stunning than Vincent,” Oriana said off-handedly.

Heinz’s lips, which were usually hidden by his mustache, curled in a grin—one suave enough to send a girl’s heart pounding.

As she spun around, Oriana snuck a glance at Vincent and his partner. The girl should have only had eyes for Vincent, but she was restless, all her attention focused on Heinz and Oriana.

Honestly, I don’t get— No, okay, I kinda *get why she can’t focus.* After mentally waffling back and forth, Oriana wanted to scold herself and ask, *Well?*

Which is it? But frankly, it was both.

It was impossible to comprehend how a girl could be distracted by anyone else when she had someone as handsome as Vincent in front of her, but at the same time, Oriana could sympathize with curiosity getting the best of her after their teacher suddenly appeared, having transformed into a beautiful man.

“Ah, drat,” said Heinz. “The other teachers are going to give me grief tomorrow for this. And probably scold me for intruding when this ball is supposed to be for students.”

“I’m happy that you came. I never dreamed you’d participate.”

“I was threatened. Since Tanzine promised the first dance with her, all the other boys were too intimidated to be her partner.”

“Oh, that’s…a failure on my part then. I’m sorry. But thank you for doing that for her.”

Oriana never even considered that possibility. Now she realized how blind she had been. It was only because other people threw in their support that her idea even came together.

“Ah well, even though I’ve helped out every year, I never actually got to *try* any of the food. This year, I’ll make sure to eat my fill.”

“You really think you will have the free time for that?” Oriana asked. “I do believe you will be stuck dancing the night away after this.”

“Ugh, you kids should show more consideration for your elders.”

Oriana laughed as she danced along, guided by his expert lead. Her voice dropped low as she asked, “Say, Professor Heinz, since I have your ear for the moment, would you mind if I asked you something personal?”

“*Hm?*”

The waltz was the perfect dance for having a secret exchange with someone. It was a chance to ask a question she had never been able to before, especially since all the other pairs in the room were preoccupied dancing with their partners. The booming noise of the orchestra would also drown out their conversation. Assuming no one was intently listening in, their words would

remain private.

“Since you have intimate knowledge of herbology, tell me… If you wanted to secretly kill someone, how would you go about it?”

“Hey now.” Anger flashed through his eyes.

Oriana recoiled, worried she had offended him. In terms of inappropriate questions one should never ask a teacher, this was probably near the top of the list. Still, she couldn’t back down now.

“I’m sorry. I realize it’s an uncomfortable topic. It’s just that I read about it in a book.”

“Oh…so *that’s* it. Well, you shouldn’t read too much of that kinda stuff at your age.”

“Yes. I will be more careful in the future.”

Although Heinz pretended to buy Oriana’s excuse, he had his arms around her body and could feel the way she seized up. She gulped and waited for him to continue.

“*Hm…* If it were me, what would I do…? Well, maybe I’d go for something that other mages—students included, of course—wouldn’t know about.”

“For instance?”

“Telling you would defeat the purpose, wouldn’t it?” Heinz smirked.

He had a point. Besides, she didn’t think he would give her an answer. Oriana had hesitated her entire time at the school, knowing that voicing this question would only make others think less of her. But she knew she would never get another chance like this. Heinz wasn’t here as a professor right now, but as an attendee. That was why she took her chances. But alas, she had been too naïve.

I still got something out of it. There’s some method out there to secretly kill people that we simply don’t know about.

Back when she was worried about Vincent’s well-being, she realized there was a limit to how much knowledge a student could obtain through books alone. It wouldn’t be enough to rival a professional assassin. That said, Oriana never dreamed the information she desired was beyond her reach to begin

with.

“More importantly,” Heinz said, interrupting her thoughts, “are you sure you don’t want to capitalize on this chance, Elsha? You won’t have many opportunities like this to make Tanzine jealous.”

“Sorry?” Oriana lifted her head.

“Boys tend to feel threatened by older men. I bet I’m getting under Tanzine’s skin as we speak.”

Oriana jerked her head, trying to look for him, but she had no idea where Vincent and his partner had disappeared off to.

Heinz pressed his lips close to her ear and said, “They were behind us a moment ago, but now they’re to the right. There, behind the girl in the green dress.” He guided her along, spinning her around so she could catch a glimpse more easily.

Vincent had moved to the edge of the room, far from where she and Heinz were dancing. His face was the picture of composure as he led his partner.

“He doesn’t look bothered at all to me. Considering how distant they are, he probably doesn’t even know where I am, does he?”

“Come on. You’re not being serious, are you?”

“Oh, should I be thanking you for flattering me with the suggestion that he cares?”

“No, and I can see Tanzine has his work cut out for him.”

“Whaaat?” Oriana sputtered, uncomfortable with the idea that Heinz probably thought she was looking for reassurance.

This is probably all because I spent years declaring my affections for Vincent.

As a result, people naturally thought there was romance between them—that they were a couple. Admittedly, Oriana had wanted people to view them that way for the longest time. It probably seemed all the more strange for her to deny it now.

“Elsha, you know…”

“Yes?”

“I’m apparently here today to help students create memories that will last a lifetime.”

“Oh?” Oriana tried to nod, but suddenly, Heinz yanked her close—which was odd, considering she was sure she hadn’t missed a step in their dance sequence.

At the same instant, the orchestra went silent, signifying the end of the first dance. Oriana and Heinz were frozen in place, his arms wrapped tight around her. The eyes of the crowd burrowed into them.

“Be grateful I treasure my students so much. This is my present to you,” Heinz whispered into her ear before pulling away.

“Uh…okay?” Oriana tilted her head.

Was their dance supposed to be his once-in-a-lifetime present? Frankly speaking, the more beneficial present by far would’ve been a clear answer to the question she asked him earlier.

As she stood there dumbfounded, someone suddenly yanked her arm. Caught by surprise, Oriana lost her balance. A hand immediately caught her back, helping keep her upright. She didn’t even have to look up to know who it belonged to. The scent of cedarwood flooded her nose.

“I’ve brought your partner back to you, Professor Heinz.”

“Yep, thanks for that.”

Heinz stepped away from Oriana and took his partner’s hand. The two walked off without sparing Oriana a single glance.

“Vincent?”

“What?”

Vincent had arrived almost the instant the song ended. Professor Heinz had been right; he knew exactly where she was. Escorting the female student he’d shared the first dance with should have slowed him down, but the fact that it didn’t meant he must’ve beelined for Oriana.

“You’re squeezing too hard.”

“Oh! Apologies…” Vincent hurriedly released her wrist. She was wearing elbow-length gloves so it was impossible to see her skin, but he’d probably left an imprint.

This was the first time Vincent had ever grabbed her like that.

Is this what the professor meant when he said “memories that will last a lifetime”? No. No, no, come on. That can’t be it. Right? I mean, unless… But no way. Could it…?

Oriana’s gaze flitted between Vincent and Heinz’s receding back. Although Vincent turned his face away, she caught a glimpse of his awkward expression and grinned.

Oriana and Vincent joined their peers, dancing among the dozens of others on the floor. Her skirt swayed to the rhythm of Vincent’s movements. The heat from his fingers poured through the fabric of her gloves as they held hands. His other cupped her back and she leaned into it. She was so elated that she almost wanted to spin in circles.

Oriana didn’t have the confidence to maintain eye contact with Vincent the entire time. When she did manage to glance up at him, she soon averted her gaze, repeating this cycle numerous times.

The skin on her chest where her dress line dipped had turned pink. The champagne she drank earlier surely wasn’t the only reason for that.

“I never thought we’d be able to dance like this again,” she muttered, feeling as though she were in a dream.

Vincent frowned and lifted his brows. “This is the first time I’ve ever danced with you.”

“In that case, I guess I’m the lucky one since this is my second time with you.” Oriana giggled, and the disgruntled expression on Vincent’s face vanished. Apparently, he liked the way she phrased herself. Proud of that, Oriana grinned.

Tears threatened to well up in her eyes. This was such a happy moment. How long had she dreamed of this? Of being able to spend this day with Vincent

again?

“You know…even if I died, I wouldn’t forget today,” she said.

“That sounds believable, coming from you.”

From the bottom of her heart, Oriana smiled. She wanted to savor every second of their dance.

After sharing a dance, Oriana and Vincent stepped outside the venue. They couldn’t share a second consecutive dance, since per noble etiquette in Amanecer, that was a privilege reserved for married or engaged couples. There were probably no such strict rules here since it was a ball for the students, but nonetheless, the two followed their own whims and strolled through the garden.

As far as Oriana was concerned, there was no point in lingering inside if she couldn’t dance with Vincent. She didn’t want to waste her precious time at their graduation ball dancing with someone else, and she certainly didn’t want to watch Vincent mingle with other girls. Most people—save for perhaps extremely ardent admirers—wouldn’t come all the way out to the garden to proposition Vincent.

Oriana came to a halt, her arm still wrapped around Vincent’s. She only stopped because he did so first.

Vincent reached his hand out toward her ear. Her eyes went wide as she watched.

“You have something here,” he mumbled as he plucked whatever it was out of her hair. When he pulled his hand back, she glimpsed a petal pinched between his fingers. It likely got caught there when they released that vibrant flurry of petals earlier in the dance hall.

Oriana had frozen, thinking he was going to touch her face. Her cheeks flushed as she realized what she’d actually been expecting.

I thought he was going to kiss *me. After all, Professor Heinz made that comment, and we had such a wonderful time dancing. In my past life, I’m pretty sure it was today that Vince and I— Aaah!*

“Th-Th-Thanks…”

Apparently the alcohol (however little), coupled with the outside air and memories of her past life were getting to Oriana. She smiled awkwardly at Vincent. She pressed the back of her closed hand against her cheek. The silk fabric was cool against her skin, and she hoped it would help her blush recede faster.

“Does it still hurt?” Vincent’s eyes focused on her hand, his expression heavy with guilt.

It took her a moment to register what he was referring to. Vincent was most likely regretting how strongly he’d squeezed her wrist after her dance with Heinz.

“Oh, no. It doesn’t hurt at all.”

“If you’re certain…” Vincent didn’t seem entirely convinced. He was so virtuous that he probably felt ashamed of his own actions.

Oriana glanced around. They weren’t the only ones who’d fled the assembly hall. She could sense other presences in the area, but they were also trying to avoid prying eyes so they likely wouldn’t intrude upon her and Vincent. Nonetheless, she took his hand and guided him off to find somewhere more private. Vincent said nothing, obediently following her.

“I should’ve swiped one of their lanterns,” she thought out loud.

“That would’ve been a good idea.”

Oriana had only the moon and the faint illumination spilling out from the building’s windows to light her path. When she at last found a deserted place that wasn’t pitch black, she stopped and spun around to face Vincent.

Oriana began peeling off her glove. She slipped her fingers into the edges and slid it down past her elbow. Her skin looked like white porcelain underneath.

“What are…” Vincent’s eyes peeled back and there was a thread of anger in his voice.

Oriana hurriedly explained, “I thought you’d feel more at ease if you could see for yourself.” Her heart was pounding as she removed the fabric.

It wasn't as though she was doing anything inappropriate. This wasn't the days of old when such things were seen as lascivious, and her summer uniform had short sleeves. Even so, when you had feelings for someone and you peeled off any manner of fabric in front of them, it seemed immeasurably lewd—enough to make Oriana keenly aware of who was watching. It went without saying that Vincent was the only one she would do this in front of.

With the glove rolled down her arm, she finished by pinching the fabric at her fingers and pulling it the rest of the way off. Since Vincent didn't speak a word, she remained silent too. That only heightened her embarrassment. Her pulse thundered in her ears, loud enough she feared her heart might burst.

My only thought when I started this was to show him that I'm all right.

A gulp echoed. Oriana jerked her head up. Vincent's face was illuminated by faint moonlight, his earnest gaze glued to her hand. Her entire body heated up.

Okay, Oriana. He's only worried about your wrist. Don't get ahead of yourself.

The whole point of taking off her glove was to give him peace of mind. She mentally scolded herself for feeling embarrassed, blushing and squirming around like a fool.

Oriana tucked her glove under her armpit and held her hand out for Vincent to see.

"May I touch it?" Vincent's voice was hoarse.

The very depths of Oriana's heart trembled.

"Yes." Her own voice was no less scratchy than his.

Vincent stared at her wrist. He peeled off his own glove and shoved it in his pocket. Then gently, he brought his palm up to meet her hand. Where their skin touched, a numbness shot through her. Oriana almost unconsciously tried to yank away, but Vincent stopped her. He caressed her wrist, his touch as light as a feather.

"This is the spot," he said.

"Yeah…"

"It doesn't…hurt when I touch it?"

“No.”

His fingers continued to stroke her hand without pause, and her lips began to tremble. His palm was enormous as it wrapped around her hand. When they first met in this second timeline, Vincent was only thirteen. Their height had been about the same back then. That only made Oriana all the more determined to protect him—because he was so tiny, compared to how she remembered him.

When had he gotten so *big?* Oriana had been too focused on what was to come—on Vincent’s impending death. Only now was she really looking at the Vincent who stood before her.

Vincent studied her face closely as he shifted his hand so their palms met. His eyes were like those of a predator intent on seizing its prey, so Oriana dare not meet them. Instead, she squeezed her own eyes shut. Even though it was already the middle month of spring, her hand was clammy.

Sweat. Oh, this is awful. I just want to cry.

Oriana wanted to yank out her handkerchief and mop away all the sweat between the crevices of her fingers, but the slightest touch from him—the friction of their skin—sent shockwaves through her.

Aah… Aaaah! AAAAAAAH!!

Her eyes were beginning to spin as she went into full panic mode. The way he stroked her hand felt so intimate.

Rustle…

Oriana jumped. Vincent, who’d also been lost in the heat of the moment, also froze, his back stiffening. There were footsteps headed their way. They couldn’t hear what the voices were saying, but there were clearly two or more people.

Oriana and Vincent exchanged glances, their composure now restored.

“This way.” Vincent dragged her by the arm, pulling her into a bush.

Oriana was careful to make as little noise as possible, but it was dark, and she was in such a hurry that her foot caught on one of the hedge’s branches.

“Ah!”

As she tumbled forward, Vincent caught her. The two landed with him pinned beneath her. Her body was pressed flush against his, and their faces were so close, she could feel his breath crawl across her skin.

“Sorr—” Oriana started to apologize and scramble off of him, but she was caught on something and couldn’t pull away. She froze immediately. Unable to recognize this strange sensation, she glanced down at Vincent, hoping for answers. “I just felt something—”

The rest of her words hung unspoken as she stared at his face. Even in the darkness of the underbrush, he was red as a tomato. He had his eyes firmly shut and his face turned away. Bewildered as to what could’ve elicited such a reaction, she dropped her gaze down at their bodies only to suck in a breath. Her strapless dress was slipping down her body. Oriana yanked both of her hands back to cover her chest.

“I didn’t see anything,” Vincent sputtered. “I swear I didn’t.”

Oriana nodded quickly. If he promised he hadn’t seen anything, then he hadn’t. She had to believe that. Overcome with confusion, she curled in on herself, clenching her legs together. She kept her head down, squinting through the bushes where she caught a glimpse of some other students. Panicked, she hunkered down. She couldn’t let anyone see her like this.

It was impossible to lie flat while also pinning her dress in place. Oriana resolved herself and clung tight to Vincent, pressing her body into his. A tremor ran through him.

“I know I must be heavy,” she whispered, “but I’m sorry, we have to do this!”

“This is torture,” he gasped out, as if lamenting their horrible circumstances.

You don’t have to go that *far,* Oriana thought sullenly.

The strange sensation she felt—as if she was caught on something—must’ve been the ribbons at her back being pulled loose. In the instant she fell, a protruding branch from the shrubs had caught her laces. Since they’d been burned earlier by that girl’s hair iron, it had probably weakened the fibers.

I was in too much of a rush.

It wasn't as if they had been doing anything so naughty that they needed to hide themselves. All she did was remove her glove and hold Vincent's hand. That was all.

It's not a logical problem. It's an emotional one.

Oriana had no idea how Vincent felt, but the moment was intensely intimate to her. She didn't want anyone else to see, let alone intrude. She didn't want to share their private moment—or the afterglow of it—with anyone else.

"…with…right?"

The voices of the approaching students trickled into her ears, and both she and Vincent went rigid. Both of their bodies were feverishly hot, and Oriana's heart was beating at an unhealthy rate. Vincent's neck—which she'd never seen before—was right in front of her eyes. Since he was a man, there were muscles rippling underneath. The way his Adam's apple bobbed had her captivated. She could even hear his breath in her ear. It was almost too much to handle.

I can't look at him.

Oriana turned her head. The tip of her nose brushed against his neck. As her breath poured over him, his skin turned to gooseflesh and beads of sweat began to form. Vincent swallowed hard, squeezing his arms around her. Oriana held her breath, shocked.

He brought his mouth to her ear and whispered as quietly as possible, "Don't move." Vincent's voice was so strained, it sounded almost like a threat. His feverish breath caressed the shell of her ear, causing her to shiver. "Please," he added.

Oriana wanted to beg him to do the same—to not move!

She whispered a breathless "Okay." The air from her own mouth was ridiculously hot as it seeped into the fabric of his jacket.

"It's a shame, especially after we practiced the waltz together."

The approaching voices became more distinct, and this one she couldn't mistake—it was Miguel. In which case, the other voice that she hadn't been able to make out likely belonged to his partner, Yana. The two had apparently

come outside to take a short walk and get some fresh air.

Oriana pushed her body against Vincent's, burying her face in his chest.

"I was surprised you noticed that the two of you were the same height," said Yana.

"There aren't many people who are as tall as me."

It was wrong to eavesdrop, but the more she tried to distract herself from Vincent, who was pinned under her still, the more she focused on her friends' conversation.

"It's almost like I jinxed you by telling you I hoped the two of you would be able to dance together. Sorry about that," said Miguel.

That stirred Oriana's memories of when Yana chose Miguel as her dance partner during their lesson the other day. He'd whispered something in her ear at the time, causing her to blush. It must've been the same thing he said just now—about hoping she would be able to dance with Azraq.

"Even if he *was* here, I am sure he wouldn't have danced with me. I know how he is. He's not the type to seek that which is out of his reach."

Yana must have turned red back then, imagining herself dancing with Azraq.

And Azraq saw her reaction, never knowing what was said.

Oriana's whole body tightened at the thought of him. That prompted Vincent to groan beneath her.

"Oriana, can't you roll off to the side?" he gasped out.

It was only then that she remembered their predicament.

"What's wrong? Are you hurting somewhere?"

Perhaps he had a rock or a stick beneath him that was digging into his skin. Oriana paled. She needed to get off of him as quickly as possible then.

She tried to roll to the side, but the moment she moved, the branches above pulled at her hair. Apparently, with all their tousling about, her hair had gotten caught too. She tried to reach her hands up to untangle herself, but she couldn't locate where she was stuck. Given the state of things, her hair

ornament was probably caught up too.

“I can’t,” she said. “My hair is tangled in the bush.”

“All right, I will see what I can do.” Vincent reached his arms around her, brushing past her sides. A shiver ran through her again.

“Aah,” she moaned. The moment her body jerked, Vincent froze. Having given up on fiddling with her hair, he dropped his hands back into the grass.

“Phew…” He let out a long breath, emptying his lungs of every last bit of air.

They stayed like that as Vincent composed his breathing. He stared straight ahead as he whispered, “Apologies. You don’t have to move. Simply stay still. And please close your mouth.”

“It’s not like I’m *trying* to make a bunch of noise—”

“*Oriana.*”

“Fine, fine.”

Oriana didn’t want him to be in any more pain than he already was. Apparently, her shifting around only made it worse. She had to do something to lighten his burden, even if only a little.

“Sorry,” she murmured, “but I’m going to move a little.”

“Don’t.”

“Only a little.”

Oriana ignored his warning and shifted. Her legs had been pressed closed until now, but as she lifted one leg, she was straddling him, with her other leg sandwiched between his thighs. She thought if she could get on her knees, she could support her own weight somewhat. She couldn’t do the same with her upper body, since it would leave her chest in full view, but surely, this would give him some relief.

“Don’t— Urk…!”

As she was moving about, her knee nudged something hard. Vincent must’ve felt the impact because he gritted his teeth.

“S-Sorry. I think my leg bumped against something… Hey, Vincent, are you

carrying your wand with you?”

He must have tucked it away in his inner pocket. Perhaps it was a precaution in case anything unforeseen were to happen.

Oriana patted his clothes, searching for it, and she found it near his groin. It was in the perfect spot that if she tried to move further down, it might catch on her and break.

“Oriana, you…” He gasped as if he thought she was the devil incarnate. Oriana was shocked at the resentment in his voice.

“I’m sorry! I didn’t realize it was your wand.”

“That’s right. So don’t move. Please, I’m begging you.” Vincent had averted his eyes this entire time, but now he was peering down at her. A heady mix of sweat and cedarwood cologne wafted into her nose.

Oriana squinted through the darkness. Vincent’s face was practically on fire as he clenched his teeth tight. Raspy breaths were trickling out between the gaps of his pearly whites.

Oriana was on the verge of tears. She wanted to bring him relief as quickly as possible. At least if he didn’t have her weight bearing down on him, then, even if the rock continued to dig into his back, he could lift himself up a bit and escape from it.

“It would be awful if I somehow stepped on your wand and broke it, so I will move it out of the way first,” said Oriana.

There was nothing more important to a mage than their wand. If one were to lose theirs in an accident or break it, they could buy a new one, but then it’d take years for them to fashion it into something that suited them. Thus, Oriana rationalized that she was perfectly justified in her decision to extricate it.

“You idio— Stop! I mean it, you fool. You had better not!”

This was probably the first time he had ever called her names like that. Oriana flinched from the shock as she slipped her hand between their bodies. Vince’s entire body was so tense, he was trembling. Her heart sank with the thought that he was suffering, and she hurriedly patted his body down, feeling around

for the wand.

“Even if you have a gemstone embedded on it, I’m not going to steal it.”

“No. That’s not the issue— Wait, Oriana. I mean it, don’t you dare move. Please.”

Vincent’s hands shot toward her, trying to grab her arm to stay her. But since he couldn’t see anything, he missed his mark. What he grabbed instead was her lower back, near her buttocks. A strangled cry spilled from her throat.

“*Ngah!*”

“Wait…I mean it…please don’t…” Vincent ripped his hands away in a panic, using them to cover his face instead as he groaned in despair. His voice was feverish and gravelly. He had to be absolutely miserable. Each breath was ragged.

Confused at the strange noise that’d come out of her, Oriana snapped her mouth shut.

That almost sounded erotic. Oh, what’s wrong *with me… I don’t want him to think I’m some kind of hussy with illicit thoughts—least of all in* this *situation*…

Oriana was on the verge of tears as she pleaded with Vincent, “I beg you, don’t move. If you let me work, it will be over in a moment.”

“I *would* be upset if it ended that quickly— Wait, no, that isn’t the issue. No, don’t touch it. Stop!”

Found it!

Her fingers, which had been fishing around his clothes, finally found their target.

“What *are* you two doing?” called a voice from above right as Oriana was rummaging through Vincent’s layers, trying to find the opening to his pocket so she could pull out his *wand*. She whipped her neck around to look up, but the branch yanked her hair back, causing her to screech.

“Yowch!”

“*Hm?* Oh. Your hair is stuck…” Miguel reached a hand out, intending to free

her. It was a bit embarrassing to be caught like this after all they'd done to hide, but that ship had sailed now. It was time to pay the piper.

Oriana steeled herself for what was to come when a sharp voice called out from below, "Miguel, close your eyes!"

Oriana jumped with surprise. She only belatedly realized that she'd lifted her upper body in the confusion, leaving her chest visible. Panicked, she grabbed for the top of her dress to hold it in place.

Miguel turned his head away and said, "Yana, it's all right. It isn't anyone suspicious, only Vincent and Oriana. Would you mind coming over? Seems there's something I'm not meant to see."

It shocked Oriana that they thought her and Vincent might be someone suspicious. Although, all things considered, a sane person wouldn't be tossing around in the bushes on the night of the ball like this.

"What's the matter?" Yana asked as she crept closed. "Oh… *Goodness,* Oriana! If you'd only *told* me, I would've happily vacated our room for the night."

"Wait," said Oriana. "Hold on a minute. What in the world *are* you talking about?"

This was the point where Yana was supposed to get angry and scold her for her indiscretion. Instead, she was having the complete opposite reaction.

Panicked, Oriana explained, "I *swear* this was all an accident! It wasn't as if I was undressing and Vincent attacked me or anything like that!"

"I must say, it doesn't look as though there's any other explanation for it." Yana shook her head.

"Yana, Oriana's hair is tangled in the bushes. Can you help free her? And give her this to wear." Miguel's voice echoed overhead, but he was no longer in view. Most likely, he was keeping his distance to give her privacy.

"All right, slip your arm through here. And your other arm through this sleeve." The way Yana helped dress her reminded Oriana of how her maids would help her get changed back home.

“Miguel, thank you. I don’t mind if you cut my hair off, but can you do something quickly? Vincent seems to be in pain. I want to help him as quickly as I can.”

“Cutting your hair is out of the question,” Miguel said. “Now that you’re clothed, however, why don’t I lift you up? Vincent can crawl out from under you in the meantime.” Once he was sure she was wearing his jacket, he reached his arms toward her.

Oriana panicked. “Wait! If you aren’t careful, you might break his wand!!!”

“His wand?”

“His wand is somewhere near my stomach right now. I thought I might snap it in half if I wasn’t careful when I moved, so I wanted to pull it out first.”

“Oh. I see. Well…I guess it *is* a wand.”

“Yes, indeed. A hard *wand*.”

Miguel and Yana nodded with knowing looks on their faces.

Uh, yes? That’s what I said—a wand.

“But,” said Miguel, “for Vincent’s sake, I think we should leave it where it is.”

“Huh?”

“Apologies. But I’m going to lift you now. Up you go!”

Before she could press him for answers, Miguel slipped his hands under her armpits. It must have been an awkward position for him as he lifted her up like a stray pup, but at least Oriana didn’t feel any pain.

Contrary to Oriana’s fears, Vincent—who’d been absolutely silent up until now—had no trouble scrambling swiftly out from under her. His speed was so impressive that even a mouse fleeing from a fire could hardly match him.

“Vincent, are you all right?” Oriana asked, worried about both his body and his wand as she dangled helplessly in Miguel’s arms.

Vincent remained crouched on the ground, his voice filled with despair as he croaked, “My dignity is dead.”

“What? Why?”

Vincent cradled his head in his hands, slumped over in the grass. He didn't move for a while.

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BY the time they finally managed to pry her hair loose from the branch, the whole group was thoroughly exhausted. Oriana had to remain in an awkward pose throughout the ordeal while Miguel and Yana left to find a lantern. When they got back, they had to untangle her hair one thin strand at a time with their fingers. Vincent sat hunched over on the grass the entire time, but for whatever reason, neither Yana nor Miguel blamed him for his inaction.

Oriana's beautiful updo had turned into a disheveled mess, as the shrubs had pried her iris hairpiece loose during the whole debacle. Her ribbons had indeed been cut during her fall, so Yana had taken emergency measures to secure her dress in place. She was now decent enough to mingle with the other students, but Vincent wouldn't allow her to shed her jacket. Incidentally, said jacket was no longer Miguel's because Vincent had changed it out for his own rather quickly.

Vincent's scent tickled at her nose. As she spaced out after all that'd happened, Oriana pressed her face against the jacket and inhaled.

"I no longer have the energy to return to the ball," said Yana.

"Me either. Especially with my hair like this. Why don't we go back?"

Oriana's hair was a rat's nest, and she had to keep a man's jacket over her dress, so she looked the part of a woman who'd been assailed by some kind of hoodlum. They had done what they could. No one would think much of it in passing, but this hair arrangement wasn't exactly appropriate for a ball.

"Mister Tanzine, please escort us back," said Yana.

"Yes, of course," said Vincent. "Miguel, I will look after them both."

"All right. Take care!"

"See you later, Miguel."

"Yep, see ya."

They waved hands before parting. The two girls and Vincent made their way

toward the girls' dormitory. The sidewalks were empty along the way. It wasn't that late out yet, so everyone else was likely still enjoying the ball. Perhaps some of the large roasted chicken in the girls' lounge still remained.

The walk home was so calm that it was hard to believe the past hour had been so hectic. Vincent followed from behind, quietly listening as Yana and Oriana chatted. It was mostly small talk. The topics ranged from the snacks they'd eaten at the ball to the colors of their classmates' shoes, and before they knew it, they were back at the dormitory.

"All right, I will head up first. Oriana, be sure to return his jacket to him," said Yana.

"Oh, that's right. Thank you."

If Yana hadn't reminded her, she might've carried it straight to their room.

Oriana tried to shrug the jacket off, but Vincent stopped her with a smile. "Can we speak for a moment longer?"

She pulled a face and glanced to her side. Yana had been there a moment ago, but she'd somehow disappeared.

Oh, that's right. She did *say she was going to head up first.*

Oriana spun around, but Yana was already through the door and heading up the spiral staircase. As Oriana watched her friend from behind, she realized Yana was trying to be considerate of them.

"Oh, um…s-sure." Her cheeks heated.

After he went to the trouble of guiding us here, I can't help wondering if him inviting me out again has a deeper meaning.

Oriana eyed his proffered hand before slipping off her glove and placing her fingertips in his palm. He gently squeezed, pulling her along. They began walking along the wall of the dormitory.

It was lively inside the building. Laughter trickled out through the windows they passed. Those without partners had set up a girls-only party, and it was evidently a booming success.

Oriana and Vincent slipped away from the clamor, walking through flower

beds the female students had cultivated. There, Vincent came to a stop. Oriana halted too. With nothing better to do, she leaned her back against the wall. Vincent slipped up beside her and did the same.

Despite being the one to invite her along, saying he wanted to speak, he was being awfully tight-lipped.

Not that I really mind.

At least, as far as Oriana was concerned, it wasn't an uncomfortable silence. Today was a special day and she was with someone equally special.

The two continued holding hands as they gazed up at the stars. It was a pleasant, peaceful moment.

The collar of Vincent's jacket smelled of cedarwood. Oriana lifted her shoulders to bring it closer. She then pressed her back firmly against the wall, shoving her hands into the coat pockets as she stretched out her legs and inhaled. His scent flooded her lungs.

I almost want to cry. I'm so happy.

Even if she had to live this life all over again, she would still be able to recall this exact moment in vivid detail. She wouldn't forget a thing—not the feel of the wind, the scent of the earth, the cry of the insects, or even the faint laughter reverberating from within the dormitory.

"Today was…" Oriana's mouth opened before she realized what she was doing.

"*Hm?*"

"Fun."

"Yes, it was."

It had been an eventful day but an entertaining one. These past three months had been so hectic and full of anxiety, but at least she'd taken an active role. And in the end, the ball was enormously satisfying.

"Hey, mind if I ask a question?" Oriana tried to play it casual. She lifted her shoulders a bit more, hiding her face behind the coat collar.

“What is it?”

“Why did you ask *me* to be your partner?”

If he’d asked her the same question, she would not have hesitated to answer, but Vincent said nothing. His hand stiffened in hers.

Oriana pretended not to notice as she prattled, “Oh, it’s okay. I basically understand already. I mean, I kept going on and on about the Vince from my past life, so you were probably just trying to compete, right?”

“Oriana.”

“And also, everyone had already decided on their partners! You must’ve noticed me panicking and felt bad for me. Sorry about that. I appreciate it, though. I really was anxious.”

“That’s not it at all.”

“Um, also, you know,” she continued, “by inviting me, you could ensure there weren’t any misunderstandings after graduation…with your future bride. Especially since no one would ever think twice about me…”

“Oriana, please listen.”

Vincent’s voice was so earnest that Oriana couldn’t keep blabbering on. She stared down at her feet instead. Their hands were still connected, but hers had gone limp. Vincent was the one keeping a firm hold.

“I invited you because I wanted to. Because I wanted to dance with *you.*”

Oriana bit down on her quivering lip.

Vincent moved in front of her, peering into her face. She froze and he brought his hand to her cheek, cupping it.

It was all so sudden. She could only gawk at him.

Vincent traced his thumb over her lips, and they parted with ease.

“Can this be enough for you right now? There are no other words I can yet offer.” His palm trembled slightly. “Tomorrow, or the day after, I will be returning home. On Seed Day, I want to speak with you again. But I need you to wait for me until then.”

A tear slipped down her cheek and he must have felt it against his hand. As if to comfort her, he brushed his thumbs over her cheeks, wiping the edges of her eyes.

I forced myself not to look for an answer. If I thought about it, I knew it would influence me. I mean, I'm not his lover in this life. Vincent didn't choose me.

That was why she'd convinced herself there was no hope. She'd chided herself for letting her heart beat with anticipation at every little thing because she was sure it wasn't possible. But no longer could she hold herself back.

"I…I can wait for you?"

"Yes."

"I used to be your girlfriend, you know."

"I know."

"So when I say wait, it's with that meaning in mind."

"I know," he said again. "That's why I'm asking you to wait."

His voice was so gentle. It seemed to wrap around her, softer even than the coat resting on her shoulders.

"After school on Seed Day, I promise I will go to the lounge. Wait for me there," he said.

She bobbed her head. In the same instant, her tears wriggled free. Unable to contain her happiness, she threw her arms around him—or at least, she tried. Vincent's hands shot up frighteningly fast, blocking her.

"What…?"

"No more. All of this needs to wait until Seed Day."

"But why?!" Oriana demanded. "Is what you said a moment ago—"

"I won't be able to take it."

"What?!"

That's my line!

Miffed, Oriana began to furrow her brows. But before she could, Vincent

grabbed her face. His enormous hands covered her cheeks. She didn't even have a chance to be surprised before his forehead bumped against hers. Their noses brushed and their breath blended together. If she wasn't careful, they were close enough that their lips might touch.

Vincent's feverish gaze bore into her.



“Are we clear?”

“Y-Yes…”

Dazed, Oriana nodded. His hands dropped and his face pulled away. She pressed her fingers over her lips.

I thought he’d kissed me.

No, though their lips hadn’t touched, it was still a kiss. Their hearts longed for one another.

“I’ll escort you back now.” He took her hand. She squeezed it, unable to do anything else at the moment.

Vincent silently guided her back to the dorm entrance. He spoke no words of parting and Oriana could only stare absently after him. When he finally disappeared, she willed herself to climb the stairs.

“Oriana! So you’re already back.”

“We still have some chicken left.”

Some of the other students came over to greet Oriana as she arrived at the lounge. Despite how much she’d hungered for the chicken they were enjoying, she didn’t even care to look at it now. She silently shook her head and started up another flight of stairs. Worried voices echoed after her, but she ignored them and retreated to her room.

Oriana waltzed through the door and, without peeling her dress off or removing her makeup, slumped across her bed. The top bunk had a curtain drawn around it. Perhaps Yana was already asleep.

That’s right, Vincent’s coat…

Oriana had forgotten to return it. She pulled it tighter, not worried about how it might wrinkle as she hugged it.

I’ll return it after I have it cleaned.

She nuzzled it with her nose and clung to it, inhaling Vincent’s scent until it filled her. With each anxious breath, she tried to engrave all the details of today in her mind—the way Vincent’s voice sounded, how warm his body was, how

passionate they both were…

Oriana closed her eyes. Tears leaked past, seeping into the fabric of Vincent's coat.

Chapter 12: White Sky, Red Flame

THE tanzanite Oriana had tucked away like a cursed item now glimmered brightly atop her wand.

There was no school for the two days following the ball, so all the students were spending their time leisurely, basking in the afterglow of the event. The temporary lull was a nice reprieve, especially since they'd have to start seriously seeking out job opportunities beginning next week.

"Yana, let's go eat some ramen," Oriana whined.

"Oh? Is ramen on the menu today? I wonder if they have salt flavor."

Having tired of their room and the lounge, Oriana dragged Yana toward the cafeteria. There was a crowd surrounding the signboard outside. They must've all been anxiously awaiting this day.

After all, ramen is king.

"Only salt and miso flavors today? Rats, I was hoping for pork cutlet," Oriana grumbled.

"What will you do instead?"

"Well, I've never had the salt before, so I guess I'll go with that."

It was a mundane conversation, the likes of which they'd shared many times before. But Oriana knew this wouldn't last forever.

As she lined up with the others waiting for salt-flavored ramen, Oriana slipped her hand into the sleeve of her robe. She traced the item she'd tucked away there, reminding herself of its presence. After the ball, she'd started carrying her wand and a sheaf of papers with magic circles already drawn on them.

Students weren't allowed to use magic outside of class, but knowing what danger awaited, Oriana couldn't allow herself to be weighed down by such rules. She didn't care if the teachers scolded or even expelled her. Vincent's life was literally on the line.

Having said that, Vincent actually wasn't at Lagen Magic Academy right now. Despite the overwhelming anxiety threatening to swallow her whole, that was the one glimmer of relief, since Vincent had died inside the Academy last time.

The security here was high enough that almost no outsiders could slip inside. Even the private detective she'd hired confirmed there were nearly no crimes that had been committed within school grounds by people from the outside. Whoever it was that had murdered Vincent in these halls might try to follow him out to the city, but Vincent was a duke's heir. His personal security was second only to royalty.

There were apparently some methods one could kill by that Oriana couldn't even begin to guess at, if Professor Heinz were to be believed. Vincent's chances of survival were much higher if he returned home where his status mattered rather than staying at the Academy, where he was treated like any other student. Plus, this time, Vincent knew he was in danger. He would surely be more careful than usual.

Oriana had even told him when he left on Flower Day that the day of his death was approaching, so he needed to be even more vigilant. He'd warned her against getting involved with that business, but seeing the desperation on her face as she implored him, he agreed without argument.

A letter had arrived from him earlier. Apparently his father, whom he wanted to meet with, had to leave suddenly on business, and Vincent's return to the school would be delayed until Seed Day afternoon.

His letter read: *I'll return when classes are over. Wait for me like we promised.*

Oriana's eyes had taken in the words dozens of times.

Oriana and Yana took their seats at the edge of the classroom and slurped their ramen. The seat beside Yana was conspicuously empty, but Oriana was even growing used to that—as much as she hated herself for it.

"This bamboo is delicious."

"I like the onion."

Oriana scooped out a spoonful of broth containing onion and sesame seeds. She was beginning to wonder if perhaps it was time to admit that pork bone

broth wasn't the *only* pinnacle of delicious ramen cuisine. As she swallowed her last sliver of bamboo, boys began spilling in through the cafeteria entrance. They numbered less than ten in total, and for some reason, they were all wearing work clothes. They also had what resembled a huge board in one hand and a glove in the other.

"Oh? What's that?"

"A new club that started up this year. It's called Magic Ball," said Oriana.

Since the same event occurred in her previous life, she knew all about it already. One of the first-years, who was a passionate fan of the sport, had negotiated directly with the school to be able to form the club.

"Apparently, that magic paper they've pasted to their board makes the ball fly into the distance."

"Interesting. Ete Karima has that as well. Golphy, we call it. I assume they're the same."

"Probably. I guess so?" Oriana avoided giving a definitive answer, since she'd never even seen Magic Ball or Golphy for herself before. "Professor Quicee is their advisor. I hear they're practicing in the middle of the forest."

"If it's a sport that involves making a ball fly, wouldn't it be inconvenient to play in a forest?"

"They're having trouble coordinating a practice area, so I hear they're arguing with the school about where to do it."

Oriana knew of the club's existence in her first timeline, but she'd never known the particulars of it. When she glanced at the male students, their trays were loaded down with plates.

"They sure have a healthy appetite," she said.

"Exercise does empty the stomach after all."

Oriana dipped her spoon into her soup. The noodles were already gone, but she still hadn't found the bottom of her bowl.

I wonder what he's eating right now…

It was obvious who she was thinking about, especially since her cheeks turned red. Oriana never thought she'd be able to fantasize about him like a lover again—not in this lifetime.

*He told me to wait for him. And I…*want *to wait.*

Oriana and Vincent were to meet up tomorrow after school. She couldn't even begin to imagine how she would spend the intervening hours.

It's vexing that I can't remember how many days after the ball it was that Vince died. It's also terrifying too. But if we work together, I am sure we can overcome it this time.

Vincent had told her in his letter: *Wait for me like we promised.*

Oriana reflected on the words over and over. She had read his letter so many times she could even vividly recall his penmanship.

She put her spoon down. Although she couldn't stop wolfing the soup down before, her heart was so full of love now that her stomach couldn't fit anything else.

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"WHAT?! *You* like a girl?"

And here I thought he'd be a bit more serious about this…

Although his head ached and he felt dizzy, Vincent continued standing stiffly as he nodded.

The Amethyst Dragon Duke had a luxurious estate in the capital. The entrance was large enough to accommodate multiple horse-drawn carriages. The carpet leading to the marble front hall changed with the seasons, and the main staircase within was always freshly polished. It was also equipped with a sitting area and reception hall, both of which other nobles in the capital eagerly hoped they would receive an invitation to during a social season. This place had belonged to Vincent's family for as long as he could remember, and it was his to protect and pass on to the next generation.

Currently, Vincent was standing in the study, and opposite of him was the man to whom this room—or rather, the entire mansion—belonged: the

Amethyst Dragon Duke.

Light spilled in from the cracks in the curtains, reflecting off the mahogany desk where Vincent's father had put out his cigarette on an ashtray. The duke motioned for Vincent to take a seat, but he insisted on standing.

"I would like to start thinking about my future with this girl," he continued.

"Why do you say it like that?" asked Vincent's father. "Is this some kind of declaration? Are you going to tell me I better permit your union, or you'll run away from home? Is that it?"

It was hard to believe, but this man really *was* the one true Amethyst Dragon Duke.

"Oh, goodness no! Dedicated and well-behaved boys like you are so apt to brooding and then spiraling out of control."

"I said nothing about running away," Vincent reminded him.

"Yes, you're right. My bad. I wasn't being serious either. I understand, you know—just how hard you have worked, trying to put our lands and our house first. Did I hurt your feelings? I'm sorry."

"Enough of your—" Vincent snapped his mouth shut, clenching the hand he'd had resting on his hip.

Stop, he chided himself inwardly. *Don't let him drag you into his nonsense.*

"Can we speak seriously?" Vincent asked instead.

"Be my guest." The duke—whose face much resembled his son's—smiled, his eyes crinkling shut.

The words were like tar, glued to the back of Vincent's throat. He silently cursed. Thanks to his father's theatrics, he'd lost some of the nerve he'd built up.

"I am hoping to make her my wife—my duchess, in the future. There could be no better peace of mind for me than if you agreed with my decision."

"Now hold on a minute. For you to say something like that, I assume she must not be a noble girl. If she is, you need only say the word. Whether she be the

daughter of a viscount or baron or even from an impoverished noble family, I will be happy to take care of everything and permit your relationship."

Take care of everything—those were heavy words. Especially since Vincent's father had the power to follow through. No one could really oppose him, regardless of the circumstances, and yet his promise of support extended only to nobility. Nothing was more important to the nobility than pride and prestige, and the best way to uphold that was through good breeding and a solid lineage.

"She's a…commoner."

"*Hah*, I knew it! Well, considering she's dating you, I'm sure she must have some guts," said the duke as he leaned back in his chair.

Vincent flinched and awkwardly mumbled, "No…"

"*Hm?*"

"We're not…dating yet."

For a moment, the duke's mask slipped as he gawked. Vincent had never seen him like this ever before.

"Come again?" His voice grew louder. "Really, what is the matter with you? You're being far too rash. Is this your first love? It *is,* isn't it?"

"Enough. We aren't discussing that."

"No, that's precisely what we *are* talking about. Now hurry and take a seat. Explain things to me. Okay?" Vincent's father motioned again to the couch across from where he was sitting.

Vincent reluctantly sat down before explaining, "I didn't want to date her if we might have to break it off later." The words sounded far more juvenile and anxious than he'd intended.

For Vincent, getting married in the future was a given, and he already knew he was in no position to choose his partner. He'd been engaged to Sharon when they were younger, but then her family had a scandal. Their family had done everything to suppress the matter on the surface, but of course, his parents had canceled their betrothal. The metaphorical seat at his side had remained empty since, and his parents had likely decided that when the time came, they'd be

the ones to choose who filled it.

But the only person I want to occupy it is Oriana.

“Has this girl agreed to your proposal?”

“What?” The word came out almost strangled as Vincent feared his father had seen into the very depths of his heart.

“Even if you do start dating her now, maybe she only wants to be your girlfriend while you’re still at the Academy. Maybe she doesn’t want more.”

Vincent paused before saying, “No, there’s no possible way—”

“Okay, hold on, hold on.” The duke’s expression turned gentle as he tried to placate his heated son. He lifted himself up and walked over. As he settled down beside Vincent on the sofa, the leather cushions sank beneath him. They hadn’t sat this close together since Vincent was a boy—well, granted, seventeen was still young enough to be called a boy, but nonetheless.

“Since you were young, you’ve always poured everything into your studies without a single complaint, and I probably put too much on your shoulders because of it. Now that I think back, I realize you always had a strong sense of responsibility. Too strong, one might argue. You are allowed to experience love with one or two or even three girls while you’re at the Academy.”

“Have you forgotten that all the girls at the school are unwed? Even if I made promises to each of those girls and their houses, I would only ever be able to take one as a wife when the time comes.”

“This is precisely what I mean! Your sense of obligation is too strong! When that time comes, you play stupid. Obviously.”

“Father…are you a degenerate?”

“He called me a degenerate… My beloved son just called me a degenerate…”

The duke buried his face in his hands as he lamented. A butler, who’d been standing in the corner of the room, walked over and offered Vincent’s father a tissue. Apparently, he wanted to keep up the ruse of a sobbing parent.

“I have *never* been dissatisfied with my role,” said Vincent. “Nor have I pushed myself past my limits in working to fill the shoes you will one day leave

me. Even when it comes to marriage—”

“Well, for now, why don’t you bring her to meet us on your next holiday? I will speak with your mother on your behalf. We can take this whole marriage thing step by step. Don’t look so anxious. There are loopholes we might use.”

They most likely wanted to meet Oriana and evaluate her to determine whether she was worth the risks that came with using said loopholes.

But that level of commitment is more than enough.

Satisfied with leaving it at that for today, Vincent took to his feet. He glanced down at his father, who was still seated on the couch.

“I will return with her during our next break then.”

“Yes, please do so. I will be looking forward to it.” His father’s lips curled into a truly genuine smile.

Sometimes Vincent didn’t even know which side of his father was the real one.

❦ ❦ ❦

WHEN he left the study, the butler who’d been waiting inside followed him out. Vincent was the one who’d requested the man be there when he spoke with his father. If he were left alone with the duke, he knew he would too easily lose his cool and be swept up in his father’s antics.

As they started up the stairs, the butler hesitantly called up after him. “Lord Vincent?”

“Yes, I know. I’m not such a child that I believe everything he said.” Vincent scowled.

When he was younger, he simply wanted his father to smile. The duke always wore a happy face when he did his best. As the oldest of his siblings and someone well respected and loved by all the people around him, his father knew how to inspire others to do as he willed. And of course, his father had used that to his advantage.

“My father is no saint, but he is not a villain either.”

The duke wasn't kind enough to let things pass simply because it came as no loss to him. On the other hand, he *would* be willing to overlook things, provided it benefited him somehow. That meant he would permit Vincent's marriage to Oriana, as long as it held some kind of merit for him.

Maybe if I told him that I was fated to die, but Oriana managed to save my life, he might reconsider…

No, if Vincent said that, his father would either think he had lost his marbles or was so insincere that he'd stoop to lying to get married. Either way, it would only hurt his father's opinion of him.

Even without Oriana, Vincent intended to protect their territory and keep top grades at the Academy, as befitting someone of his status. But for as accomplished as he was, the only thing he had to offer was his time. It looked like he had everything from the outside, but in truth, none of that power was his to freely use.

Vincent originally planned to offer up his time to his father when he brought up the subject of marrying Oriana. If it meant spending a future together, he was willing to become his father's puppet for five or ten years—however long it took. That said, he wasn't going to say as much openly. Vincent knew if he stated his conditions outright, his father would force him to stick to them, regardless of how he really felt.

Ultimately, it ended without him having to offer. His father freely agreed that the two could be lovers, despite her common birth. His attitude wasn't befitting of a gentleman, but that was beside the point. Vincent felt as though he'd won a huge gamble. At the same time, clouds still hung over his heart.

"Maybe she only wants to be your girlfriend while you're still at the Academy. Maybe she doesn't want more."

Those words hit him where it hurt.

Vincent's love for Oriana was special. He thought he would spend his life never knowing love and marry whomever his parents picked, then spend his days protecting his family and their lands. Yet his passion for Oriana was like destiny. He was sure Oriana felt the same—no, he was pretty sure she felt it even stronger than him.

Lately, it was clear that Oriana was seeing him as Vincent, rather than as Vince. She'd spent her whole life worrying about his well-being, so he blindly believed she shared his feelings. The possibility that she didn't never even crossed his mind.

After graduation, she might not even bother to look my way anymore.

Oriana had her own house to worry about. He didn't think her father was the type to prioritize some nobody over an engagement with the duke's son, but then again, stranger things had happened. Namely, Oriana living through two timelines. That was proof that the impossible was actually possible.

"My father was right. I suppose I *am* being too rash. Perhaps she hasn't given marriage to me any thought."

He launched into self-deprecation after they entered his room, and the butler began helping him change so he could return to school. Specifically, the butler was helping him slip his arms through the sleeves of his jacket. He would normally do this by himself, but he always had numerous servants to help out when he returned home.

After the butler finished fastening the buttons, the crow's feet on the edges of his eyes deepened as he smiled. "Then I would ask that you listen to what I have to say. If you find it unhelpful, you need only pass it off as the idle ramblings of an old man."

"I would never do such a thing. Please, speak freely."

This butler had looked after Vincent since he was a young boy. He was practically part of the family, though he was already pushing over sixty.

"Let us assume that this young lady doesn't desire the same as you. If you were to play off your feelings as only being casual, it would only destroy that future which you wish for so dearly. However, if you are determined enough to stick with how you truly feel, you can only stand to benefit."

Vincent's shoulders stiffened. He glanced back at the butler.

Basically, if Oriana really did only want a fling with him while they were at school, it wouldn't pay for him to pretend he wasn't serious about the relationship simply to impress her. He was the only person capable of changing

her heart, assuming she wasn't serious. That would be impossible to do, however, if all he sought from her was casual dating to begin with.

"I am reminded once again how much I need you to stay in good health. I hope you're looking forward to your birthday this year." Vincent shot a wry smile at the man.

Every year, he and his sisters gave him a present. As far as the butler was concerned, both Vincent and his father were probably still nothing more than troublesome children.

"I truly am blessed," said the butler with a grin.

Vincent was glad he'd asked the man to come along during his meeting with his father.

Once he finished changing, he grabbed his robe. No sooner had he turned toward the door than the servants standing there opened it in anticipation of him.

The butler took a deep bow and said, "Lord Vincent, please be safe." His voice was accompanied by a chorus as the other servants joined in. Vincent's eyes crinkled as he looked at them all and finally nodded.

"Yes. I'll be off now."

❦ ❦ ❦

SINCE Vincent had already informed the Academy ahead of time that he would be late returning due to household affairs, the faculty didn't scold him. That didn't stop him from being in dour spirits at how late the hour was upon his return. It began raining on the way, and his carriage got stuck in the mud. He and the driver had to work together to push it out, which they'd succeeded in doing only after they were thoroughly drenched.

Once he arrived, he changed into a spare uniform and headed straight for the lounge in the eastern building. Along the way, lightning danced across the sky.

I wonder if she's all right.

Oriana was probably alone. Imagining her trembling by herself in fear of the lightning made his heart ache. For the first time in his life, Vincent started

running through the halls.

Professor Wilton noticed him at a distance and tried to scold him, only to freeze in place upon recognizing who Vincent was. Likely, the teacher never dreamed Vincent would be the student brazenly breaking school rules. He shot right past her without thinking twice. Time was of the essence right now.

I need to hurry to her immediately. And then—and then what? What do I tell her? How should I say it?

His face puckered. As part of the nobility, he never thought a day would come when he would have to convey his feelings to another person.

What about "I adore you"? Is that too casual? Then "I love you"? Or is that too clichéd?

The words raced through his mind one after the other. As far as he could picture, Oriana would be delighted no matter how he phrased it.

It doesn't matter anymore. Instead of planning it ahead of time, I will look her straight in the eyes and tell her what I think in the moment.

The thunder roared outside. Shortly after, the whole sky flashed white.

I need to hurry. And when I get there, I'll take her in my arms.

When she was frightened by the storm before, all Vincent could do was sit beside her. He told her to seek him out when it happened next, but since there hadn't been another storm after, he'd never had the opportunity to be there for her again.

But if there had *been a storm, would she have sought me out?*

Although he knew how much she feared the lightning and thunder, there was a part of him that hoped for it, if only for the chance to console her.

❦ ❦ ❦

WHEN Vincent finally reached the lounge, he was gasping for air. He threw open the door and immediately found Oriana. He could see the back of her head jutting up from the sofa where she was seated.

His legs almost trembled from a rush of nervousness and relief.

“Oriana, I apologize for being late. You must’ve been frightened.”

It was a miracle that his voice didn’t waver.

Vincent started toward her. She was planted on the sofa he always occupied by himself. Her eyelids were firmly shut.

“Oh, you’re sleeping?”

That’s a relief, he thought. *Then you didn’t even notice the thunder and lightning.*

Vincent let out a soft sigh and plopped himself into a chair that sat perpendicular to where Oriana was. When he glanced at her, he noticed a wand in her hand, crowned with a purple jewel.

A chuckle slipped past his lips.

“And here you said you were going with the ink type…”

At some point, she must’ve put that enormous tanzanite on it. Vincent recalled the time he overheard her and their classmates. It was quite clear that she’d added it out of affection for him. It glimmered in her hand, as though Vincent himself were already nestled right against her side. That made him smile.

It’s been a while since I last saw her sleeping.

That time, she’d been painfully moaning, her entire face contorted from a combination of the fever and past regrets. Now, however, she looked peaceful. One could even say she was smiling. Her expression perfectly conveyed how anxiously she’d been awaiting his return.



“I adore you.”

The words slipped out before he even realized he was saying them.

“I’d like you to consider having a future with me.”

Vincent rested his elbows on his thighs and buried his face in both hands.

“I’ll say it all again when you wake up.”

Could he actually do that? His face was so feverishly hot that he second-guessed whether he could summon the courage to do so.

“It’s warm in here. Let’s damp down the fire a bit.”

Although he knew no one was listening, Vincent still made excuses for himself as he stood up. He grabbed the poker, thrusting it into the raging flames.

“Hm…?”

Noticing something bizarre, he prodded a bit more. He used the poker to pull whatever it was from the fire, scooping it and a pile of ash into a steel dustpan.

“What…is this?”

What had been burning in the fireplace with the rest of the firewood was a bright, smoldering branch. The moment he fished it out, a strange scent filled the air. It was so sweet, as if all the flowers in the world had been boiled down into a thick concentrate, overpowering enough to intoxicate even a dragon.

Vincent’s brows furrowed as he eyed the branch. Any mage would recognize the difference between a normal tree branch and one from the Dragon Tree in an instant. And this was definitely a Dragon Tree branch. It burned so bright, almost like magma.

The fireplaces at Lagen Magic Academy used ordinary firewood. Caretakers would periodically inspect the fireplaces and leave the necessary wood for the students to use. Occasionally, they would find a letter some student had crumpled and thrown in or a test with a bad score someone had discarded, but Vincent had never heard of someone burning a Dragon Tree branch in the fireplace before.

It’s making me dizzy.

As he stared at the branch, his body started to lean to the side. A cloying sweet smell rose up from the branch, burning as it went down his throat. The effect was similar to alcohol; he could feel the strength fading from his body.

Vincent decided to put some distance between himself and the branch. He turned his back to it.

In that instant, the whole room flashed white. A loud clap of thunder followed only a few seconds after. The earth rumbled with it, sending vibrations through the floor beneath Vincent's feet.

"There was thunder that day… The day someone precious to me died."

For some reason, he could still vividly recall what Oriana told him that day when it was storming.

Oh no, he thought. *I have a terrible feeling about this.*

Vincent took long strides over to the couch where Oriana was resting. He would feel bad for waking her, given the weather, but he wanted to suggest they take their leave of this place.

"Oriana? Ori…ana…?"

As Vincent put his hand on her cheek to wake her up, he froze. Oriana was ice cold. Panicked, he put his hand over her mouth.

The strength left his legs. He collapsed on the floor beside her.

"Oriana?"

She wasn't breathing. Her skin was as frigid as stone, and it was clear that any life had long left her body.

All of the blood drained from Vincent's face and his body began trembling.

"But…why…?"

Wasn't I *the one…who was supposed to die?*

Vincent's heart hammered. He put his ear against her chest, but there was no sound. He couldn't believe it—any of it.

He threw his arms around her, drawing her into his embrace. The wand she'd been holding clattered as it fell on the floor. He clung to her body, as if he

thought he could share his own heat with her—as if then she might open her eyes for him again.

“Oriana… Oriana!”

Vincent pulled her down from the couch, letting her body rest atop his legs. He didn’t want to share her weight with anything. He wanted to be the only thing to support her.

The expression on Oriana’s face was so sweet, as if she was locked in a dream. He checked her over, but there were no signs of anything on her neck or beneath her clothes. He even slipped his fingers in her mouth to check, but there was nothing out of the ordinary.

The world turned white again as lightning filled the sky.

“I hear they sometimes call thunder ‘the Dragon God.’”

Vincent remembered what Oriana had said to him. He opened his eyes and stared at the bright red Dragon Tree branch by the fireplace. It was the only thing amiss in this entire room.

“Don’t tell me…”

It continued to smolder, bright as magma, invoking the same fear as the dragons it was named after.

A chill ran down Vincent’s spine.

Thunder roared outside like a dragon’s cry.

“Is this really a dragon’s curse?”

Vincent glanced down at Oriana. The intoxicatingly sweet smell swelled in his nose until he could breathe nothing else, and his vision began to grow hazy. Everything around him faded rapidly until he couldn’t even make out Oriana’s face anymore. He wanted to see her even a second longer—to feel her. He cupped his hands around her cheeks. His own body grew so cold that he couldn’t even register the chill of her skin anymore.

Creaaak.

There was a sound like hell’s door cracking open.

And then everything went black.

Afterword

HELLO, it's nice to meet you! My name is Eiko Mutsuhana.

It's an honor for this series to receive a translation. I never dreamed I would get the opportunity to have overseas readers enjoy it, but I'm really glad I am able to.

Return from Death: I Kicked the Bucket and Now I'm Back at Square One With a Boyfriend Who Doesn't Remember Me centers around Oriana and Vincent, while also portraying various forms of love and friendship and the daily lives of young students at a magic academy.

Oriana is lucky enough to reunite with her former lover, Vincent. She pours her everything into this new timeline and tries desperately to stick by his side. While searching for the best way to prevent his death, she still tries to look cute in front of him. I hope you are able to enjoy our lovable protagonist and her love interest, who quickly begins to fall for her.

For those of you who are biting at the bit for more after the cliffhanger, please look forward to the next volume.

Last but not least, I would like to thank the amazing artist, Hiyori Asahikawa, who provided the artwork for this volume. I would also like to convey my gratitude to the Japanese publisher, EARTH STAR Entertainment, as well as Cross Infinite World for providing me this chance. Huge thanks to my family, who supported me while I was writing this as well!

To all the readers who graciously picked this series up and read it: I thank you from the bottom of my heart. And I hope that you will continue to stick with it!

Eiko Mutsuhana



AS THE VILLAINESS, I REJECT THESE HAPPY-BAD ENDINGS!

STORY BY: IOTA AIUE
ILLUSTRATION BY: KUROYUKI
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

A romantic comedy oneshot about a villainess doing whatever it takes to stop the heroine from falling in love and dooming the world!

REINCARNATED AS THE LAST OF MY KIND

STORY BY: KIRI KOMORI
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SERIES | VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

An endearing slice of life fantasy light novel series about a nonhuman girl's journey to become an alchemist to repay the family who took her in!





RESET! THE IMPRISONED PRINCESS DREAMS OF ANOTHER CHANCE!

STORY BY: KEI MISAWA
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SERIES | VOL 1 OUT NOW

Can Magic Change Her Future?
This is the story of Princess Annabel's second chance at life, and her drive to stop the destruction of her kingdom.

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APOCALYPSE BRINGER MYNOGHRA

STORY BY: FEHU KAZUNO
ILLUSTRATION BY: JUN
SERIES | VOL 1 OUT NOW

Takuto reincarnates into his favorite strategy game as the commander of an evil civilization! Will his kingdom building strategies prove just as good in a real world?

HELLO, I AM A WITCH AND MY CRUSH WANTS ME TO MAKE A LOVE POTION!

STORY BY: EIKO MUTSUHANA
ILLUSTRATION BY: VIENT
SERIES | VOL 1 & 2 OUT NOW

This is the heartwarming story of a shut-in witch and an arrogant, strait-laced knight whose romance starts from a love potion.





THE WEAKEST MANGA VILLAINESS WANTS HER FREEDOM!

STORY BY: KAZUKI KARASAWA
ILLUSTRATION BY: MASAMI
STANDALONE | OUT NOW

Oh, crud, I just realized that I've been reincarnated into my favorite manga as the first boss defeated by the heroine at the start of the story!

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