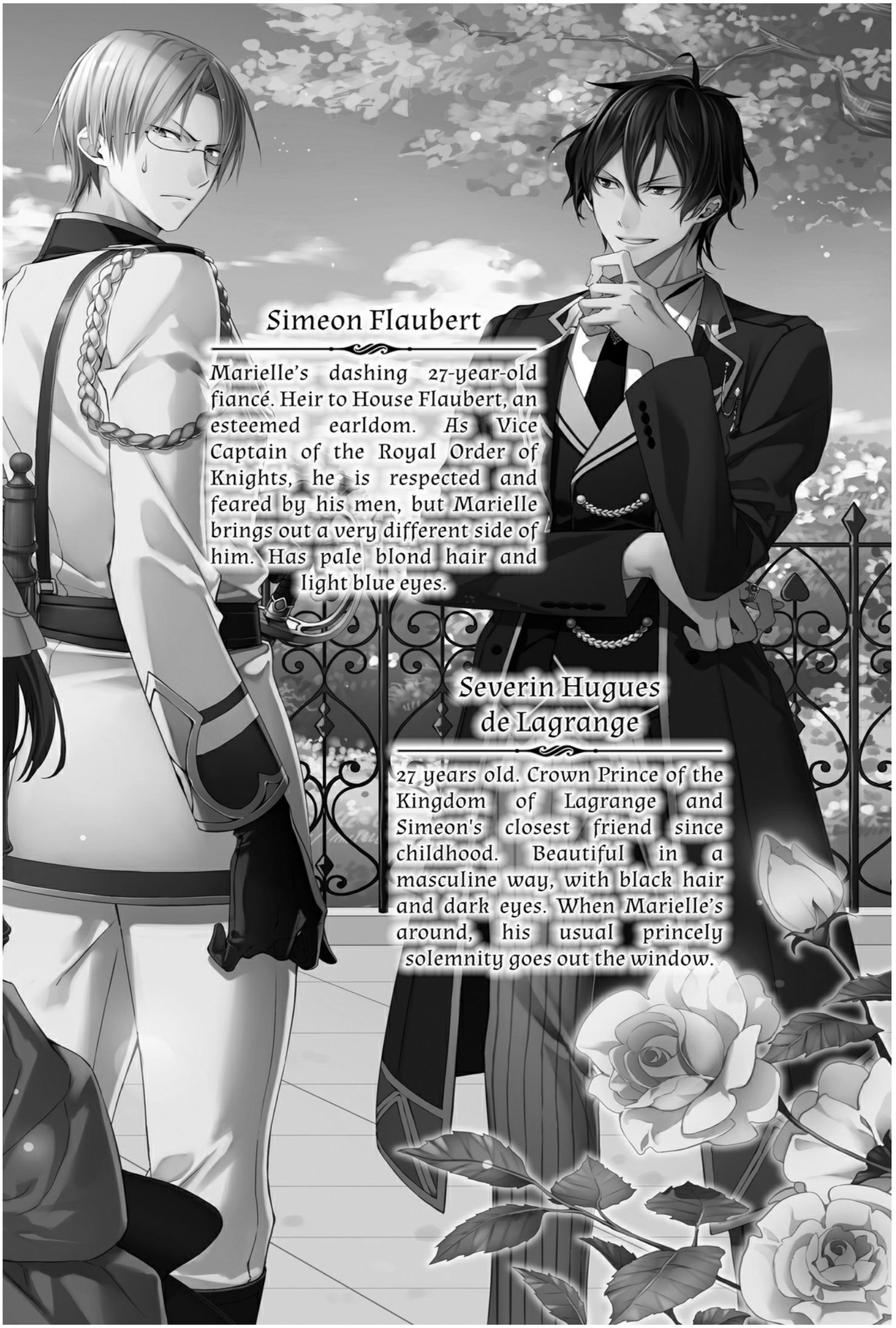

THE TALES OF
Book II
MARIELLE CLARAC
The Beloved
of
Marielle Clarac
Author: Haruka Momo
Illustrator: Maro


The Beloved
of
Marielle Clarac


Simeon Flaubert
Marielle's dashing 27-year-old fiancé. Heir to House Flaubert, an esteemed earldom. As Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, he is respected and feared by his men, but Marielle brings out a very different side of him. Has pale blond hair and light blue eyes.
Severin Hugues de Lagrange
27 years old. Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Lagrange and Simeon's closest friend since childhood. Beautiful in a masculine way, with black hair and dark eyes. When Marielle's around, his usual princely solemnity goes out the window.


Michelle Montagnier
17 years old. Daughter of Marquess Montagnier. Has a sweet and subdued air about her.
Emidio Cialdini
An earl serving as an ambassador from the Grand Duchy of Lavia. A distant relative of Marquess Montagnier. Has short black hair and an upbeat personality.
Julianne Sorel
Marielle's best friend. An avid reader who likes a rather specific type of content.
Aurelia Cavaignac
Daughter of Marquess Cavaignac. Has blonde hair, green eyes, and stunningly good looks.
Emile Clarac
Marielle's father, Viscount Clarac. Appears to be friendly and cordial, but has a hard-nosed side to him as well.
Lucienne Chalier
25 years old. Princess of the Kingdom of Lagrange. Married to Duke Chalier.
Henriette Lagrange
20 years old. Princess of the Kingdom of Lagrange. Set to marry a Lavian prince.
Lutin
An internationally notorious thief. He exclusively targets nobles and the wealthy, so the lower classes see him as a hero. Keenly interested in Marielle.
Marielle Clarac
18 years old. Daughter of Viscount Clarac. Has brown hair and brown eyes, and wears glasses. Entirely plain, with no real distinguishing qualities. Can suppress her presence, hiding in plain sight to observe people and gather information. Secretly a popular author called Agnès Vivier.

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Chapter One

Love is something that arrives unexpectedly.

Throughout history, in every love story ever written, the hero and heroine find each other by way of endless surprises and coincidences.

I'm a huge fan of such tales of tempestuous romance, full of twists and turns—I adore both reading them and writing them. Naturally, then, I'm also a huge fan of the real-life romances that occur all around me. Seeing the heady delights and heartaches of couples in love has always set my heart racing a mile a minute.

And that used to be enough to satisfy me. That was my life, and I didn't need anything beyond that vicarious thrill.

Or so I thought.

The tall gentleman in front of me looked over his shoulder. "Marielle," he called in a gentle voice. From where I sat on the bench, his graceful form stood out from the wintry landscape like an ice sculpture. His physique had been well-honed through years of training, and his posture was upright, his broad shoulders projecting a quiet intensity.

As he looked toward me, I noted—as always—that he was an exceptionally handsome man. His pale complexion and his features spoke of noble quality, like a storybook Prince Charming, while his glasses suited him well, suggesting both an intellectual side and a certain austere sternness. His pale blond hair and light blue eyes could sometimes be ice cold, like a frigid night under the midnight sun, while other times they burned so hot they looked like they could melt iron.

What set him apart from a storybook prince, and made it clear that he was a knight, was the shrewdness that often lay hidden behind his outwardly calm visage. A saber hung at his side, and his black boots trod heavily on the snow, with footsteps worthy of the Grim Reaper—beautiful, yet terrifying. Yes, I thought, he was an emissary of hell, bringing certain destruction to anyone foolish enough to stand in his way. Once drawn in by the captivating sight of his

blazing blue flame, it was already too late to escape.

One could not help but be mesmerized by his beauty and then crushed by his unforgiving might. *My word... He honestly, truly is my ideal man.*

“Marielle,” he repeated.

I had read every book I could get my hands on, and added plenty of my own to the canon besides. Out of every male character archetype featured in every story, the type of man I adored above all else was...

“Marielle!”

...the brutal, black-hearted scoundrel. *Oh, I can hardly contain myself! My breathing is at risk of growing VERY heavy indeed! If only he was holding a riding crop in his hand, he’d be sheer perfection!*

“A riding crop?” he responded, as if to my thoughts. Had I spoken aloud? “Where on earth has your mind carried you? Wake up, if you please. If you allow yourself to drift off into dreamland out here, you’re certain to catch a cold.”

He shook my shoulders, jolting me out of my dream. I had intended to sit and rest on the bench for a mere moment, but I had failed in this endeavor. Now, peering at me from very close range was the Grim Reaper himself...or rather, my fiancé.

“Oh, my apologies,” I replied after a pause. “I was having such a pleasant dream.”

“I have no desire to hear about it. My intuition is screaming that I would regret it.”

“There was nothing untoward about it, I assure you. I was merely thinking about what an unbearably wonderful and good-looking man you are, Lord Simeon.”

“And that is every detail I care to hear.” He handed me something wrapped in newspaper. “Here.” The warmth of the parcel radiated through my gloves, and I broke into a smile before I even knew it. The contrast to my own cool temperature was so delightful that I was almost glad I’d dozed off and grown so

chilly. My cheeks began to flush as I took in the heat and the accompanying sweet scent.

"Thank you most kindly. And..."

I took one of the roasted chestnuts—a delicacy that the city of Sans-Terre is well-known for—and popped it into Lord Simeon's mouth. His handsome face grew rather flustered. *The way he opens his mouth when he's embarrassed is just so cute! Who would ever expect this behavior from a man of such confidence, of such exquisite good looks—to say nothing of the fact that, as the Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, his presence is so imposing that even crying children fall silent. Oh, if only I could show his subordinates how he looks in this state... How would they feel knowing that even their strong, scary, strict Vice Captain has this adorable side to him?*

I did my utmost to fight the urge to grin shamelessly, and to fangirl over him even more shamelessly—but Lord Simeon appeared to have noticed. As if in revenge, he took the hand I'd put up to his lips and gave it a light kiss through the gloves...and then, before I had time to enjoy the ecstasy of that moment, he turned his enchanting gaze on me, and I was lost in that instead. *Oh, heavens above... I swear, the sensual atmosphere crafted by a strait-laced soldier has infinitely more destructive force than that of any clumsy playboy!*

As I writhed in agony on the inside, beset by adult thoughts of a variety best not described in detail, it was Lord Simeon who now pushed a roasted chestnut into my mouth. Smiling, now he offered me his hand, and I stood up from the bench to join him.

It tasted so sweet. Not the chestnut—although yes, that was delicious as well. But what truly left an impression was the atmosphere between us. I never thought the day would come that I might experience this in real life. This was how it felt to spend time together, two people in love, just like in a story.

Who could possibly have foreseen it? I was always the one who stood on the sidelines, gaining all my enjoyment from watching other people's romances play out. I thought it would stay that way my whole life long, that a romance of my own would never enter the picture at all.

Holding the parcel of chestnuts in one hand, I nestled up close to Lord

Simeon's arm with the other. The appropriate thing to do would have been to gently lean against him, but I allowed myself the audacity of clinging tightly instead. After all, this was neither the royal palace nor a nobleman's manor, but Brunet Park—a place for the citizenry to relax. Those around us were each enjoying themselves in their own way as well. Strait-laced manners could surely be set aside for now, and a festive mood brought to the forefront. What was winter if not the time of year for lovers to huddle together closely?

Yes, lovers, I thought to myself. *The two of us are in love with one another.*

It didn't seem possible, but Lord Simeon proved it with his response to my behavior. He was unperturbed by my clinging to him. There was no furrowing of his brow to suggest that I was being immodest or overfamiliar. Rather, he accepted it with a gentle smile. It was clear as day that he, too, was enjoying our time together. He slowed his pace to keep time with mine as we walked side by side.

Although we weren't doing anything in particular, just walking together, somehow the world appeared to sparkle. *So this is what being in love feels like,* I thought. I'd found myself able to write much sweeter stories than I ever could before. It turns out that seeing and hearing about romance was not sufficient on its own. Experiencing it for myself was important as well.

We wandered around the park together while snacking on the roasted chestnuts. Soon we came to the pond beside which Lord Simeon and I had, just two months earlier, declared our love to one another in a rather tumultuous scene. The banks were now buried in snow, the water birds had long since flown away, and children frolicked on the surface of the ice. The water, which was only knee-deep for an adult, became a skating rink when it froze over, bringing joy to young and old. I longed to join them, but I had to temper my enthusiasm, as I had not brought any skates with me. All I could do was watch the merriment from the sidelines.

"Ah, indeed," Lord Simeon teased, noticing my expression. "Perhaps I should have had suitable footwear prepared."

"Next time," I replied. I pressed my cheek to his arm, as if to insist that the next time we visited the park, he would accompany me onto the ice. Still,

although I couldn't go skating that day, nestling close to him was enjoyable enough on its own. As to why that was the case, I could give no straightforward answer. It was the same winter as always, and I was in the same locale I had visited many times before...and yet, just being beside Lord Simeon made the world around me look so different.

My name is Marielle Clarac, I'm eighteen years old, and I am in love!

I felt I could scream it at the top of my lungs.

Of course, I fought the urge back completely and merely smiled. I wondered how Lord Simeon was feeling. It was hard to imagine the Vice Captain being so giddy with emotion that he would scream out loud about anything.

Even so, those around us were not ignorant of our situation. We had drawn more than a few pairs of eyes. True, a pair of lovers huddled closely together was far from a rare sight—there were plenty of others nearby—but we were the only ones drawing such attention.

The reason was obvious. It was because Lord Simeon was such an attractive man.

Indeed, his beauty made such an impression that even commoners, who had no idea that he was the heir to a very notable earldom, could not help but fix their gazes on him. Even in understated everyday clothing that in no way resembled his distinctive royal guard's uniform, he could never simply blend in to the background. Regardless of where he went or how he dressed, Lord Simeon was a person who stood out.

I marveled at how every young woman who walked past, every lady who saw him from afar, stared at him, blushing. Some were so incapable of taking their eyes off him that they quite forgot about the existence of their own lovers standing next to them*. How devilish of him, drawing the attention of every woman in the vicinity!* And then, as soon as their gazes drifted toward me, the confusion set in...until their puzzled expressions at last changed to scornful sneers, or looks of pity. *What a mismatched pair,* their faces said. *She's so inferior in comparison to him that one can't help but feel sorry for the poor gentleman.*

Starting with my entirely commonplace brown hair and eyes, my physical

appearance was so ordinary that you could say my lack of any distinguishing features was my one distinguishing feature. In stark contrast to Lord Simeon, I was so lacking in any sort of presence that I blended into the background and went thoroughly unnoticed wherever I went. I was totally unbefitting of my twenty-seven-year-old fiancé—and, as the *pièce de résistance* , I wore terribly unfashionable glasses. *Yes,* I thought to myself, *I understand everyone's feelings perfectly well. They are all quite right. I, too, would never expect someone like me to be engaged to a man like Lord Simeon.*

And my outward appearance was far from the only problem. Unlike Lord Simeon's family, which had produced generations of ministers—and even prime ministers—mine was a mid-level viscountcy with no particular heritage or wealth. We were one of the many unremarkable noble houses that went unnoticed for generation after generation. In fact, there was such a vast difference between Lord Simeon and I in terms of social standing that marriage talks would never normally occur between our two houses. When my father spoke to Lord Simeon about the subject, he was only expecting for the latter to introduce me to one of his subordinates. He didn't have any silly ideas above his own station.

Despite this, Lord Simeon put himself forward as a candidate to marry me, making my father suspect some sort of ulterior motive. I harbored similar suspicions; I feared that my father might have discovered some sensitive information about Lord Simeon and was using it to blackmail him. This line of thinking led to a misunderstanding that was...somewhat discourteous on my part.

I thought I had uncovered something great and momentous, but the reality was nothing like I had imagined. The truth was that Lord Simeon had been aware of my existence for years, and knew all about my secret hobby. The Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, who was always keeping a close watch on everyone around him, had happened to witness a small dispute amongst some young ladies in a quiet corner of the palace grounds. I had been at the heart of that dispute—and I apparently left quite an impression on him.

In that moment, I had been far too preoccupied to notice him watching me from the shadows. I was busy indulging in my secret joy, brought about by the

authentic experience of being bullied in the same way one so often reads about in books. How thrilling it was! I quickly grew so absorbed in writing down all the insults hurled at me by Lady Aurelia—she played the role of the villainess so well!—that I was unable to think about anything else. Besides, I was in such a rarely frequented location that I didn't expect anyone else to be watching.

It still strikes me as odd that a scene like that could cause someone to fall in love at first sight. I will admit that my behavior when I get excited might catch someone's attention...but it is a giant leap from there to actually developing an interest in me.

In fact, on a conscious level, Lord Simeon himself only thought of me as someone strange that he looked out for at social gatherings. However, as the years went by, I began to weigh on his mind more and more, until, unbeknownst even to himself, his feelings had transformed.

They do say that truth is stranger than fiction. And yet, even I'm not so delusional that I'd expect such a classic romance novel plot twist to happen to me in real life.

Therefore, I had convinced myself that our marriage was one of convenience and absolutely nothing more. I was positive that the only feelings Lord Simeon harbored toward me were those of obligation, so I endeavored to feel the same. And that should have been entirely possible...but then I fell irrevocably in love with him.

Of course I knew for certain that it was unrequited love and would remain so forever. But life has a way of being more interesting than one expects. Inconceivable things like this really can happen in real life. Now, every day filled me with excitement and joy, with never a dull moment to be found.

A soft giggle escaped from my lips. Lord Simeon's eyebrows rose with a hint of exasperation. "Please don't tell me your mind has wandered into another one of your bizarre fantasies."

"Not at all," I replied. "It's simply that I am enjoying myself so much right now. Have you noticed how many eyes are on us from all sides?"

"I am distantly aware of it, yes." Rather than looking around, Lord Simeon just let out a soft sigh. It occurred to me that he must be accustomed to this

situation. *He is always the center of attention at societal functions as well, I suppose.*

"It's so much fun, don't you agree? Their gazes hold so many layers of meaning! *What on earth am I looking at? That woman is in no way a suitable match for him! What a tragedy to have HER beside him when he's worthy of so much better! No matter how brazen she is, I can scarcely believe she's able to stand next to him without feeling ashamed of herself!* Such scorn and pity emanating from all those eyes... It's simply irresistible!"

This time Lord Simeon sighed rather more loudly. He adjusted his glasses. "I cannot begin to comprehend why that would amuse you."

"And I cannot believe there is any question! Of course it amuses me. If it were simply an attractive man and an attractive woman besieged by stares of admiration, that would be entirely commonplace, the most ordinary thing in the world. This reaction, on the other hand... All these people gawking at a pairing that should never have come to be... It's not admiration or envy that they feel, but disdain and superiority, and that is far more delicious. It's truly interesting, and makes for perfect reference material!"

"Trying to imagine what sort of story you would write using THIS as your reference material is, frankly, terrifying. And yet, what confuses me most of all is that the resulting books are, in fact, perfectly decent. Your mind is a strange and mystifying thing."

Lord Simeon spoke with a weary tone, but even so, his face held no disgust or disapproval. He has never once tried to prevent me from writing—which, incidentally, is not merely a hobby. I write novels as a profession. It's not something I can be open about in noble society, but he is kind enough to treat it as a worthwhile undertaking. Even more than his outward good looks and his tantalizing vicious side, what attracts me to him most of all is this fair and generous attitude.

I answered Lord Simeon with only a good-humored smile. He shrugged his shoulders and teasingly poked my forehead with his free hand. "I definitely agree that you are brazen, but the rest is all wrong."

"How so?" I replied, tilting my head.

He bent down to bring his face closer to mine. “When it comes to one person feeling affection for another, there is no such thing as being a ‘suitable match’ or not. All that matters is that the two people get to know each other and mutually accept each other. I’d go so far as to say that being told our love is a tragedy is rather an insult to me. Kindly put that idea out of your head for good.”

The manner in which he focused his light blue eyes on me, intensely earnest at a very close distance, did not suggest that he was angry, exactly. Nonetheless, I found myself somewhat troubled. After a moment’s pause I replied, “But...it is what they’re all thinking.”

“Not at all. That’s nothing but your own false assumption.”

“But the majority of people in the world feel that way.”

“Then the majority of people in the world are wrong. I’m not denying that such a tendency exists, and I don’t object to you using it as reference material for your writing. I just don’t want you to misunderstand and believe it to be the truth. Or do you think that if my appearance was different, your attitude toward me would change accordingly?”

“If what’s on the inside remained the same, it would make no difference at all. You are Lord Simeon, and you would remain so. Though I must confess, I am very fond of your looks as well.”

“Then let us follow that line of thinking to its conclusion,” he said, “and consider that if you make derogatory remarks about yourself, you are, in the same breath, insulting me as well.”

I felt a warm sensation on the tip of my nose, and then Lord Simeon returned to his original posture. The dissatisfaction that he had only targeted my nose must have shown on my face, since he responded with a sly chuckle. His smile held more than a hint of the malicious quality that drove me to distraction. He was so attractive, he left me writhing in agony. *How can someone so earnest have such tormenting eyes? I can’t bear it, but I love it so much!*

I clung to Lord Simeon’s arm again, and we continued walking while engaging in some idle conversation. I no longer gave any heed to the stares of those around us. *Whether we’re a suitable match or not,* I thought to myself, *today I*

am very happy. And if I happen to be able to collect some useful reference material on the side, there is nothing wrong with that. It's a fortunate happenstance—one I enjoy very much—and nothing more.

I had already enjoyed a day-to-day existence that allowed me to pursue exactly what I desired, but the addition of Lord Simeon had made it all the more bright and cheerful. My life had become a series of events more exciting than any story I had ever read. I felt a little sad whenever we were apart, but seeing his face again made me so happy I could float off into the sky.

Being in love is great fun. Thinking back on my former self, who thought it was enough to simply look on from the sidelines, I almost want to laugh. It turns out that in order to experience this kind of happiness, you really do have to grab the bull by the horns and experience love in real life.

As for my subsequent thought—the intense urge to cram that feeling of joy into my writing as hard as I could, and write a story just as sweet as this in my next book—I decided to keep that to myself for now.

Chapter Two

Picture a typical winter's day. Beyond the windowpanes, the gardens were so deeply blanketed in white that spring could only be a far distant prospect. The Kingdom of Lagrange was always covered in snow at this time of year, owing to its location in the northern part of the continent.

But here, indoors, the situation was quite the opposite. The ample light that shone through the glass not only warmed the conservatory to a more than comfortable temperature, but also highlighted the countless young blooms that stood proudly on display, forming a rainbow of colors.

They said things like: "Good day, Your Highness." "Thank you for inviting me today." "A pleasure to you as well, Your Majesty. I hope you are doing well."

This display of our kingdom's most beautiful young ladies, all in one room, was truly a sight to behold. Each of them was a vision of youthful good looks from a high-ranking family. All of them introduced themselves and exchanged greetings with their hosts in the most refined manner they could muster.

Each and every one was dressed to impress; however, it was not only their clothing, but their inherent beauty that drew the eye. Above all, these young women carried themselves with so much grace and elegance that they were practically radiant with it. Truly, they were flowers in their prime.

The recipients of their attention, not to be outdone, held themselves with an air of dignity and class that commanded notice. How could it be otherwise? After all, they were Her Majesty the Queen, and her son, His Highness the Crown Prince. The pretext for today's gathering was that the queen was hosting a garden party, but it was in fact an effort to choose a bride for His Highness.

All those invited were around the age of twenty (give or take a few years) and were young women of high social standing. Naturally, one of those present was Lady Aurelia of House Cavaignac. As the daughter of a Marquess, her social standing was very high indeed. Today, as ever, her lustrous blonde hair flowed in waves and she sparkled more beautifully than anyone else in the room. She was so magnificent and imposing that I couldn't help but be spellbound. *Lady*

Aurelia really is wonderful. If His Highness were to choose based on outward appearance alone, she would win without question.

Of course, the other young ladies each had unique charms of their own. They were all well-known in high society—pictures of beauty chosen from among the most distinguished of families.

Prince Severin, basking in the passionate gazes of all those first-rate blooms, wore a smile that looked...somewhat forced.

Well, his feelings are understandable. All these young ladies have put on faces of such polished politeness, but if you look at their eyes, you can see the ferocity within.

The ladies who had been selected as candidates for His Highness's hand were projecting an uncommon degree of intensity. Even as they chatted amiably amongst themselves, invisible sparks flew as each one tried to somehow push their competitors down a rung. And the gazes they turned on His Highness were like those of hunters, passionate with desire to catch their prey. I could well believe that His Highness felt like a rabbit waiting to be trapped and skinned.

Oh, the tension in the air! This bloodthirsty atmosphere—eat or be eaten! The young ladies look like warriors holding their spears at the ready. They are Amazons, beautiful but deadly! Don't give in, Your Highness! Even if your chances of victory do look increasingly bleak!

As I stood there fangirling over His Highness and cheering him on inside my heart, I heard a quiet cough from beside me.

As I stood inconspicuously beside the wall, a single royal guard had arrived and placed himself next to me without drawing my notice. The man's slender form was tall to such a degree that looking up at him made my neck ache slightly. His well-honed body fit into his white uniform very well indeed.

Lord Simeon looks incredible regardless of how he dresses, but his appearance in uniform is definitely the best of all. A uniform simply has a unique kind of charm to it! One gets that sense of stoicism from the very first glance...and somehow, despite the fact that it covers his entire body without leaving a single gap, it still conveys an indescribable sensuality. The saber he's wearing adds a wonderfully dangerous air as well. Personally I would prefer a riding crop, but in

and of itself, the saber makes for an excellent prop.

Seeing someone who is already so handsome under any circumstances wear clothing like this caused me to teeter on the edge of a violent nosebleed.

“Marielle,” said Lord Simeon, his forehead creasing as I looked up at him with my heart pounding.

“I haven’t seen you in half an hour, Lord Simeon. I hope you’re doing well.”

“If there was that great a change in my wellbeing in thirty minutes, it would be an event in itself,” he replied in a whisper. “It looks as though you’ve been wrapped up in your own world again, so please do remember your role here. If all you do is stand here and blend into the background, His Highness will give us a stern talking-to later on.”

I gave a small shrug. Did he think I had forgotten why I was there? Of course I hadn’t. Just because I had momentarily surrendered myself to the thrills of fangirl desire, it didn’t mean I was shirking my information gathering duties. That always happened naturally, without me having to be consciously aware of every little detail. It was my well-practiced daily routine, after all. Just as Lord Simeon was responsible for security at the gathering and couldn’t help but keep an eye out for danger, I instinctively gathered every piece of information I saw and heard.

For example, the fact that a lady-in-waiting and a knight who stood some way across the room were secretly in love with one another.

“That hardly matters right now!” said Lord Simeon when I mentioned this.

“But there is such a sweet and delicate mood that flows between them as they exchange nonchalant glances. They are all that exists in each other’s world. And right in front of His Highness, who is currently trembling in fear of being viciously attacked! If those two get spotted, they’ll also receive quite a scolding, won’t they?”

“As we’ve discussed, there is no need for you to worry about the larger crowd. Please focus all your attention on the young ladies.” Lord Simeon grasped my head with both hands and turned it to face toward the candidates for Prince Severin’s hand. At that moment, my eyes happened to meet those of

His Highness himself, who was looking in our direction.

I wished I could defend myself out loud. *No, Lord Simeon and I were NOT flirting, nor were we trying to make a display of our affection! So please don't look at me with such a scary face, Your Highness, all right?*

"Perhaps we had better not stand so close together," I said.

"You're right," replied Lord Simeon, having also noticed the prince's glare. He put a bit of distance between us. *See, Your Highness? You can ignore the two of us, so pay attention to the hunters—I mean, women—standing before you.*

I waved at him as if to stealthily say: *I'm rooting for you!* His Highness returned only a peevish scowl, but he quickly turned his attention away from me and back to the assembled young ladies.

My role here: to ascertain whether these splendid flowers were hiding any poison in their roots.

You might not expect that a member of humble House Clarac, the very picture of a mid-ranked family with no particular social standing, would ever attend a gathering like this. I had, in fact, been invited only one day earlier.

A guest had come to my home accompanied by my fiancé, Lord Simeon. The butler led both of them through to the drawing room before sending for me. The servants and I had grown used to unplanned visits; Lord Simeon was a well-mannered person who took courtesy rather seriously, so as a rule he would send a message in advance of coming whenever he could, but the nature of his work didn't always allow for this. He had not only his role as the heir to an earldom to contend with, but also his position as Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights. These kept him rather busy every day. Even so, he did his utmost to find time to see me as well. He often dropped by simply because he was in the area, and whenever he did, it made me very happy indeed.

My maid informed me of his presence, so I rushed to put my appearance in order, then headed for the drawing room. At this point I had been awaiting a visit for more days than I would have preferred. After a thorough check to ensure that my sleeves were not at all stained with ink and no scraps of paper were stuck to my dress, I opened the door.

“Welcome, Lord Simeon. And...person who looks identical to His Highness.”

The black-haired, dark-eyed young man sitting beside Lord Simeon, masculine in his beauty, objected to my supposition immediately. “Looks identical!? Why the devil would you assume THAT rather than thinking I’m the genuine article!?”

Even when placed right next to Lord Simeon, this young man did not come out unfavorably in the comparison at all. He possessed an excellent face and figure, and a suitably dignified air to match. His appearance struck a marked contrast to Lord Simeon’s pale hues and more elegant beauty. As a humble romance author, the sight of them together stirred up my creative juices to an intense degree. True, my area of expertise was male-female romance, but the variety of stories favored by my best friend are full of romance between attractive young men such as these.

It was most unexpected for a person like that, one who practically sparkled with high-class majesty, to appear suddenly in my drawing room in unbecomingly plain clothes.

I replied, “I must consider all the circumstances. My family does not have the status required for a visit from His Royal Highness the Crown Prince. We entirely lack the knowledge and experience that would be needed to show him the proper hospitality. Were we to receive him in a careless manner, there would be a risk of causing great offense. As such, I can only conclude that the gentleman before me is not His Highness, but someone who closely resembles him. So you can come back now, Natalie.”

My maid, Natalie, who had come bearing tea, had blanched and retreated as soon as she heard the suggestion that the guest might be the crown prince himself. I had decided it would be best to soothe her and encourage her to serve the tea after all.

“M-my lady...”

“It’s quite all right. Even the real Prince Severin would not behave in a belligerent fashion toward the servants. And, since this is in fact an entirely different person who just happens to look like him, there is absolutely no need to worry. After all, if Prince Severin himself were coming to visit, he would let

my father know well in advance, giving us plenty of time to prepare. He couldn't possibly turn up unexpectedly like this, as if he were a friend or relative come to visit, and sit there with an expression on his face that suggests he sees all this as entirely within the realm of reason."

His smile twitched at the corner of his mouth. "You are remarkably forthright considering how placid you appear on the surface."

Beside him, Lord Simeon pressed his fingers to one temple. "Marielle, please exercise some caution in what you say."

"Whatever do you mean? Did I say something inappropriate?"

Lord Simeon grimaced. "Don't you have ANY sense of decorum?"

"Who gives a damn, honestly," said Prince Severin at last, sighing as he attempted to pacify Lord Simeon. "If I'm to be a person who looks like His Highness rather than the man himself, it's no skin off my nose. In fact, going incognito has its advantages for me. I apologize for this sudden visit that breaks all rules of politeness and procedure, but there are extenuating circumstances. Miss Marielle, I come bearing a request of a highly confidential nature. There is no need for excess formalities, so please listen to what I have to say."

"So you're not just here to prevent Lord Simeon and myself from enjoying a private rendezvous?"

"You really don't see a need for ANY formalities, do you!? I can scarcely imagine what impression you must have of me, to think I have enough free time to do something like that! I might not look it, but I assure you, I am a VERY busy man!"

"Marielle," said Lord Simeon in a lecturing tone, "there is a line, and you crossed it some time ago. Just because His Highness is willing to forgive your transgressions does not mean you are entitled to continue in that vein."

At that, I sat down opposite the two of them, pouting. "I thought Lord Simeon had finally come to visit again at last, but now it turns out there's some kind of entirely unromantic business to attend to. I was momentarily excited, and now I'm disappointed instead."

"This is a serious subject," said Lord Simeon. "Please think of it as a work-

related conversation, and approach it in that manner."

"Oh, are the two of you writing a book?"

"I don't mean it's directly related to YOUR work."

"But the only work that really interests me is the kind that sets my fangirl heart racing."

"Marielle, please hear His Highness out, at least. If you do, I'll buy you your favorite sweets later."

I changed my tone. "When it gets late, my parents and my brother will return home. I suspect you would rather avoid their notice. Why don't we meet elsewhere? We could request a room at Tarentule."

"Do you realize what you're suggesting?" Lord Simeon asked. "The kinds of men and women who would do such a thing are those with...questionable intentions. It's for secret trysts with ladies of the evening, that sort of thing."

"Indeed, and yet, such unexpected faces you see there!"

"I don't need to hear any more!" cried Lord Simeon.

"Are you intentionally rubbing my nose in your precious romantic bickering?" interrupted His Highness in a growl so low it practically slithered on the ground. The two of us regained our composure, and Prince Severin smiled evilly. "I suppose I did rather wish to interfere with your rendezvous after all. All this ostentatious flirting makes me feel jolly rotten."

"My apologies," I replied. "We only recently ascertained that our feelings for one another are mutual, so our passions have not yet cooled."

"Cease your boasting at once!"

"You should hurry up and choose a partner yourself, Your Highness. Indulging in romantic delusions is greatly enjoyable, but I've found that real love is something quite special."

"Delusions!?" His Highness exclaimed, leaning forward. "I'm not like you, Miss Marielle! Kindly do not suggest that I am!"

"Your Highness," said Lord Simeon, softly putting out a hand to restrain the

prince.

Prince Severin took a breath to calm himself before continuing. “It just so happens that my choosing of a partner is precisely the matter at hand. I would like to ask for your help in that regard.”

“Me?” I replied, tilting my head. *What could possibly justify this?* I wondered. *I am only Marielle Clarac, after all. I am a plain person, so lacking in any presence that I make no impression on others whatsoever. People see me as nothing but air.* Until Lord Simeon and I got engaged, I’d often gone to social gatherings and hardly been noticed at all for the whole evening. Lord Simeon, who had noticed and fallen in love with me, and Lady Aurelia, who had noticed and bullied me, were rare and precious exceptions. So naturally, I was somewhat lacking in societal connections. If His Highness wanted me to introduce him to a suitable princess, it was a request I would have no way to fulfill.

I offered, “If it’s purely information that you need, I can provide it, but...surely the palace is able to investigate more thoroughly than I ever could?”

Selection of candidates for the prince’s hand had already been taking place for years at this point—young noblewomen from within the kingdom and without. Of all those, I thought, surely at least one suitable candidate should have appeared by now.

And yet, I knew full well that, as of that moment, no partner had been chosen, which was entirely down to the man in question never giving the nod to any of them. Perhaps being offered all the finest women available left him spoiled for choice, or perhaps His Highness just had very specific taste. Either way, talks had been initiated and then broken off multiple times, causing great consternation to those around him.

“Hmm. I suppose ultimately, it does come down to information.” His Highness sighed in a rather unceremonious manner, somewhat belying the dignity and grace he always displayed in public. “My mother has finally become unwilling to wait any longer. She has insisted that I cease my dilly-dallying and choose a partner. Insisted, demanded, ordered... I can tell you, I have never heard her speak with such tremendous force. And the two of you are to blame for it.”

Feeling those rather bitter eyes on us, I turned to look at Lord Simeon, who

smiled wryly.

His Highness continued, “Since Lord Simeon is finally engaged, it seems I no longer have any excuse to wriggle my way out of marriage. When my mother asks me why I’m not engaged yet while my friend of the same age is, and inquires as to when I will choose a bride of my own, I no longer have any cards to play. I am nearly thirty, after all. It seems I cannot keep putting it off.”

His Highness was twenty-seven years old. Indeed, it wouldn’t do for the heir to the kingdom to stay single forever. He was at an age where he’d usually be long since married by now, or engaged at the very least.

Still, there was no risk of any succession dilemmas. He had cousins, so there were plenty of other relatives in line even if the worst should happen. In times past, his marriage would have been arranged from birth, but in this more enlightened era he had been granted a certain degree of freedom to choose. Not to mention, His Majesty the King was still young and healthy, so the prince’s succession to the throne was a far-off prospect.

And yet, none of this changed the fact that it would be better for him to find himself a princess as soon as possible.

Think about it. The appropriate age for the young woman was around twenty. If His Highness kept getting older, he would either have to choose a young woman who is past marriageable age, or have a marriage with a corresponding age gap. Although, personally, I fangirl over marriages with big age gaps, and a man as attractive as His Highness would no doubt still look fantastic even in middle age. *Maybe it would even be better that way,* I thought. *Imagine a young bride with a husband who’s old enough to be her father... Ooh, that gives me an idea.*

“Excuse me, might I ask why you have opened your notebook all of a sudden? Are you even listening to a word I say?”

“I’m still listening. Continue, by all means. Incidentally, Your Highness, what degree of age difference is acceptable for you? I suppose a child of fifteen or under would pose some ethical problems...”

“What in blazes are you implying!? I am NOT into little girls!”

As I hurriedly scribbled some thoughts in the trusty notebook I used for all my work-related reference material, a possibility occurred to me with a flash. My head shot up.

“Your Highness, are you sure you don’t have a certain *other* predilection? It would be quite remarkable, and my friend Julianne would be overjoyed... Though I would feel sorry for you, since I’m quite sure the base requirement for the crown prince’s marriage partner is for it to be a woman at the very least.”

“Please, Simeon, act as my interpreter,” he said at last, tearfully. “This conversation is proving too high a mountain for me to climb. I cannot go on like this.”

Lord Simeon pushed up his glasses and let out an exceptionally deep sigh. “Marielle, neither of the two things you have implied are even remotely true. Please bring your consciousness back into the realm of reality. His Highness is not avoiding marriage for any elaborate reason along those lines. He simply hasn’t been able to find a partner that he deems suitable.”

“But the candidates put forward so far must have been the most unparalleled young ladies there are in terms of social standing, family pedigree, looks, and education. How high can his expectations possibly be?”

“You of all people should be able to understand, *Agnès Vivier* .” Lord Simeon rather pointedly referred to me by my pen name, no doubt to accentuate that I am a romance novel author. *So he’s suggesting that His Highness doesn’t want to choose based on those sorts of criteria, but is instead hoping to fall in love?*

I understood THAT feeling very well indeed, but given his position, it seemed an immense challenge. Even I, a speck of dust in the world of high society compared to His Highness, had resigned myself to an arranged marriage. As long as my husband was not too unspeakably awful, I’d planned to accept it without any complaint. That was the reality of noble life, including that of the royal family. Tempestuous romance was something that only existed in stories.

But despite all my expectations, my life had been blessed with the most preferable of all my preferences, the perfect fuel for my fangirl fire, the black-hearted archetype—or at least, that was how he appeared on the outside. On the inside, he had turned out to be an earnest and sincere young gentleman.

Not only was he Lord Simeon, the one every young noblewoman had set their hearts on, but our marriage was not to be one of convenience at all. He was actually in love with me. It was all true, yet it was still an unbelievable story!

I'm sorry, I thought, *but even though I've experienced this kind of miracle for myself, it's still impossible as a rule. Surely it's best to choose someone as close to your taste as you can find, then slowly foster a deeper relationship? I'm sure it's possible to fall in love after you get married. There is such a thing as affection that grows quietly without one even noticing.*

"Have all the candidates so far been entirely unsuited to His Highness's taste?"

"That's a rather complicated question to answer," said Lord Simeon, turning to look at His Highness, who sighed once again, then began to speak.

To sum up his explanation, there had been a young lady in the past whom he had found very suitable indeed, and the two families had proceeded with marriage talks. Her pedigree was good, and as far as he could see, all was well. However, she had a cruel and arrogant side that she had successfully hidden from her parents and anyone else of high rank. In secret, though—toward servants and anyone else of lower status—she behaved in the most abhorrent manner imaginable.

There was even a case where her treatment of a girl who worked for her had left the girl on the brink of death. His Highness happened to learn of this, and, upon further investigation, all kinds of terrible incidents were uncovered. It was clear that someone like this would not make a suitable princess, and the marriage talks came to a premature conclusion.

Although he didn't disclose the name, I knew immediately who he was referring to. He'd given more than enough information for me to pinpoint the young lady in question. *Yes, indeed, that person's public and private selves are diametrically opposed to one another. Some people may be fooled, but she can't deceive me. I know ALL about her.*

But regardless of who it was, this experience had naturally left its mark on His Highness. He couldn't simply brush it aside with a few cursory words of regret. A woman he'd thought to be kind-hearted and mild-mannered had turned out

to be a habitual bully capable of tormenting someone almost to the point of their death. It had been too great a shock, and had unfortunately left him mistrustful of women. Ever since, no matter what kind of disposition a potential partner showed him, he had found it very hard to believe that all was as it seemed.

"Women are tremendously skilled at hiding their true natures," he remarked. "Take you, for example. At first I thought you were so damned unremarkable that that was your only remarkable quality. To me, you were a plain, docile young woman and nothing more. I'm sure you have all the nobles in the kingdom fooled by your surface veneer. How many of them know what a preposterous individual you are? Admittedly, you are by no means ill-natured, and your curiosity toward other people seems to manifest in an entirely upbeat and positive fashion...so if Lord Simeon is able to accept it, I can hardly express any opposition." The conflicting feelings were evident in His Highness's voice as he spoke.

Personally, I found his way of speaking to me rather mean. It sounded as if he thought I was demented. I wanted to shout at him: *It's not a pretense! I really am a plain and docile young woman who doesn't stand out at all. I'm even working really hard on learning how to be a good homemaker. I'm COMPLETELY normal! I just have a secret job as a novelist, okay? I like observing various other people as reference material for my writing. That's why I've honed my special skill of pushing my lack of presence to the very limit so that I fade into the background. That's all!*

I began to politely explain this, and he interrupted, "It's that special skill of yours that I'd like you to employ for me. Tomorrow, a garden party will be held at the palace, and I'd like you to attend it and watch from the shadows."

He graciously bowed his head to me. I could react with nothing but bewilderment. "A garden party? In the dead of winter?"

"It will be held in the conservatory, so technically it's not a garden party, but the precise name of the event is not the most critical detail at present. My mother has invited every possible candidate for my hand and plans to introduce me to all of them at once."

“A blind date of royal proportions,” I replied. “Though with a vast crowd of them and only one of you, it’s not the most subtle approach.”

“I suppose my mother has grown sick of keeping up appearances at this stage. I have had several instances of abandoning marriage talks that were already in progress. This time I’m under strict orders to do my duty and choose a partner. To tell the truth, I’m also thinking it might be best if I give in and accept my fate. I just cannot shake these blasted worries about what my potential brides might be hiding beneath their magnificent masks. I won’t be able to withdraw easily once official talks have commenced, so I must be extremely cautious in making my choice. Please, help me. Blend in with tomorrow’s party and ascertain the true natures of these young ladies.”

At this point, I finally understood his request. I took a breath. *I see, so that’s why he came to me. He doesn’t feel he can make this request of anyone connected to the palace, and it leaves him in quite a bind.*

Even so, it wasn’t something I could readily agree to. However, I only wanted His Highness to be happy, so I thought it best to give him a straight answer. “I’m not sure this is something you should leave to a third party. It’s a significant life choice—something you need to determine for yourself before making any commitment. Your wife will be family, someone you spend your entire life with. Isn’t it better to find a partner who satisfies you, and choose her yourself? A woman of my status has no alternative but to marry whoever her father chooses, but you are in a position to decide on your own. Are you absolutely certain you want to delegate that choice to someone else? Are you sure that won’t lead to regrets in the future? All couples have arguments, after all. When two people with different upbringings and points of view are living together, quarrels are inevitable to a greater or lesser degree. As you gradually become a family, you will both need to compromise, or sometimes just admit defeat and move forward regardless. However, if the marriage is ultimately one that doesn’t satisfy you, then rather than accepting these little setbacks for what they are, your dissatisfaction will simply grow stronger and stronger. In the end, both you and your wife will be left deeply unhappy.”

His Highness stared in amazement as he listened to my words. Lord Simeon looked surprised as well. *Why the dramatic reactions? Did I say something*

wrong?

"I must say, I am rather shocked at you giving such sincere advice," said His Highness.

"What do you mean by that?"

"I just didn't expect such a straightforward and rational approach from you. In fact, it's not the kind of thing you'd normally expect any teenage girl to say. It almost sounds like advice from someone with years of married life behind them."

"Well," I replied, "I've observed all sorts of people. I've seen the many different ways in which their lives unfold based on their differing relationships. I've also learned a lot from my parents and grandparents. It's not my own experience, certainly. Merely the smattering of knowledge I've gained. However, the novels I've written based on my observations have been deemed quite accurate by society at large."

"Yes, indeed. I suppose it was somewhat rude of me to doubt you." *What was this? A genuine apology?* He smiled. "I am surprised, but pleasantly so. Your head is not brimming with nothing but delusional nonsense after all. I'm reassured to learn that you do have a few serious thoughts knocking around in there. It makes me want your help all the more."

I should have known better than to think he would apologize. He was only using it as an excuse to get in another jab at me! Sullenly, I looked away from him.

"Miss Marielle, I never suggested that I would like you to select my partner for me. I am merely asking you to determine whether there are any candidates whom I most definitely should NOT select."

"But I shouldn't be in charge of deciding that either. Everyone has their good points and bad points. There is no perfect person in this world who has absolutely no faults."

"I am well aware. I'm not concerned about minor flaws. I only ask that you tell me if any of the candidates have major flaws of the variety I described to you earlier."

I sighed. “But shouldn’t Her Majesty be the one to investigate? If she puts all of these young ladies forward as candidates, surely that should mean that she has judged them to be free of significant flaws? They must all be people of good character that you can choose from without any worries.”

“I’d hope so...and yet, the young lady I described earlier was also introduced to me under that assumption.”

“Oh.” I couldn’t find any further words to respond with, and my gaze wandered. I puzzled over what could have gone so wrong with the palace’s investigations.

I looked at Lord Simeon, who had stayed silent throughout, and he appeared to be rather troubled as well.

I let out one more sigh. “If you’re really only asking me to be one more opinion that you can use as a point of reference, then...”

“You’ll accept my request?” said His Highness, eagerly leaning in close to me.

Flustered, I rushed to remind him of my conditions. “But I’m only looking for the most serious of problems! And otherwise you will essentially decide based on your own intuition! And my role is only to provide a supplement to that! Yes?”

“Yes, that all sounds capital to me. Thank you, Miss Marielle. I know I can count on you.”

Even as he treated me to a dazzling smile worthy of a prince, I couldn’t help but feel uneasy. My concern was that he might, in fact, be intending to refuse any and all candidates, and was searching for excuses. I had no desire to become his excuse. *If this causes problems further down the line, I can’t accept responsibility for them. I have to ensure that I don’t put myself in that position by avoiding saying anything too decisive. Rather than focusing on the potential princesses’ flaws, perhaps I’ll try to emphasize their good points instead.*

“Incidentally,” I said, “which young ladies have been put forward as candidates?”

I asked expecting that he might not know yet, but as you’d hope from a prince worth his salt, His Highness had obtained this information already. He produced

a folded sheet of paper from his breast pocket, unfolded it, and handed it to me.

I glanced over the list; the names were all well known to me. However, there was one name that caught my attention in particular. “I see that Lady Aurelia is on the list. Out of all these options, I recommend Lady Aurelia the most, Your Highness. I wholeheartedly nominate her.”

“Her of all people!? If you’re trying to mock me, it is NOT funny!” His smile from a moment earlier disappeared into the ether as he turned his rage on me once again.

I replied, “What a deeply unfair thing to say about Lady Aurelia. She is, as of now, the most beautiful flower in Lagrange’s royal court. She’s radiantly attractive and magnificently imposing—the perfect crown princess. And House Cavaignac is one of the most prominent noble families in the kingdom. What could be wrong with her?”

“But...hasn’t she bullied you relentlessly?” he asked, his voice beginning to waver with exhaustion.

I shook my head in dismay. *What am I going to do with him? He really doesn’t understand anything.*

“Lady Aurelia’s bouts of ill temper are well known throughout high society. That’s exactly why I recommend her.”

“Do talk sense, Miss Marielle.”

“A truly devious and malicious person wouldn’t behave like that out in the open where everyone can see. Consider the young lady you mentioned earlier. Before you looked deeper, she had thoroughly convinced you of her good character, yes?”

He grunted, as if his words were caught in his throat.

“Lady Aurelia is not crafting a false persona. She is putting all her negativity on display and allowing herself to be deemed a bully. Even if it gives her a bad reputation, even if it causes some to distance themselves from her, she is aware of this and comfortable with her choice. She also deserves credit for living in a manner that is entirely true to her feelings. There are few people who can be

relied on for their honesty as much as she can."

"Distressingly, that is...almost convincing."

I continued, "Besides, all her bullying is of a trifling nature. A few cutting remarks from her and her coterie, the occasional stained dress, locking people in the powder room, spreading lies, and so on. No matter how much effort she puts into her designs, they never amount to anything but frivolous attempts at besmirching her victims' names. It's all rather moderate, with no lasting ill effects."

"It terrifies me to hear you describe those acts as moderate."

"Well, they're nothing that causes injury or puts any lives at risk. An insult is nothing but words—you just have to ignore it. A stained dress is resolved by changing into a different dress. Even when she leaves people trapped, she always puts them in a room that's easily accessed, where the victim can cry for help and receive it straight away. In my case, the room even had a large window, allowing for an easy escape. Whatever gossip these incidents cause, it's just typical flavor-of-the-month nonsense. As soon as a more interesting topic comes up, the old one is dropped. Also, the only people Lady Aurelia bullies are young ladies of the nobility. She never bullies servants, for example. I'm sure she might vent her anger to a certain degree, but she is not the kind of person who would systematically abuse those in a weaker position who are unable to stand up to her. Which is exactly why she is surprisingly well loved by her staff. Well? To me it seems she precisely fits your requirement to select a woman who has no hidden dark side."

Lost for words, His Highness turned to the man beside him. Lord Simeon wore a face of great consternation. *Their response is so puzzling. What exactly are gentlemen looking for when it comes to women? I would have expected all this to be exactly the thought process of the queen when she added Lady Aurelia to the list.*

At last he replied, "Certainly, if you phrase it that way, she sounds like a fine, upstanding individual, but..."

"That was not my intent," I cut in. "Naturally, what stands out the most about her is her bad reputation. However, if you tell her in no uncertain terms that

once she is chosen as princess, this bullying has to stop, then the problem resolves itself. Even Lady Aurelia will have no qualms about aiming to be a first-rate princess. She'll dedicate herself to behaving in an appropriate manner."

His Highness rested his elbows on the chair and let out a deep sigh. He appeared to be thoroughly exhausted, but he shook his head in a resolute fashion nonetheless. "I will grant that there is some merit to your words. However, I would ultimately prefer someone who isn't a bully at all. I'm looking for someone of a kinder nature."

I thought: *Picky, picky!*

But anyway, that's how I ended up infiltrating the garden party.

I wore a dress even more plain than my usual garb, gathered up my hair into a tight bun, and presented myself as some sort of strait-laced governess or lady's maid, with a facial expression to match. I stood in plain sight and watched over the young ladies' interactions from a corner of the conservatory. A woman from a good family would never come alone, so the room held plenty of other young women of the same general nature. I aroused no suspicion at all, and in fact, my very presence was hardly noticed. As always, I blended into the background completely.

Even as I watched her in the crowd, Lady Aurelia still seemed to stand out as the most impressive of all. Her natural charms alone could compete with my goddesses, the Three Flowers of Tarentule. *His Highness must have very particular tastes. A normal man would surely have at least some interest in a woman who is this beautiful and this full-bosomed. Why is he so dead set against her?*

Beneath his typically grand and dignified facade, it was plain that His Highness was entirely fed up. In the face of all these wily hunters, he was thoroughly defeated and ready to retreat. Though choosing a bride may have been the crown prince's duty, I had the feeling that forcing it was a bad idea.

Just as I was glancing around and wondering if it might not be better to find some way to change the queen's mind, my eyes lit upon on another young lady.

She stood slightly removed from the crowd, and wasn't looking toward His Highness, perhaps suggesting that she had no interest in him. However, there

was also no affected air about her, no sense that she was trying to stand out by her lack of apparent interest. Rather, her face suggested that, much like His Highness, she was hoping to leave as soon as possible.

Who is she again? I couldn't recall her name off the top of my head, so I thought back to the list His Highness had shown me. Amongst those names, the one I'd been least familiar with was...Lady Michelle, daughter of Marquess Montagnier. *That must be her.*

She had only recently made her debut into society, and at seventeen years of age, was one year younger than me. She had hardly been sighted at any parties at all so far, and was rarely a subject of conversation amongst the nobility.

Maybe she isn't fond of the pomp and circumstance of parties, and that's why she has appeared in public so rarely. Even now, she looked as if she was trying to shrink into herself so that she wouldn't stand out. Her face and figure also did not particularly stand out compared to the other young ladies, even if there was something cute about her. I could definitely relate to her.

Her hair, a shade of white-blonde even paler than Lord Simeon's, was quite stunning. I felt that if she dressed appropriately, she would be able to enhance that feature even further. She was also tall and slender, so if she stood next to His Highness, who was a tall man himself, they would make an impressive display. *She has a markedly different kind of charm from Lady Aurelia, I suppose. If she just lifted her head up more proudly, and smiled a little...* But ultimately, I wasn't sure she needed my help. Her current unpretentious air had an appeal of its own.

However, while being put forward as a potential crown princess would be expected to make anyone joyous, Lady Michelle did not look happy at all. *I suppose all people have hopes and desires of their own. Not everyone is going to be bowled over by His Highness just because he's a prince.*

While these thoughts floated around my head, I turned back to His Highness. It turned out that he, too, had let his eyes come to rest on Lady Michelle. He looked at her intently with a serious expression on his face. *Wow, it looks as if he's REALLY interested in her. The look he's giving her is completely different from the wary gaze he showed all the other young ladies.*

And...what's this?

I watched the subsequent events unfold with some measure of surprise. His Highness actually stepped forward of his own volition and began to speak to Lady Michelle. She reacted with bewilderment at first, but he showed her a kind smile and they held a rather long conversation. The other flowers arrayed throughout the room seemed to become invisible to him. All their eager faces—and even the queen, who hid her surprise behind her fan—had simply faded away.

My goodness. What a turn of events.

I looked around to find Lord Simeon. Naturally, he, too, was watching the pair with a surprised expression. Sensing my gaze on him, he turned to me. A stunned smile spread across his handsome face, and he gave a slight shrug. I answered him with the same gesture.

What to think of all this? It feels quite absurd.

After all the prince's annoyance, all his grumbling, as soon as he made the slightest effort, it was love at first sight.

He really is impossible!

Chapter Three

Thanks to His Highness's clear enthusiasm, marriage talks between his family and that of Lady Michelle Montagnier progressed very quickly indeed. Nothing had been publicly announced, nor were they officially engaged yet, but apparently the mood amongst the royal family was that the matter was set in stone.

A short time after the garden party, Lord Simeon paid me another visit. This time there was no prince present to interrupt our time together, just the two of us sitting face-to-face in the drawing room. Accordingly, I felt free to express my complaints without reserve.

"It seems there was no need for me to poke my nose into his business at all in the end. His Highness was able to decide entirely on his own." Though this was admittedly something of a relief, part of me felt rather put out at being dragged into this only for my services to be unnecessary.

I pouted. "I'm right in the middle of finalizing my manuscript, and yet I resigned myself to losing an entire day to that gathering. I mustered up all my enthusiasm and support for His Highness so that I could help him choose a partner that was to his liking. And yet, after all that, His Highness has not even deigned to ask my opinion. In advance of the party we discussed so many potential pitfalls, but I can only conclude that he had, plainly and simply, never found a young lady that he liked enough to marry. Otherwise, where has all his mistrust of women disappeared to? He chose her on the spot, with no hesitation."

Lord Simeon spoke with a smile that was gentle, yet held a hint of irony. "Ultimately, he was only parroting words I had said in the past. Or, to put it another way, it was no more than a pretext."

"What do you mean, words you had said? Were you a victim of some great betrayal?"

No matter how many times I gazed upon his perfectly constructed form, I never tired of it. He looked just as handsome today as he always did. The appeal

he held for the young ladies of high society rivaled even that of His Highness, so it would be no surprise to hear that, before meeting me, he himself might have had a terrible experience such as the one His Highness had described.

“Not at all. I did not mean to suggest such a thing, so please clear your head of the idea. My reason for not marrying sooner was merely that I had no particular desire to associate with women.”

His outward appearance painted him as a dashingly handsome man with a dark side who knew a thing or two about how to treat a lady, and as such, he’d drawn the eye of countless women over the years—yet, despite this, no rumors had ever surfaced that associated him with any of them.

But the reason was perfectly clear now. Lord Simeon was, at heart, a serious and strait-laced person who was passionate about his work. It was his nature to toil at his duties and his training rather than dallying with women, and he was at his most fulfilled when spending time in the company of men—specifically, his subordinates in the Royal Order of Knights, to whom he was a stern commander. Upon reflection, a certain thief had once said he felt “thoroughly defrauded” by Lord Simeon’s outer appearance.

It still utterly astounded me that Lord Simeon, a man of such a nature, had fallen in love with me of all people. I remained baffled as to what could possibly have attracted him to me.

“Though I knew I had a duty to marry,” he continued, “I never truly found any enthusiasm for it. I found the whole matter to be more a bother than anything else, being a man who has never much valued women’s company. The most I ever hoped for was to find a partner I could feel relatively comfortable spending time with. One who made for easy company and did not cause me too much bother.”

“Does my company bother you as well?” I asked.

“No.” An immediate response, accompanied by a shake of the head. A smile spread over Lord Simeon’s face, and he spoke in a somewhat teasing manner. “I certainly wouldn’t use those words. You say such inconceivable things, and your energy and initiative know no bounds. If it will help you gather reference material, you’ll worm your way into absolutely any situation. I can never be

complacent.”

His words did worry me slightly. If he had been hoping for a partner who didn’t cause him any bother, it did not seem entirely unlikely that he harbored some negative feelings toward me—specifically, my tendency to behave in accordance with my fangirl urges.

“Are you...dissatisfied with me?”

Apparently sensing my uncertainty, he gave his next words an air of importance. “I cannot say I approve of every single thing you do, or find it all worthy of praise, but...” He paused a moment. “I am continually surprised by how much joy it brings you. You do cause me some consternation, quite frequently I might add, but I never tire of watching you. It brings me great joy as well.”

Was this a compliment, I wondered? His kind smile held no hint of reproach, but his words felt somewhat ambiguous and devoid of any firm conclusion.

“I’d like to ask you the same question,” he continued. “How do you feel?”

“Me? What do you mean?”

“Are you dissatisfied with me at all? I knew you for years before we officially met, but for you the situation is quite different. At best, you had an idea of me formed from societal gossip. You’ve mentioned before that you would have no choice but to marry whoever your parents selected. Perhaps I am entirely unlike everything you wished for, and you are simply hiding your disappointment.”

His light blue eyes gazed earnestly at me from behind his glasses. I responded with a smile. “Dissatisfied? How could I ever be? Certainly, I assumed I would have that sort of marriage. It’s purely a matter of course—it’s what young ladies in noble houses are told all their lives. But my parents took great pains to find a husband who would make me happy.”

He waited for me to continue.

“Naturally, if they had presented me with a two-faced gentleman whose true nature I found thoroughly despicable, or someone I had a visceral negative reaction to, I’d have been rather upset. However, the one they brought before me was you, Lord Simeon. Nothing about you could cause me dissatisfaction.

Quite the opposite, in fact! You are, after all, the type of man I adore above all else: the brutal black-hearted scoundrel. The fact that you wear glasses only *adds* to your appeal! And yet on the inside, you're so pure of heart. It strikes *such* a contrast to your outward appearance that it makes me fangirl so hard I could die! You are just so endlessly full of surprises, *and* you're broad-minded enough that you don't prevent me from engaging in my hobby and profession. If *this* leaves me dissatisfied, then what kind of a man could I ever expect to marry?"

For some reason, Lord Simeon met my fervor only with silence and a troubled expression. I wondered, *Did I not praise him enthusiastically enough?* I had enough words of adulation for Lord Simeon that I could have carried on for days!

At last he let out a small sigh and said, "If you truly feel that I am to your satisfaction, then I am glad to hear it, of course. Though I must ask, am I actually...'brutal'?"

I am aware, of course, that "brutal" is not a positive description. It's a word that I only use as part of my fangirl vocabulary. I know full well that Lord Simeon is a kind and sincere person. "It's just the outward impression one gets from looking at you," I explained. "Anything beyond that is purely a figment of my imagination. Objectively speaking, you do have a certain scoundrel-like quality, but only to the extent that it makes you an attractive gentleman."

"I see." He sounded somewhat unconvinced.

I glanced through the window at the snow, which covered the ground in a thick blanket once more. "Spring truly appears to be a distant prospect." We had already decided that we would hold our ceremony in spring. Spring was the time when warm rays of sunshine graced the kingdom again, and when high society came alive. It was by far the most suitable season for a newly wedded couple to introduce themselves as such.

Preparations for the wedding were proceeding apace. My bridal gown had already been ordered, for example. Not only my father, but also my grandmother and other relations were doing their best to ensure that everything was ready. Since I was marrying into an earldom—a house of far

higher rank than my own—they were investing a great deal of money, perhaps too much, to be certain that we did not embarrass ourselves.

Any protest of mine that they needn't go to such absurd lengths fell on deaf ears. They admonished me, insisting that it was the only appropriate course of action. I offered up my earnings from my writing career thus far—it seemed the least I could do—but I was told that I should bring those funds with me into my new life along with my dowry. What I've learned from my father is that a parent's work does not end only with matchmaking, but rather, many duties follow after that require a great deal of attention.

I continued, "When I was deciding upon the design for my wedding dress, I asked the Three Flowers for their thoughts. I found their preferences to be a little ostentatious, but they told me a bride was allowed to stand out on her wedding day."

"Certainly. I wouldn't expect them to be in favor of anything plain."

For the question that came next, I made my voice as meek as I could. "They also said they would like to attend the ceremony, and I said I'd love for them to be there as well, but...I suppose it wouldn't be appropriate?"

He smiled tenderly. "I would trust them to have a clear understanding of proper decorum. They wouldn't do anything to draw undue attention or make a scene. I have no objections."

He agreed readily, with no hint of doubt or hesitation. The question of inviting ladies of the evening to one's wedding would cause a normal person to refuse outright, but Lord Simeon did nothing of the sort - this, despite the risk of starting awkward rumors that they were not my friends, but rather, Lord Simeon's paramours.

He shows such magnanimity toward me, and such trust in the character of the Three Flowers. This sense of fairness is something I deeply respect, and which brings me such happiness. "Thank you! Oh, thank you!"

Honestly, how could *anyone* be dissatisfied with a person as wonderful as this? If anyone is foolish enough to be unhappy with these circumstances, I'd certainly like to meet them!

I thought to myself, *I am delighted. There is enjoyment to be found in each and every day, and I have no doubt this will continue long into the future.* I occasionally found myself wondering if I really deserved to be so blessed.

I prayed that Prince Severin and Lady Michelle, too, would share a joyous future together. But as I had that thought, I suddenly felt quite ill at ease.

His Highness had fallen so madly in love that it felt like destiny—he was over the moon—but by comparison, it was hard to be sure how Lady Michelle felt about him.

The reason she had caught my attention in the first place was that she stood apart from the crowd and appeared to have no enthusiasm for the event whatsoever. Even when His Highness struck up a conversation with her, the smile she met him with felt rather formal—she did not look genuinely cheerful. I wondered why that might be. I was curious, and concerned, as to how she might be feeling now that she had been selected and their relationship was proceeding in the direction of marriage.

Perhaps I was worrying over nothing. Perhaps all was well. Possibly, I thought, she was simply daunted by all the other young ladies present at the garden party. For one such as herself, who had only recently made her debut, it would no doubt be a source of much uncertainty and confusion to suddenly be thrust into the limelight, and into a position that the others would all have found so enviable.

Yes, I thought, *hopefully she was just a little intimidated, and over time she'll grow more more used to the attention.*

But if there was another, deeper reason... What then?

"Marielle?" said Lord Simeon.

Wait, I have had a sudden recollection. I have heard one rumor about Lady Michelle. There was absolutely no proof, and in fact you could barely call it more than a suspicion, and yet...

"Marielle, is something the matter?"

I silently shook my head. It was too early to be making any firm judgments. I hardly knew anything about Lady Michelle. First I needed to observe her a while

longer.

The snowfall had grown rather heavy, so Lord Simeon rose from his seat sooner than expected. I was reluctant to part with him, so I quietly ignored his suggestion that I need only follow as far as the front door and accompanied him outside to see him off.

“Hurry back inside or you’ll catch a cold.” Lord Simeon’s black military coat added such a sense of danger, it was almost more than I could handle. Amongst the falling snow, he stood out like the Grim Reaper. My beating heart refused to be still. *I don’t feel any cold. With a sight like this before my eyes, my fangirl fire is burning so hot that the snow around me could evaporate at any moment.*



“Take care,” I said as Lord Simeon went to climb into his carriage. A moment before he did so, a strong gust of wind blew past us. *M-m-my goodness, it is actually VERY cold indeed.* My brown hair was at risk of being caked in white.

I hunched up, and suddenly his arms were around me. His large frame blocked out the wind and kept me safe from the snow. Instinctively I looked up at his face, only to find that it was much closer than I expected. Before I could react, I felt the warmth of his lips on mine. His glasses brushed against mine with a tiny *clink* .

“I, too, am eagerly awaiting the coming of spring,” he whispered into my ear before stepping away.

I was still in a trance as the door of the carriage closed and it raced off into the distance. It was not until the carriage was a tiny speck on the horizon that I realized I was wrapped in his scarf.

It’s too much, FAR too much! I really am fangirling so hard that I could die!

How could he be so serious and tactless, then occasionally hit me with a surprise attack like this? He had provoked a mystifying variety of adult feelings inside me. The temperature was rising again, but this time for a rather different reason!

Not only was my fangirl admiration of Lord Simeon impossible to suppress, but it was only growing stronger, more intense, with every passing day. I truly felt at risk of being so fangirled out that I would leave this mortal coil altogether.

“My lady, might I suggest that you come back inside before you turn into a snowman?” my maid Natalie called from the front door. But I stood outside alone, writhing in agony, until she practically dragged me inside.

It was not long before an invitation arrived from the palace. On paper, His Highness was inviting us to a tea party for close friends, but his ulterior motive was plain as day. I had no doubt that he had invited Lady Michelle to tea as well. I assumed that Lord Simeon and I were to be used as a pretext for him to get closer to Lady Michelle. *I wish he’d be more considerate of my needs. I do have my own business to attend to! I have a deadline fast approaching, so losing*

an entire day is quite a burden!

But it was, after all, for the sake of His Highness's happiness, so I wasn't about to refuse. I did want to help—and I was genuinely curious besides.

When I arrived at the room where we were to meet, I began to regret taking the invitation so lightly. I had anticipated a small tea party with just the four of us in attendance, but there were others present that I hadn't been expecting.

"Good day, Marielle. It's such a pleasure to finally meet you," said one of the stunning young ladies.

"I've been so hoping to have a chance to talk to you," said the other. "I've told Simeon so, but he just hasn't brought you to meet us."

I was in the presence of His Highness's younger sisters, Princess Lucienne and Princess Henriette. I was quite taken aback at suddenly encountering this pair of royal siblings. Unable to help myself, I shot His Highness an uneasy glance.

He frowned. "Do forgive me. They decided to invite themselves."

"Don't be like that, brother dear," chimed Princess Lucienne. "We've been so *yearning* to make her acquaintance, and this is such a golden opportunity. Did you really mean to exclude us?"

"A crowded ballroom is too full of eyes for us to casually start a conversation with her," added Princess Henriette. "A tea party amongst a small circle of friends, free from noisy crowds, is too perfect a chance to pass up."

Their buoyant demeanor reminded me somewhat of the Three Flowers of Tarentule. It was a joy to be in the company of such beautiful women, but their dizzyingly high status did give me a touch of nerves.

And...where was Lord Simeon? I looked around, but my fiancé was nowhere to be seen in this elegant room.

"He's not coming," said His Highness. "He turned down my invitation. Apparently he couldn't miss work for a mere tea party."

He's throwing me into this situation and then casually leaving me to tackle it alone? I take it all back. I feel a need to express my dissatisfaction after all.

I was still a little impressed, however. Only the Demon Vice Captain could

flatly refuse an invitation from the crown prince.

I offered the princesses the requisite formal introduction, accompanied by a curtsy. “I must express my deepest gratitude for being given an invitation so far beyond anything I deserve. I am the daughter of Emile Clarac. My name is Marielle. It is a true honor to have the opportunity to meet Your Highnesses.”

In response, the princesses laughed merrily.

“My word, that was formal!” said Princess Lucienne.

“No need to stand on ceremony,” said Princess Henriette. “This is a private gathering. We should all let ourselves feel at ease.”

I quietly took a moment to observe them. Princess Lucienne was the older of the two, at twenty-five years of age. She was the wife of Duke Chalier and the most preeminent young lady in all of high society. Her younger sister, Princess Henriette, was twenty, and engaged to a prince from a neighboring country, the Grand Duchy of Lavia.

Black hair and dark eyes were features shared by the entire royal family. They were also all very beautiful, but in the princesses’ case the beauty had a soft, feminine quality to it, whereas Prince Severin had inherited the best aspects of both Her Majesty the Queen’s looks and His Majesty the King’s masculine charm.

I sensed no hostility from either of them. They had shown me nothing but a lively sense of curiosity. I decided there was probably no need to be overcautious, so I let myself relax.

Next I introduced myself to the woman who stood a step behind the princesses, quietly holding herself back from the conversation. “And you must be Lady Michelle of House Montagnier. I’m Marielle. It’s a pleasure to meet you.”

She curtsied hurriedly in response. “Yes,” she stammered, “it’s very nice to meet you too. I apologize for waiting so long to introduce myself. I was raised in the countryside, so please forgive me for my inevitable indiscretions.”

This truly was a humble and naive response. I noted that her voice was deeper than I had expected. *I somehow imagined she would have a sweet voice,*

like the ringing of a bell. Still, it's a voice that radiates a feeling of self-assurance, and it has a pleasant ring in my ears.

"That's quite unnecessary, Lady Michelle. My rank is far lower than yours, so there is absolutely no need to show such consideration toward me."

"Oh, no, but..."

As the eldest daughter of a marquess, she was a member of a very prominent family indeed, and yet, Lady Michelle seemed remarkably modest in her demeanor. *Or, in fact, now that I look...is she in a state of panic? The way she hangs her head and carries herself as if she's ashamed certainly gives that impression.*

It would be understandable for her to shrink away like this in the presence of the royal family, but I couldn't understand why she would show such diffidence toward me, of all people. Perhaps she'd mistaken me for someone from a more prominent house?

I replied with an attempt to redress the balance somewhat. "My fiancé has been a close confidant of Prince Severin since their boyhood years. Once you and His Highness are married, I hope the two of us can be close to one another as well. I am only a mere viscount's daughter, and I get nervous amongst such highly ranked nobility. If you would befriend me, Lady Michelle, it would give such a boost to my confidence. Might you do me that honor?"

At the edge of my field of vision, His Highness broke out into a grin. I supposed he was glad to see me treating Lady Michelle as his fiancée so readily. *But look closer, Your Highness. Lady Michelle appears to be turning pale.*

"Oh, yes, indeed," she said hesitantly. "I would like that as well."

Though she tried her hardest to maintain her composure, it was clear that she was not succeeding. *What on earth troubles her so much? I'm most intrigued.*

I was certain that the princesses would have noticed this as well. However, their expressions gave no outward sign, and they said nothing to draw attention to it. And so we began our friendly tea party.

The conversation flowed primarily between the young ladies present. As the only gentleman, His Highness was left out almost entirely. Though there were

likely all sorts of questions he wanted to ask Lady Michelle, his sisters deprived him of any opportunity to do so.

"Marielle, I must ask you," said Princess Lucienne rather eagerly, "what's Simeon like when you and he are alone? His looks are second to none, but I fear he is the type of man who is somewhat unsociable and places work above all else. Does that not cause you any distress?"

"Though it would amuse me to learn that despite all appearances, he's as sweet as sugar with his fiancée," added her sister.

Given that Lord Simeon had never been a source of much gossip, it was hardly surprising that his engagement provoked more inquisitive questions than most other people's would. The words "as sweet as sugar" did remind me of our parting in the snow a few days earlier. *His behavior was sweet indeed! But that's hardly something I can talk about in this place, in this company. It would be far too embarrassing.* I decided I would keep that moment locked away inside my heart, and then one day use it to nourish my writing.

I replied, "I am grateful for your concern. There was some degree of tension at the start of our engagement, but now that we've gotten to know each other better, I can find small joys in even the most insignificant moments. Even a terribly strait-laced person can be lovely and charming in his own way."

"Now that is a delicious morsel!" said Princess Lucienne with a relaxed smile and a hint of jesting in her voice.

With a touch of some deeper curiosity, Henriette asked, "Do you not feel any uncertainty about marrying someone you hardly know? If I recall, you hadn't even spoken to Simeon before your engagement."

I realized that both Princess Henriette, who was being married off to the prince of a foreign land, and Lady Michelle, whom the crown prince had fallen madly in love with, were in much the same situation.

I replied, "Once you begin to harbor such anxieties, there can be no end to them. Instead of that, I consider the enjoyment that will come from marrying Lord Simeon. The very fact that I didn't know him before the engagement means that I have the joy of getting to know him. The process of finding out the many small ways in which the real Lord Simeon differs from my first impression

of him has given me a great deal of happiness."

He was still the Demon Vice Captain who would forever set my fangirl heart racing. Being able to observe that person at such close range filled each passing day with excitement and joy. His habit of adjusting his glasses, for example. The way he put his gloves on. His tendency to touch the saber at his waist. He had an air about him, not of a hero of justice, but of a villain. I could not look at him without fangirling over him.

But despite all that, he was pure and good on the inside, and that made my heart ache so blissfully.

"You see the glass as half full," said Princess Lucienne.

"There's no fun in seeing it as half empty. Those who enjoy life are the ones who win in the end."

"Wise words," she said, laughing cheerfully.

Under his breath, His Highness muttered, "All the distress lands on Simeon's plate." The assembled young ladies ignored him.

"What a lovely way of thinking," said Princess Henriette with a smile. "I'll do my best to follow your example." She appeared to be cheerful by nature; I guessed that she never let herself be consumed by serious worries. *And if she has that attitude, then I'm sure she has nothing to be concerned about.*

In stark contrast, Lady Michelle remained deathly silent and sat as still as a doll. It was hard to be sure if she was even listening to our conversation.

I felt that even if we tried to arouse her interest by turning the discussion toward her, it would be hopeless. His Highness also appeared to be thoroughly bored. I decided that the only solution might be for me to split the party in two.

"I also have Lord Simeon to thank for being graced with the pleasure of an invitation to the palace. Prior to this, I had been permitted to enter for balls and other very special occasions. Even then, the most I could hope for was to stand in a distant corner of the ballroom. A tea party with His Highness and Your Highnesses is something I could never have expected. Quite honestly, even now I find myself slightly apprehensive, since this is so far beyond my position."

“Utter rot,” said His Highness. “Who is this goody two-shoes pretending to be Marielle?”

“It’s not so outlandish that I’d feel that way. People like me are not normally permitted to talk directly to members of the royal family. Perhaps Lady Michelle might understand my feelings on this matter.” I turned to face her. “Oh, Lady Michelle, are you all right? You look rather pale.”

Lady Michelle jumped in surprise. My comment was not merely a transparent excuse to address her directly; her face really had turned a very odd color indeed. All the blood seemed to have drained from her cheeks.

“I, well...”

“Oh no, are you unwell?” I interrupted. “Your Highness, perhaps you had better take her to lie down in another room.”

“No, please don’t concern yourself on my account.” Her voice wavered. “My apologies, but I fear I will have to take my leave for today...”

“We couldn’t send you home in your condition. We’d be frightfully worried. I think it would be much more sensible for you to lie down until you feel better. Don’t you agree, Your Highness?”

I urged him with my eyes and my voice, and finally he caught my implication. He stood up from his chair with a knowing expression. “Yes, I do indeed. Miss Michelle, I imagine it must have unnerved you most frightfully to have these uninvited guests at our tea table. I’ll take you to a room where you can lie down.”

“Your Highness...” Though she hesitated, he took her hand and drew her to her feet in a manner that was gentlemanly, yet somewhat forceful. I got the distinct impression that he did not wish to pass up the opportunity to be alone with her.

Lady Michelle did not offer up any further objections, and with a hasty goodbye to the rest of us, she and His Highness quit the room. The door closed behind them, their footsteps disappeared into the distance, and abruptly, Princess Lucienne laughed.

“How kind of you! Brother dear looked exceedingly happy.” She looked at me

with an expression laden with irony.

Smiling, I replied, “If I don’t help him along, he’ll only chide me later. That is presumably why he invited me, after all.”

“He said you were a dauntless individual, and he was quite right,” she said, with no hint of criticism at how forward I was being. “Most interesting!”

Lady Henriette stuck out her lower lip. “Apologies for the two of us turning up and interfering with the scheme.” But even as she pouted, there was a smile in her eyes. Thankfully, the princesses both seemed to be kindhearted and down-to-earth.

Princess Lucienne added, “We, too, were hoping to find a suitable moment to give him a tactful nudge in the right direction. Spring has finally arrived for our brother, and a little earlier in the year than one might expect. Please don’t think we intended to prevent them from getting close to one another for the entire length of the tea party.” She paused. “I do wonder about her, though.”

I understood those last words without any need for her to be explicit. They had also picked up on the strangeness of Lady Michelle’s behavior.

She continued, “Being chosen to become the crown princess should have given her some sense of joy or pride, but I felt none of either. She seems to find the whole situation very unpleasant.”

“I don’t know if I’d put it that way,” said Princess Henriette. “It feels more as if she’s full of grim resolve in the face of tragedy. Either way, this appears to be a case of purely unrequited love on our brother’s part.”

Princess Lucienne put her closed fan up to her cheek and sighed. “Her father, Marquess Montagnier, seems to be raucously happy, however.”

“So there have been no difficulties in the negotiations with her family?” I asked.

They both nodded in response. *So perhaps Lady Michelle is in such torment because she is unable to defy her father’s wishes?*

A woman’s marriage is something that is decided upon by her parents. For a house as prominent as House Montagnier in particular, a young lady cannot

hope to have even the slightest freedom to choose. Lady Michelle should have long since accepted that—so what could be troubling her so deeply?

Was she repulsed by Prince Severin on a physical level, I wondered? This seemed hard to believe. He was one of the most notoriously handsome men in Lagrange's royal court—perhaps the first or second most handsome—and he was a generally pleasant fellow who enjoyed wholesome activities like horseback riding. His established reputation painted him as a man of good character who performed his princely duties well.

There seemed little reason for complaint, but people do have their own individual tastes. Perhaps, I considered, Lady Michelle might prefer men who were less polished, who had some dirt clinging to them, metaphorically. She might find the light of His Highness's perfection to be blinding rather than pleasant.

That was one explanation, and it was plausible enough. And yet, a far more obvious possibility presented itself...

If she was unhappy with the engagement her parents had arranged for her, you would usually expect one cause, and one cause alone: true love. It seemed very likely that Lady Michelle was already in love with another man.

"If she doesn't begin to feel better about it soon," said Princess Lucienne, "I wonder what will happen. It would seem a shame for it to fall through, especially since Mother compromised after our brother finally found a woman he felt passionate about."

My ears immediately pricked up. *Compromised? About what?* Was Lady Michelle an unsuitable partner in Her Majesty's eyes?

I gave voice to my question. "Were there other candidates that Her Majesty preferred?"

The two of them nodded with matter-of-fact expressions.

"In a manner of speaking," said Princess Lucienne. "Certainly, if our brother were not so enthusiastic about her, she would never have been in the running. That is the way things are, after all."

"Social decorum dictated certain candidates who could not be disregarded

entirely," said Princess Henriette. "House Montagnier fell into that category. The intention was to invite as many prospects as possible, so Miss Michelle was included partly to make up the numbers. But she was never a strong contender."

Ah, I see. I nodded in understanding.

House Montagnier was a prominent house with a great deal of history, but in the present day it had lost its former influence. The unvarnished truth was that the house was on the wane, with a continually depleting fortune and no presence on the political stage. In the shadow of vaunted houses like Lady Aurelia's House Cavaignac and Lord Simeon's House Flaubert, they were beginning to be forgotten by society at large.

This was why she was not among the queen's first choices, and why the marquess was so overjoyed for her to have been chosen anyway. It could result in a great sea change in his family's fortunes. All the more reason for Lady Michelle's personal wishes to be disregarded so thoroughly.

"But hasn't Marquess Montagnier been instrumental in setting up your own marriage, Princess Henriette?"

The marquess had a distant relative who was close to Lavia's Grand Duke, and I'd heard that this man had acted as an intermediary between the two countries. No doubt the marquess was striving toward the restoration of his own house's former glory, and this was part of his plan.

"You could say that." Though she nodded, Princess Henriette's face bore more than a hint of irony. "But in terms of his actual role, he's a glorified carrier pigeon. The diplomats are doing all the real work. His contribution is hardly essential."

"Oh, really?"

"To be fair, it is beneficial to have an almost direct line of communication to His Majesty the Grand Duke, but..." Princess Henriette stopped speaking at her older sister's reproachful glare.

I composed my face to suggest that I had not noticed a thing and lifted a sweet from the table to keep my mouth busy. Clearly this was something that a

mid-ranked viscount's daughter like me did not need to know about or be involved with.

I knew there was more that Princess Henriette was holding back, but I did not speak another word on the subject. Presumably it would have led the conversation toward the rather tense details of the northern continent's ongoing power struggle. Far too touchy a subject for a simple tea party.

I turned the discussion back to His Highness and Lady Michelle, and the princesses followed my lead without hesitation. We enjoyed an amicable discourse for the remaining time that the three of us were alone together. They saw fit to open their hearts to me, so rather than trying to disappear and turn into air as usual, I felt free to simply enjoy my time chatting with them.

By the time His Highness returned—alone—we had turned out to be kindred spirits indeed.

"Oh, brother dearest," said Princess Henriette. "Where is Miss Michelle?"

"She was still poorly, so she went home. She asked me to give you her apologies, but I fear you might be the ones who need to apologize."

"How impertinent of you," Princess Lucienne replied. "What are you accusing us of? She's to become our sister-in-law, so why wouldn't we expect to be able to introduce ourselves?"

"In fact," Princess Henriette added, "shouldn't you have introduced her to us of your own volition? How rude of you to try to sneak her in under our noses."

"Sneak her in!? I was doing nothing of the sort! I wished to avoid your inevitable meddling, that's all. Lucie, you're married. You have a new family now, so you've no need to be constantly lingering among ours. Go back to your duke. And Henri... Don't you have lessons in Lavian history to attend?"

Upon being urged to leave by His Highness, the two princesses sullenly got up from their chairs. I couldn't properly see them off if I remained seated, so I stood as well.

"Hope to see you soon, Marielle," said the older sister. "Perhaps next time it can be just us girls."

“You can tell us even more about Simeon!” said the younger.

The magnificent pair departed, and the room suddenly grew quiet. His Highness and I stood facing each other, both on our feet.

“They were awfully candid with you. It’s quite rare for those two to let their guard down so completely.”

“Is it indeed? They showed me a very warm welcome, I felt. I greatly enjoyed spending time in their company. Not to mention that it was quite a treat to see those beautiful princesses at such a close distance. They also told me all sorts of things about you, Your Highness.”

“What the devil did they tell you!?”

“Oh, I could never say. Stories of how you embarrassed yourself in your boyhood days, various failed romances... They made me promise to keep it amongst ourselves.”

“Those blasted girls.” His fist trembled.

I asked him earnestly, “What about Lady Michelle? Did she open up to you at all?”

He made a strained noise, as if any response was instantly caught in his throat.

I knew it. I let out a sigh. “You’ve surely realized, Your Highness, that Lady Michelle appears to have no enthusiasm for this engagement whatsoever.”

He stood silent.

“In all likelihood, she’s accepting it purely because she can’t go against her father’s wishes. How do you feel about that, Your Highness? Are you still comfortable pushing ahead with the marriage?”

He frowned and looked away from me. Eventually he spoke in a voice drained of all energy. “We’ve only just begun to get to know one another. I think that, given time, she might gradually become more comfortable around me.”

He’d finally met a woman he liked, so it would be a real pity to tell him that he should let her go because of her complete lack of interest in him.

“Perhaps she will.” I pushed down the voice inside me that said: *I hope so, but...*

Though he may have been madly in love at this particular moment, His Highness was neither insensitive nor arrogant. I did not see him as the type who would forge ahead with his own wishes while completely ignoring the feelings of Lady Michelle. If things went too far in that direction, I was sure he would put a halt to it. Besides, there was a real chance that Lady Michelle’s feelings might indeed change. I couldn’t rule out that possibility, so I decided to refrain from pursuing the matter any further at this point.

I excused myself and left the room on my own. I nodded in greeting at a royal guard I passed in the corridor, with whom I had a passing acquaintance, and I wondered what Lord Simeon was doing right now. *I suppose sharing advice and criticism with His Highness is ultimately Lord Simeon’s job. Perhaps he can make him see sense.*

It occurred to me that the two men had a lot in common, as you’d expect of such close friends. *His Highness is, in the end, a serious person in the same way as Lord Simeon. With his status and looks, he would be able to ensnare and toy with any woman he likes, but he doesn’t engage in such behavior. His wish is for a partner that he feels is destined for him.*

Women who threw themselves at him held no appeal, while the woman he was besotted with had no feelings for him. Looking at it that way, I felt rather sorry for him. He was dashingly handsome, and a prince no less, so why had circumstances left him so pathetic?

But even if I did have sympathy for his doomed romance, I couldn’t quell my rising excitement. Eagerly, I stepped into the shadow of a pillar. I took my notebook from my handbag and readied my pen.

A perfect man being so pathetic... I could definitely fangirl over that. Attractive, but pathetic. He should be a hit with the ladies, but he’s too pathetic. So skilled, and yet so pathetic.

Such an impressive gentleman, yet with one aspect that struck such a devastating contrast. I felt a broad grin spreading across my face.

My feelings of sympathy for His Highness, in the form of pity toward him,

fired up my creative juices to a remarkable extent. *Maybe next time I'll write about a pathetic male love interest. He loves the female protagonist, and tries his hardest to win her, but somehow he fails to convey his feelings properly, and he becomes a victim of love. That would be great! Of course, by the end his love will be requited and they'll live happily ever after, just as it should be. But he'll go through all sorts of hardship to get there!* A giggle escaped from my lips.

"You appear to be enjoying yourself. What are you writing?"

Though I thought I'd checked carefully enough that there was no one nearby, someone had managed to draw close without my noticing.

I slammed my notebook shut. When I turned around, a tall young man stood before me. His short black hair flicked upwards at the ends in a rather carefree fashion, and his blue eyes seemed to hold a great deal of interest in me. His cheerful face looked suntanned—and that face felt somehow familiar...

I frowned. *I know this man, don't I? I have the feeling I might have seen him quite recently.*

Then it struck me. "You!"

"Good day, Marielle. You're all dressed up today. Did you enjoy the prince's tea party?" He spoke in an overly familiar tone, and as he did so, took my hand and made as though to kiss it. I pulled it away quite forcefully. With no apparent shame at all, he gave an easygoing shrug of the shoulders. "Oh, how heartless," he said. "Have you forgotten all about me?"

How dare he act this way! I wish I could forget him, but clearly there's no hope of that. Yes, I remembered him well, though I never dreamed I would meet him again here of all places.

He was the thief that Lord Simeon had taken great pains to arrest, but who had then slipped through the police's fingers and escaped. What on earth was he doing here in the royal palace?

Chapter Four

"So you've finally decided to make an attempt on the royal treasures? Perfect, just wait here a moment. I'll call the guards right away."

I quickly cast my eyes around. There were always a number of knights standing guard inside the palace. I was sure that if I cried out even for a brief moment, they would hear and come to help. As soon as he was surrounded by knights, that would be the end.

But despite his arrest being quite imminent, the man before me seemed entirely unmoved. "Calling the guards won't achieve anything. You'd be rebuked for wasting their time, that's all."

"Wasting their time? But reporting the presence of a burglar is a citizen's duty!"

"And where is this burglar you speak of?" He grinned as he spoke, though his lie was so barefaced as to be infuriating. Lutin, the mysterious thief, was widely known not only in Lagrange, but in the neighboring countries as well. Here he was, staring right at me in a corridor of the royal palace, not even in disguise as far as I could tell.

And this is how he acts! Marching in here showing his real face like this... What does he mean by it? So many people know that face. Not only me, but Lord Simeon and numerous other members of the Royal Order of Knights, too.

And yet.

I drew in a deep breath and tried to rein in my shock. There was no use losing my presence of mind. I was dealing with a notorious scoundrel. I had no idea what he might do to me if I showed him a chink in my armor. I needed to exercise great caution.

"No need to put up your defenses like that," he said. "I'm not going to do anything. I just thought I'd say hello since I happened to cross paths with the object of my affections."

What utter nonsense. The object of his affections? It just amuses him to toy

with me. “If it’s not Lutin the mysterious thief standing before me, then who am I talking to, might I ask? And what deception did you employ to sneak past the entrance guards?”

“They let me walk through, as per all official procedures. Ah yes, I haven’t introduced myself yet. Earl Emidio Cialdini. It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Marielle.”

My mouth fell open. I was dumbfounded. *An earl, of all things?* Giving himself a noble rank was astonishingly audacious. “And I suppose with a name like that, you must be from the Grand Duchy of Lavia?”

“I am indeed. I’ve traveled to Lagrange to negotiate the engagement of Princess Henriette and my own country’s heir, Prince Liberto. I am a diplomat, in other words.”

“Excuse me?”

Lutin...a diplomat? And supposedly he was to negotiate Princess Henriette’s engagement, of all things?

“I see,” I said when I regained my composure. “So that’s the title you’ve decided to bestow upon yourself this time. Of course, if we were to put you face to face with the Lavian ambassador, your house of cards would crumble right away.”

Lutin remained completely unperturbed. All he did was smile, as if this was all very amusing to him. “I’ve already met him, and quite some time ago. Of course.”

I was confused about what this might imply. Was the ambassador one of Lutin’s accomplices? Or had Lutin been so thorough in his preparations that he was able to fool even the ambassador?

As I strained to try and puzzle out this mystery, I hit upon something crucial. Hadn’t I just today heard about Lavian diplomats who were taking care of the engagement negotiations?

Shocked, I asked, “Don’t tell me you’re pretending to be Marquess Montagnier’s distant relation?”

Now his smile grew even deeper. “Oh no, pretending is quite unnecessary. You see, I’m the genuine article.”

Of course, he WOULD give an answer like that. Though worming his way into a situation as delicate as this was going a little far even by his standards.

Had he deceived the marquess, who in turn verified his identity? If he was supposed to be a distant relative living in a foreign country, it would be nothing out of the ordinary for the two to have never met before. Lutin had infiltrated House Pautrier by pretending to be Lord Cedric in exactly that manner.

But during that incident, I considered, *he wore a disguise that made him look identical to the real Lord Cedric. To present himself as Earl Cialdini, he would have to change his appearance to match the real earl, wouldn’t he?* I wondered if I had been wrong in my assumption that this was his natural appearance. Perhaps it was actually a perfect Earl Cialdini disguise.

I reached out my hand and grasped Lutin’s black hair. I was not shy in pulling at it, but it moved no further than it should; it certainly did not come off his head. It didn’t appear that he was wearing a wig.

“Ouch! I’d appreciate it if you didn’t pull so hard. You’ll tear it out.”

Next I tried scrubbing at his face, but again, nothing changed. There appeared to be no fakery at work here either.

“I assure you, this is the real me. And *you’ve* certainly become no less bold.”

Lutin grabbed my hands to make me stop. At least, I thought that was his purpose—but then he kept his hands on mine and kissed my fingers. *Does he never give up!?* “Let me go! Didn’t you tell me only moments ago that you weren’t going to do anything?”

“Well, you started showing me your affection, so I gladly returned the favor.”

Lutin laughed maliciously, still gripping my hands. I shook my arms to try and escape, but it made no difference in the face of his strength. He moved his body closer, forcing me back and into the pillar.

“Could you please refrain from freely misinterpreting my actions? I would never express affection for a thief. Don’t you feel shameless even hearing such

words leave your mouth?”

“I told you, I’m not a thief, I’m Emidio. I do wish you’d address me as such.”

“Just get your hands off me and leave me be!”

Lutin drew his face very close to mine. Startled, I accidentally hit the back of my head against the pillar. *You must stop,* I thought. *There’s nowhere further to go. I won’t let anyone but Lord Simeon get any closer.*

“I don’t care if you’re a diplomat, nor do I care how handsome you are. Using force on a woman is unforgivable!”

“Handsome, am I? I appreciate your kind words of praise. I suppose this means my face is to your liking.”

“Not one bit! My preference is for black-hearted scoundrels, not for common swindlers! But that’s entirely beside the point. Stop this RIGHT now!”

Devoid of all hope, I closed my eyes and hung my head—when, suddenly, a sharp sound cut through the air beside me. I felt something brush against my hair as Lutin, who had come so close we were almost touching, jumped back in a flash.

My eyes opened reflexively. Something had struck the wall, flying between Lutin and I as if to split the space between us. It was thin and flexible, wrapped in black-dyed leather, and shorter than a saber.

I suddenly realized which weapon I was looking at.

Although Lutin persisted in smiling, his eyes scowled at the weapon’s owner with a threatening look. “That could have been quite dangerous. You should exercise more care.”

Not to be outdone, the weapon’s owner returned the scowl. Blue flames burned in the eyes behind his glasses. “My apologies. There was an insect that needed swatting.”



Lord Simeon! The very man I was hoping to see. He had come to my rescue.

“Do you have some business with my fiancée, Earl Cialdini?” His words were polite, but his voice growled with menace.

He lifted the weapon away from the wall and softly hit Lutin’s hands, which were still holding mine. With a dismissive snort, Lutin let go. Free now, I practically leapt to Lord Simeon’s side, and he held me tight with his free hand. Resting against his broad chest, I felt relief wash over me.

“I would humbly request that you exercise more caution about who you lay your hands on. I don’t know how such things are viewed in your country, but in ours, behaving so insolently toward an unmarried young woman is an unforgivable *faux pas* .”

“And turning a weapon on a diplomat is perfectly above board?”

“I was merely dealing with a pesky insect. It turns out that even in the middle of winter, one encounters pests that stubbornly persist beyond their natural span.”

For a moment, the two glared at each other. Lutin was the one who blinked.

“If a guard dog has appeared to chase me away, I have no choice but to comply. It appears I am defeated for now.” He turned to me and spoke sweetly. “But we Lavian men are full of passion. We don’t give up on a romantic entanglement because of just one setback. Remember that, Marielle.” Then he departed with a nonchalant air, as if there was nothing out of the ordinary at all.

As Lord Simeon watched him go, he did not even attempt to mask his murderous feelings. He grunted in frustration and, with an expression magnificently filled with hate, spat, “Damned common criminal...”

Lord Simeon, who was usually so refined in his speech, seemed to lose some measure of decorum and speak in a coarser manner when confronted with Lutin. In his rage, he slapped the item in his hand against the wall. Hearing that sharp *whoosh* again, I could not restrain myself any longer.

“Lord Simeon!” I exclaimed.

“It’s all right now. I had intended to come as soon as the tea party ended, so apologies for my late arrival.”

“No, it’s not that! You’re just so wonderful, you’re the best, you’re so dashing... I’m fangirling so hard I could die! You simply MUST have your picture painted with you holding it!”

“*That’s* what you’re concerned about right now?”

The item that Lord Simeon held in his hand was the very object of all my desires: the riding crop. Here, right before my very eyes, was the brutal prop that I yearned to see him holding.

“What a frivolous thing to be thinking of at a moment like this. Do you not realize the situation you were in mere moments ago?”

“Of course I realize, but... Lord Simeon, you USED it! The riding crop! Of your own accord! And not for horse riding purposes. You appeared with the riding crop in hand for the express purpose of using it to hit someone! If you try to tell me I shouldn’t be fangirling over that, why, it’s an impossible request! Ahh, what a beautiful sight! It’s too much for words, I truly feel I might die! And...I would die with no regrets!”

As I threatened to collapse in on myself, Lord Simeon hurried to prop me up. “What is this idiocy you are spouting? Please come to your senses.”

“It’s simply impossible. If I were to ascend to heaven while experiencing this joy, I would die happy.”

“Did you not inform me that you have a deadline? I seem to recall that you have yet to submit your manuscript.”

“Oh! You’re quite right!” I lifted my head and stood up straight. Lord Simeon let out a deep sigh, and I continued, “But the impact of seeing the riding crop was simply too great. Now I can’t possibly hope to return to the world of my book. Why did you have to do something so perfect, Lord Simeon? It’s thoroughly unfair.”

“And now I’m to suffer your complaints, am I? If it’s such an inconvenience for you, I’ll put it away.”

“No, please don’t put it away! Quite the opposite! Hold it all the time as you walk around, just as you’re holding it now!”

“If I hold a riding crop all the time, people will think I’m peculiar!”

“Oh, that’s all right, they’ll get used to it! All it will do is increase the brutality you exude and thus add to your dangerous appeal!”

“What part of that is ‘all right’?” he asked in a rather lecturing tone. “I demand that you stop this nonsense!”

As he told me off, he gave me a light slap on the head with the riding crop. *Oh... This brutality... It feels like a wonderful reward...*

Knights of the royal guard began to gather around us, wondering what all the commotion was about. With a wave of his hand, Lord Simeon shooed them away, ordering them back to their posts.

When they were gone, I changed the subject. “Lord Simeon, don’t you have to chase after Lutin?”

“I know where he’ll be without any need to expend my energy chasing him. And it makes no difference, as he can freely march back in regardless, head held high.”

“That’s just what I meant to ask you about! Why is it that Lutin can show his face so casually? What is all this ‘Earl Cialdini’ business? Has he got both the Lavian ambassador and Marquess Montagnier under his spell? You must report this to His Highness and arrest him at once.”

“Please, calm down,” Lord Simeon said soothingly, gesturing to me to follow him. We headed toward the front entrance.

He had told me not to make a fuss, so I kept my voice measured. “What on earth is going on? I do not understand one bit.”

“That man appeared via official channels as a diplomat from Lavia. We confirmed his proof of identity as per all our usual procedures, and in doing so, we found no irregularities whatsoever. Just to be sure, we contacted our ambassador stationed in Lavia and asked him to confirm as well. Unlike in the House Pautrier incident, he does not appear to be engaging in any deception.”

I paused a moment, lost for words. “So this is Lutin’s real identity? He’s a Lavian diplomat?”

“His position as a diplomat is a temporary one that he’s been assigned just for this occasion. His primary occupation is something else, it seems.”

“His primary occupation is burglary, and he engages in a little diplomacy on the side?”

Lord Simeon shook his head in frustration. “We shall see, I suppose.”

“But,” I protested, “Lutin has committed countless burglaries. That much is undeniable. Why can’t you treat him as a criminal and arrest him?”

“The role of diplomat gives him certain special privileges. Even if we were to investigate him, we couldn’t arrest him. The most we could do is hand him back over to his home country. Besides, we’re lacking in any definitive proof that this man is Lutin.”

“How can that be, when so many have seen his face? If we go to the police, there must be plenty of people there who remember exactly what he looks like.”

“Have you forgotten? Lutin is known as a master of disguise. He could explain it all away by suggesting that Lutin was disguising himself as Earl Cialdini. Then it would all come to nothing.”

“But...” I stopped short. How could this be happening? Everyone knew that a thief stood right before their very eyes, but they had no way of apprehending him. There could be nothing more aggravating.

Lord Simeon himself, after providing this series of explanations as to why he could take no action, seemed to harbor some feelings of aggravation himself. “Given these circumstances, I regret leaving Lutin in the police’s hands. I should have taken charge of him myself. If we had had him in custody after being caught red-handed, no rationalizations could have excused him. His smug expression makes my blood boil, quite frankly. It was a struggle to prevent myself from drawing my sword.”

It was unusual to hear him speak in such violent terms. Earlier, too, he had been scowling in a manner that almost terrified me. Perhaps he truly had

wished he could cut Lutin down right then and there. *That must be why he was holding the riding crop,* I thought. *He couldn't turn his sword on Lutin, but he could at least use a substitute.*

I allowed myself a fleeting glimpse down at the riding crop, which he had returned to the holder at his hip. Recalling the impact of that black leather made me tremble. Though it couldn't cut the way a sword would, if struck with full force, I suspected that skin would tear as if it were nothing. *My goodness... It lends such a menacing air to the Vice Captain, I can hardly bear it.*

We passed a number of his subordinates, and the fear was visible in their eyes. *But why are they looking at ME with such disturbed expressions?*

"It is quite frustrating that the police made such a mess of things," I said as we continued walking. "I do wonder what he's plotting this time."

"Who can say. As of now, he seems to be doing precisely as his role suggests and involving himself in the engagement negotiations."

"I don't understand what Lavia can be thinking. True, the offer was made from our side, and we can't say for certain that the other side is fully enthusiastic about it, but to send a thief as their diplomat? It's the height of impropriety. Does His Highness know about this? What about the king and queen?"

"Of course they know. And with that knowledge, they're making careful efforts to understand Lavia's motives."

"Are they considering calling off the marriage entirely?"

"Not at this stage. Now, I need you to bear in mind, this is not something that can be discussed too openly. You mustn't breathe a word to anyone." He additionally cautioned me not to talk about it any further at that moment, so I firmly closed my mouth.

After Princess Henriette had finally been able to muster some optimism about the engagement, it was quite disheartening for something like this to be going on in the background. I felt sorry for her, and wondered if there really wasn't anything I could do. But I had a rough grasp of His Majesty's reasons for not breaking off the engagement right then and there, so I, an ordinary woman,

could do nothing but remain silent.

The Grand Duchy of Lavia found itself in a complicated position. Sandwiched between Lagrange and Easdale, it was forever being caught up in the power struggle between the two larger nations. This led to quarrels within Lavia as well: one faction advocated for joining forces with Lagrange, while an opposing faction favored aligning with Easdale. With Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto's engagement taking shape, victory for the Lagrange faction was all but assured—but things were far from settled, and we could be sure the Easdale faction wasn't about to go down without a fight.

His Majesty probably wants to keep Easdale in check by bringing Lavia over to our side completely. Which in turn makes Princess Henriette a pawn in a political game, I suppose.

Given the difficulties Prince Severin was facing in his love life as well, it seemed the royal family was having rather a lot of trouble successfully getting married lately. Prince Liberto was said to be a kind and caring person, at least, so hopefully he would take good care of Princess Henriette.

As for His Highness... I wasn't sure what could be done to resolve his relationship issues. *Perhaps I'll try to look for another young lady I can recommend instead, just in case his engagement to Lady Michelle falls through in the end.*

Given how suddenly and deeply he had fallen in love with Lady Michelle, it seemed that His Highness preferred women who were more understated than the usual ostentatious beauties seen in high society. I decided there would be no harm in trying to investigate young ladies who were cast in a similar mold to Lady Michelle. However, this did exclude a great number of the daughters of prominent, high-ranking families. Perhaps it was inevitable that they all ended up with something of a peacock quality to them, since they grew up surrounded by so much praise and adoration.

"Marielle?" asked Lord Simeon. "What has you so lost in thought?"

While we waited in the antechamber for Natalie to summon the carriage, I mulled over every young lady of marriageable age I could think of. His Highness's taste certainly presented some difficulties. If women of just a slightly

lower rank could be considered, there would have been a number of perfect candidates. But for someone to be accepted as the crown princess, I was sure that a suitable noble rank was an absolute requirement.

I looked up at Lord Simeon. “You’re His Highness’s closest friend, so you must have a good understanding of his tastes. You don’t happen to know of any young women who would suit his preferences?”

A stunned expression appeared on his face. “Is that what you’ve been thinking about?” He paused to consider. “I suppose it is better than continuing to dwell on Lutin.”

“I haven’t forgotten about him either, but for now I’m focused on His Highness. Lady Michelle appears to have no interest in him at all. It seems relatively likely that things will end badly, so I think we have no choice but to look for the next candidate. Can you really think of no one, Lord Simeon? It needs to be someone sweet and subdued in their dress and demeanor.”

“I won’t say there’s absolutely no one that springs to mind,” he said, “but unfortunately, the person in question is already spoken for.”

“Oh?”

“Furthermore, she only *appears* to suit his taste on the surface. The only men who could fall in love with her true self are her fiancé—who has very dubious tastes—and a thief.”

“Why a thief? In any case, do you not have any other suggestions?”

Shaking his head, Lord Simeon dressed me in my overcoat, then placed my hat firmly on my head, in preparation for the chilly outdoor air. “However Miss Michelle may feel, the marquess is very enthusiastic indeed. I suspect things will continue on their current course.”

“With no consideration at all for the feelings of the bride herself? What a tragedy for poor Lady Michelle. And I doubt His Highness can really be happy in that situation.”

“You’ve said yourself that a young lady has to marry whoever her parents choose for her. I’m sure Miss Michelle is well aware of her position. It’s not our place to interfere—only to watch over them and lend our support. His Highness

is very much in love and will treat her accordingly, so I'm sure a happy enough relationship will develop between them."

"But...what if Lady Michelle is in love with someone else?"

"Even if she is, there is nothing to be done about it. She must abandon that notion."

I gritted my teeth at his unfeeling manner of speaking. My eyes opened wide. "Will His Highness be happy with a bride who cries her way up the aisle, having given up the dream of being with her true love? Is that what his closest friend is suggesting?"

"I'm merely saying that there's nothing you or I can do about it. This is no longer a matter between the two of them alone, but an event that has been set in motion on a national scale. It's only a matter of time before their engagement is officially announced. It's too late to stop it now."

"No, there's still plenty of time for things to be properly resolved. Until they pledge themselves to one another before God, they can still change their minds and withdraw from the marriage." I paused. "I wonder who it is that Lady Michelle has feelings for. If that person were to sweep her away..."

"Don't talk such nonsense. This is not a novel. If such a thing were to happen in real life, it would lead to ruin for all involved. House Montagnier's name would also be sullied forever, and its downfall all but assured."

I wanted to scream. *Lord Simeon really is far too direct about this sort of thing. It's usually such a desirable trait, but at times like this it's so vexing. I wish he'd show just a little more flexibility in these matters!*

"Besides," he continued, "the very idea that Miss Michelle has an existing lover is one that originates purely in your own imagination. You have no evidence of it, and no idea who it would be. All you have is an assumption that such a man exists. If you start spreading baseless rumors like that, it could damage Miss Michelle's reputation."

"But in cases like this, there is normally a lover the parents don't know about."

"I'm telling you, stop conflating your wild delusions with reality!"

His voice struck me like a crack of his riding crop. I jumped in shock. Just as I had begun to feel some dissatisfaction toward him after all, he also seemed to be quite irritated by me. His stern gaze made me shrink back in fear. Lord Simeon alarmed me so much in that moment that I was rendered speechless. For a brief moment the air between us froze solid, but Lord Simeon noticed my panic and looked away.

"I apologize for raising my voice," he said, softening his tone considerably. "I don't mean to deny you your hobby or your work. I only ask you to keep them clearly separated from real life. The people standing before you are not the main characters of a story, but living, breathing people. Please don't forget that."

Despite his conciliatory tone, I was still unable to respond.

As we stood stock still facing each other in silence, a timid voice came from the doorway. "Excuse me..." Natalie had returned, with a pair of knights in tow for reasons I could not fathom. They entered the antechamber behind her. "I've readied the carriage. And, well..."

"Ah yes," said Lord Simeon. "Then please return home, Marielle, and take care as you go. I've asked some of my men to escort you."

"Escort me?"

I took another look at the knights. They wore thick coats, as if they intended to go outside.

"I wish I were able to travel with you, but I can't spend too long away from my duties today."

"But why do I need an escort at all?"

"Are you forgetting the *certain someone* you encountered a short while ago? I've no doubt he'll go after you again. You must be extra careful to avoid doing anything imprudent, such as going out alone."

He's concerned about Lutin? Does he think I'd be kidnapped or some such? I wasn't sure there was any need for such caution. All Lutin had done was speak to me in his typically smooth-tongued manner and come a little too close to me for comfort. Abduction? No, that was not part of his repertoire.

Yet, no matter how sure I was of this, defying Lord Simeon's wishes seemed a terrifying prospect right now, so I meekly obeyed. *And to be honest,* I thought to myself, *if events had taken their natural course this time, who knows? He might have abducted me after all.* In the end, we were talking about a thief—a wicked man. We couldn't be certain what he would or would not do, so I couldn't rule out the worst.

Lord Simeon looked on as I got into the carriage. He was just worrying about my welfare as always, but the atmosphere between us still felt strained somehow. His face looked rather more tense than I was used to, and I felt uneasy. I wondered if he was still angry.

Perhaps I should say something before we part. I still haven't apologized properly. But I couldn't find the right words, and the feeling of terror remained as well, so the door closed while I was still deciding what to do, leaving me with all my awkward feelings. The carriage started moving, accompanied by its decidedly over-the-top escort.

Snow began to fall. When I looked back at Lord Simeon through the window, the flakes began to mask him as he disappeared into the distance.

A horrible sense of uneasiness, like Lord Simeon might now be beyond my reach forever, continued to torment me for some time.

Chapter Five

After the tea party, the days passed uneventfully for a while. I finished my manuscript and submitted it to the publisher, which allowed me to occupy my time with more relaxing pursuits such as embroidery.

Despite how it might appear, my mind is not focused on novels during every waking moment. My parents were not neglectful with my upbringing, and I was instructed in all the usual skills from a very young age. Needlework, dancing, music, riding... I was not taught to a level of mastery in any of them, but rather achieved a middling degree of competence in them all. I never had any interest in reaching greater heights, so I came to a plateau in each, and that was that. The only art for which I received praise from my instructors was writing poetry.

I set up camp before the fire in the sitting room and applied myself to my embroidery with great industry. The symbol that was gradually appearing on the white cravat, made of silken thread with its own white luster, was the crest of House Flaubert. I intended to present it to Lord Simeon as a gift.

I stitched each thread with far more care and attention to detail than I had in any of my practice efforts. Every young maiden longed to see her lover or husband wearing something on his person that she had embroidered herself. If handicrafts were a *true* point of pride for me, then I would have gone so far as to make the very clothes he would wear to our wedding, but I had neither the skill nor the time for such a task. Still, it seemed within reason that I could present him with a cravat to wear on our special day, so I was working assiduously toward that goal.

Though it does suddenly occur to me that Lord Simeon might wear his uniform to the ceremony. It is a common practice amongst those belonging to the military. Many of the guests will likely be in uniform as well. His formal dress uniform, with gold braids on the epaulets, was certainly dashing, but it had a stand-up collar, so he would have no use for a cravat. *Still,* I thought, *perhaps he can wear it to the reception afterwards.*

My thread began to reach its end, so I paused and knotted it, then cut off the

excess. I let out a sigh of relief and relaxed my shoulders.

I glanced out the window. The snow had finally stopped, and the sun shone brightly. The sounds of melting ice trickling down drop by drop from the roof, and occasionally sliding off in sizable lumps, did not cease for a moment.

I hope the weather remains this pleasant. Spring can't arrive soon enough.

Since our less than pleasant parting on the day of the tea party, Lord Simeon and I had not seen each other once. Letters and presents had sometimes arrived from him, however. At this time of year it was impossible to find roses, of course, so instead he had sent a variety of sweets and charming ornaments.

I'm sure it's simply that he has too much work to do and can't find the time to visit. After all, in his letters he had expressed his concerns about me in a very earnest fashion. Similarly, I began my first letter to him with a heartfelt apology. He replied in a perfectly kind manner, so there should have been no reason for me to feel so anxious—to fear, for example, that he might no longer be fond of me.

And yet...

I sighed rather loudly. Such loud sighs on my part had certainly become more frequent lately. Though Lord Simeon was always chiding me for my reckless behavior, this particular incident continued to cause me a far greater degree of heartache than usual. I found myself thinking about it all the time. Somehow, it felt different from all those that came before it.

That image of Lord Simeon disappearing into the snow simply would not leave my mind. It felt as though I might never see him ever again, despite how unlikely that was. But, since we indeed hadn't met since then, I grew ever more anxious with each passing day.

Just as I threatened to become lost in my despair, my mother came along to inspect my handiwork. "How is your progress? Goodness, your craftsmanship is actually rather good. You seem to have truly focused and put in a great deal of effort—by your standards, I mean. I suppose you would put a little more work into something meant as a gift for your fiancé!"

Though Mother's comments included a hint of mockery, her tone indicated

that she was rather pleased. Feeling somehow self-conscious, I tidied away the cloth into the sewing box.

“Oh, you don’t intend to continue?”

“There’s no harm in taking a break. If I work so intensely for too long, I’ll fatigue myself.”

“Though when it comes to writing your novels, there’s no end to how long you can hunch yourself over the pages.” But despite saying this, Mother asked the maid to bring tea and sat down opposite me.

At this time of year it was rare to receive invitations from other houses, so women tended to be confined to their own homes. Even if one wished to go for a walk, it was often too cold, or the roads were so buried in snow that they were all but impassible. My mother and I often whiled away the days in conversation with only one another for company. Occasionally we were joined by my best friend Julianne, and, conversely, I sometimes visited her house, but otherwise we were largely alone.

“I suppose this will be the last winter I spend with you,” said Mother with an uncharacteristic degree of sentiment. She’d worried for so long that she wouldn’t ever find a suitable partner for me, but now that I was engaged at last, it seemed she might soon be lonely. “Be aware that after you move, you won’t always be able to act as you please. No matter how broad-minded Lord Simeon is, you must still be careful to conduct yourself properly in front of the earl and countess.”

“Oh, Mother, you tell me that almost every day.”

“I’m worried about you, that’s all. I know that on a fundamental level there’s no situation you can’t cope with adequately, but as soon as the circumstances begin to relate to your unique interests, it takes only an instant for you to become quite eccentric.”

It felt like an awfully judgmental comment for a mother to make to her own daughter. But in fact, she understood as only a parent can. If I confessed that Lord Simeon had recently become angry with me for this very reason, I would certainly receive a stern telling off, so I held my tongue.

I don’t deny that my behavior can tend towards a certain degree of reckless abandon, but Lord Simeon had proposed to me with full knowledge of that. Wasn’t it a bit too late for him to declare that I was too strange for him to marry?

I sipped at the hot tea and sighed again. *Perhaps I should go and see him, rather than waiting for him to come to me. It might be the only way to resolve such intense feelings of gloom. But I also don’t want to interrupt him while he’s busy with work.*

But, just as those thoughts were circling in my mind, it seemed my prayers were answered. The housekeeper brought in a letter that had just arrived from Lord Simeon. I read it in a flash. “He’s asking if he would be welcome to visit today.”

“My, my! I’m glad for you, Marielle. It has been a while since you’ve met face to face, has it not?”

This letter had left Mother in even higher spirits than me. *Has she noticed all the unpleasant feelings that have been weighing me down?*

The handwriting was Lord Simeon’s without a doubt, but the envelope and writing paper were not what I expected. They were both plain white, while he typically used more refined stationery embossed with the crest of House Flaubert. The letter said that if it would not be possible to meet during the daytime, then that night would be acceptable as well. One way or another, he was very eager to see me that very day. Presumably he had been in a great hurry and contacted me straight from the palace, and this required him to use the items he had on hand—namely, the stationery of the Royal Order of Knights.

But what could possibly be so urgent?

The sudden missive plunged the household into a state of disarray. Mother ordered the drawing room to be heated, while I hurriedly wrote a reply to indicate that he was welcome at any hour.

When I thought back on our most recent parting, my courage to face Lord Simeon again faltered. And yet, if I did not face him, my unease would only continue to grow, so I was still glad to have received his letter. I was torn

between anxiety and joy.

After sending off my reply, I changed into a more presentable dress and made sure we were prepared to receive him. Lord Simeon arrived almost right away—far more quickly than I was expecting. It appeared that he had set off as soon as he received my reply.

"Apologies for intruding so suddenly." He carefully took off his shoes, which were wet from the melting snow, and left them in the entryway. Mother came with me to greet him, and he presented her with a box of sweets engraved with the seal of the official purveyor to the royal family. *He didn't plunder those from His Highness's stocks...did he?*

"Goodness, how kind of you," she said in response. "Thank you very much. I'm sure it must still be cold outside despite the improved weather, so please come in right away."

Mother led Lord Simeon into the drawing room, where everything had been prepared for receiving a guest. She spoke a few more pleasantries and then left the room. She would normally linger a little longer, so I was fairly certain she had noticed that I was not my usual self. Suddenly Lord Simeon and I were alone, with just each other and our cups of tea. Neither of us could form any words, so silence hung in the air between us.

Hesitatingly I began, "Th-thank you for all your letters and gifts. They were very much appreciated." Those were the only words I could scrape together, and they were every bit as formal as I had been at the very start of our engagement.

"You're quite welcome. Were they...to your liking?" Not to be outdone, Lord Simeon stood on ceremony to the same degree.

"Yes, they were most adorable, every one of them. I was very pleased."

"I'm glad to hear it."

I said nothing in response, and he added nothing further either.

And that was it! The conversation was at a standstill. I didn't know what to do. *But for Lord Simeon to be behaving this way as well... It must mean that the situation has been preying on his mind, too.*

It can't be... No, it can't be, but... Is today's visit for the purpose of telling me that he means to break off the engagement?

My breath quickened. *If so, that's not fair! I know that I went too far, of course, but I gave him a full and detailed apology! Just because I was a little impertinent on that one occasion, it doesn't justify breaking off the engagement, surely! That would be so harsh. He'd be going way too far!*

But, I considered, *what if it's not just the one occasion? What if each time I behaved like that, it's weighed on him more and more, and he's finally gotten tired of it? That could justify him turning his back on me...*

Was it true? Was Lord Simeon no longer fond of me?

"Marielle?" said Lord Simeon with a startled look on his face.

I returned his gaze, fighting back the tears that were on the verge of spilling forth. "Were the presents meant as a way to...make up for it?"

"What are you talking about?" he exclaimed, rising halfway to his feet. At this same moment, a great clattering resounded from the other side of the door. The tears faded entirely as I turned and glowered in the direction of the door.

A pair of female voices resounded. "My word, Natalie!" said one, laughing awkwardly. "How careless of you!"

"My lady, how could you be so mean?" replied the other. "Must you blame this on me?"

Then all that could be heard were footsteps scurrying into the distance.

I've no doubt they were just worried about me, but if they intend to secretly listen in on our conversation, I'd much prefer if they did it skillfully enough that I didn't notice.

Lord Simeon and I simultaneously returned our gazes to one another. Somehow, we managed to look each other in the eye.

Lord Simeon reseated himself and cleared his throat. "Could you clarify, perhaps, what you were thinking about when you made that last statement? If you don't explain the steps that lead to the conclusion, I have no hope of understanding."

“Well... After the incident that occurred between us on the day of the tea party, I thought you might have come here today to tell me you’re...breaking off the engagement.”

“Oh, I see.” He leaned back in his chair and let out a very long sigh. “I was somewhat taken aback. When you started talking about ‘making up for it’ out of the blue, I wondered if I might have done something I wasn’t aware of. If it’s about the party, you already apologized, so can’t we consider it water under the bridge?”

“But you’ve been worried as well, haven’t you?”

“Well, in a manner of...” His face grew troubled, and he adjusted his glasses in a manner that betrayed no meaning. After a brief pause, he continued. “The way I spoke to you on that day was particularly severe. I felt a great deal of regret for scaring you so. Since I’ve had no opportunity to see you since then, I’ve been quite worried about how you might be feeling toward me.”

It surprised me to hear him speak like this. As if the guilty one in that exchange had been him and not me. “It was my fault,” I replied. “The way I was behaving justified such a rebuke. There’s no need for you to feel any regret.”

“It’s not that I regret criticizing you, as such. However, it was a mistake for me to let my emotions get the better of me. I lost my composure, and that failure is entirely mine.” He expressed this thought very matter-of-factly. Just as I was sorry I’d let myself get so carried away, Lord Simeon was sorry for going too far in his way of speaking to me. Evidently, we had both been experiencing a similar sort of worry.

A mixture of feelings welled up inside me. Amusement at the situation, and tenderness toward him. My face softened. The tension went out of my shoulders, and I finally felt able to talk to him in my usual manner. “It was the same in my case. I’ve been feeling rather anxious that you might have lost your affection for me.”

“I suppose I should take some comfort from hearing you put it that way.” His expression was gentle, and all the uneasiness that had collected inside my heart melted away. I was enveloped in warmth. *Thank goodness. Lord Simeon is not going anywhere. He’ll continue to be here, right before my eyes.* It was a

significant relief to be reassured of that.

It seemed that my worries had grown even greater than I was aware of. With most setbacks and upsets, I was able to forget and move on after a good night's sleep, but it was different where he was concerned. I was once again reminded quite personally that Lord Simeon had begun to occupy a very large space in my mind.

I began again. "I truly am sorry about my behavior the other day. I went too far, and I sincerely regret it." I paused. "That said, I want you to know that in spite of my usual tendencies, I was not making light of the situation and treating those two purely as potential characters in a book. I really was, and am, concerned about them."

"Yes, indeed. I acknowledge that you are a very kindhearted and considerate person, not someone who only sees other people's emotions as something from which to derive amusement. I fully understand that, but...no, let's leave it there. I'm rather lacking in time today, so let's leave that subject for now." He cut himself off quite abruptly. I was curious as to what he'd intended to say next, but I had the clear impression that he did not wish to talk about it any further.

I didn't want to cause any more awkwardness between us, so I changed the subject. "Are you very busy with work right now?"

"I would say so, yes. My plate is rather full at the moment."

"I am most intrigued as to what things your plate is so full with. Is your coming here today related to one of them?"

His expression stiffened and he nodded. "I must apologize again, for I've come with a thoroughly boorish request... Although, perhaps you would find it to be the opposite. It relates to His Highness."

Does it indeed? I leaned forward eagerly. "How has the situation developed since I last saw him?"

"His acquaintance with Miss Michelle has proceeded favorably," he replied, refusing to be swept up in my excitement. "The two have seen each other several times since the tea party. I'm told that Miss Michelle has gradually

grown somewhat less tense and reserved."

"Really?" I replied after a brief pause. If so, this was joyous news indeed, but I could not help but harbor some doubts. From the way in which he expressed it, it was clear that Lord Simeon did not speak from first-hand knowledge. Rather, it was something he had been told—most likely by His Highness.

"His Highness is overjoyed, so I can only believe it is true," said Lord Simeon, attempting to refute my evident doubts. "He's not a man who would lie about such a thing. I'm sure Miss Michelle is just a naturally timid person, and fearful of strangers. When the stranger in question is the crown prince, all the more reason to be so nervous. But that is, after all, a problem that solves itself in time. It's no cause for concern."

"If so, then indeed, all is well..." *But,* I thought to myself, *is that really all it was? I suppose it's fine, then, if their relationship keeps going on this course. Though I do question whether someone that timid is well-suited to her future role of queen.* "In that case, what could he possibly need me for? Another tea party?"

"Something slightly more substantial. His Highness has been invited to House Montagnier's holiday home, and he'd like you to join him."

"Their holiday home? Where is it?"

"It's located in Lerne, I'm told."

Lerne was several hours from the metropolis of Sans-Terre by carriage. There was a broad highway leading there, so as long as the snowfall wasn't too heavy, there would be no problem reaching it even at this time of year.

"Lerne? If I recall, it is an unexpectedly picturesque place for somewhere so close to the city."

"Yes, and many noble families have holiday homes there. Apparently Miss Michelle said herself that she would feel more comfortable seeing His Highness there than in the royal palace or her own home."

"Hmm..." That was somewhat unexpected. If Lady Michelle felt able to express a wish like that, she really had let her guard down. "Well, playing in the snow could definitely be of benefit, in any case. In the chilly season, lovers find

that the distance between them starts to shrink. And I understand that my assistance is required again?”

“Yes. You’ve met her once already, and you’re a woman of similar age. For these reasons, His Highness supposes that she’d feel more comfortable with you there. Apparently you said something along these lines at the tea party. You suggested it would be worth fostering a friendly relationship at this stage, with a view to continuing it after the weddings.”

“Indeed, I’m perfectly fine with doing so. But if it’s no more than that, then surely there was no need for all this sudden fuss, just to let me know about it.”

Lord Simeon nodded and took a sip of his tea. He let a moment pass and then changed his tone. “In all likelihood, the official invitation will arrive from His Highness tomorrow. I wanted to meet you before that and talk to you first. Marielle, you must refuse this request.”

I had lifted the cup to my mouth and was about to take a sip of tea, but my hand froze. Lord Simeon’s very serious gaze was fixed on me. My mind whirred with ideas as to why he would say such a thing.

After a moment’s hesitation I gave voice to my best guess. “Could it be that Lutin has also been invited to stay at the holiday home?” I could think of few other reasons why he’d tell me not to go.

Lord Simeon nodded, his hard expression remaining in place. “He is staying at House Montagnier’s manor to begin with, after all. The entire family is traveling there, so they can’t exactly leave...*him* ...behind.” The word ‘him’ dripped with contempt. “It’s entirely reasonable that he would decide to leave the engagement negotiations for the moment and prioritize time spent mingling with His Highness.”

“But is that really enough reason to turn down His Highness’s request?”

It felt like it should have been sufficient for Lord Simeon to tell me to be careful around Lutin—who did, after all, have to maintain his facade as a Lavian diplomat. Presumably he could only go so far.

“I assume you’re going as well, Lord Simeon?”

“I am, yes. However, I have to prioritize my role as His Highness’s escort. I

cannot neglect either my professional duties or my position as his subject."

"Of course not."

"I can't be by your side the entire time. Thus, you should tell his Highness that you're bedridden with a terrible cold. That will allow you to refuse without arousing any anger."

I folded my arms in a slightly bad-mannered fashion and glared at Lord Simeon. "In other words, you've decided this unilaterally? Prince Severin is of course fully aware of, and accepting of, Lutin's presence, and wishes for me to join regardless. It seems quite unlike you to secretly undermine his decision. Normally it would be unthinkable for you to deceive His Highness."

He took a moment before replying. "Right now, His Highness's attention is consumed by his relationship with Miss Michelle. I don't know if he's showing adequate concern for your safety."

"Oh, I wasn't aware that His Highness was such a thoughtless person. So when he's preoccupied with his own business, other people's needs simply fly out of his head?"

Furrowing his brow, Lord Simeon fell silent. His courtesy as a subject, and as a close friend who knew His Highness very well, clearly did not allow him to agree with my statement.

Besides, there was, almost certainly, another reason he wanted me to refuse the invitation. And I had a rough sense of what it might be.

If Lutin was the only problem, then it would actually be worse, in a sense, for Lord Simeon to leave me alone in the city. Lutin had many accomplices to his vile schemes, so it was not certain that I'd be safe merely because the man himself wasn't there. Lord Simeon also wouldn't be the only escort on His Highness's trip to this holiday home, so even if he did have to prioritize that role above all else, he should still have been able to keep a watchful eye on Lutin's actions.

"Lord Simeon, please don't hide anything from me. Is there another potential issue that you're worried about?"

Hearing this, Lord Simeon made a face as if he'd swallowed something very

unpleasant indeed. It seemed I'd hit the mark. I made it clear with my glare that I would not let him wriggle his way out of this, so he sighed and said, "Sometimes you can be almost terrifyingly perceptive. Although you can also be entirely blockheaded about things I wish you would notice."

"What exactly would you like me to notice?"

He shook his head and gave no reply.

It bothered me a little to be described as blockheaded. *Do I really cause Lord Simeon that much trouble?*

Well, yes, I conceded to myself, *I do often cause him trouble, and a great deal of it. But blockheaded? I can't imagine what he means by that.*

"I don't have any definitive proof, but I have quite a bad feeling about the situation. Trouble is brewing in Lavia, and it's been weighing heavily on my mind."

Lord Simeon's admission of what I'd suspected snapped me back to attention. "In the Grand Duchy of Lavia? Does it look as if they mean to refuse the engagement with Princess Henriette?"

"As of now, the grand duke and prince continue to be entirely receptive to the discussions. However, many of the people surrounding them are firmly against it."

"Aha... The Easdale faction, yes?"

"Exactly. A message came from our ambassador in Lavia—the same one I asked to confirm Lutin's story. He says he doesn't have any impression that the Easdale faction is ready to back down. In fact, their opposition has only become more entrenched."

"But in that case, it's surely Princess Henriette's personal safety we should be most concerned about. I don't see how it has anything to do with me. Of course, Lady Michelle might also be—" As I spoke, I suddenly cocked my head. "Hmm." Were these matters really not related to one another? The diplomat—really a thief—who had been sent to handle Princess Henriette's engagement negotiations was staying with House Montagnier, and would probably be going with them to the holiday home. These things couldn't be deemed totally

disconnected from one another.

"Lutin...is in the Lagrange faction, isn't he?"

"We don't know his true motives," Lord Simeon replied, "but his behavior so far certainly suggests that."

"So it's not that he might do anything, but that he might be the target of someone else's actions. Is that right?"

"Well, if he alone happened to kick the bucket, I'd raise a glass and be done with it." *Wow,* I thought, *Lord Simeon REALLY hates Lutin. His words have become exquisitely violent.* "It simply wouldn't be a great surprise if something happened, and this leaves me rather worried, that's all. I don't know of any particular reason that you, personally, would be a target. And yet, I can't explain it... I feel this strange premonition that if you get mixed up in the trouble that's already brewing, you'll be in deep before the end."

"I can't explain that either," I replied, somewhat uncooperatively. *What COULD he be talking about?*

Though, in all honesty, my fangirl senses *had* begun to flare up at the scent of an intrigue. For better or worse, I had already become very eager to be there, on the scene, in person, so that I could gather reference material.

After all, it wasn't every day that one had the chance to see a real crime or conspiracy up close. I could depict such things much more realistically if I was able to write them based on real-life experience and not only my imagination. As a humble author, always striving to improve the quality of my work, I couldn't help but want to be there.

However, Lord Simeon's face was...rather intense. If I were to give him an honest account of my thoughts at that moment, I was certain he'd rebuke me quite harshly.

And in any case, this isn't like going to see a play. There's real danger, and I'm not able to protect myself. He's right that it would be a mistake to just light-heartedly poke my nose in.

It is a shame... It is really, TRULY a shame, but... Ugh, how do I shake this extreme reluctance!?

“Marielle...”

“Yes, I understand,” I said, haltingly. “I don’t want to be an extra burden when you have to protect His Highness. I understand, and...I’ll...just have to accept it.”

The words were painful, as if I was spitting blood. *That’s right, Marielle,* I told myself. *You can’t keep causing problems for Lord Simeon.*

No matter how much of a shame it was, even if it was such a shame that my spirit threatened to slip out of my body and fly right to the scene, I had to resign myself to this.

In fact, I decided, it would actually be better that way. If my spirit went on the trip, it would be much safer. No sword or arrow can injure a ghost. *I could have a front-row seat to any scene at all, without any worries about getting injured—how very appealing! I wonder if I can learn how to have an out-of-body experience? Maybe I’ll reread some of my books about spirituality.*

“You don’t *seem* especially understanding.”

“No, it’s quite possible, I’m sure! Since I’m so lacking in presence to begin with, I think I’m quite well suited to having out-of-body experiences!”

“What on earth are you talking about now!?”

Oh, did I speak my thoughts out loud again?

“Please stop this. If supernatural phenomena start to occur on top of everything else, I’m not confident I’ll be able to keep up.”

“I’m the one who will have to keep up. It sounds like a long journey even for a spirit...”

“No, that’s not what I... Please, just give me a moment’s peace from this.” Lord Simeon huffed as if he was truly at his wits’ end. “Please, promise me you won’t put yourself in danger. If a carrot is dangled in front of your nose, you tend to charge forward like a raging bull, and it makes me worry about you. If you don’t want me to die an early death, please be good and listen to what I say.”

He spoke in a deeply serious manner. I wanted to jestingly point out that it’s horses you dangle carrots in front of, not bulls...but given the mood, I hesitated

to do so.

I also swallowed my other objection—that this was an inappropriate metaphor to use regarding a young lady—and nodded.

After all, if I did manage to achieve an out-of-body experience, I was sure my spirit wouldn't be visible to other people's eyes, so it would be fine. *He'll never catch me! Never!*

"When will you be leaving for Lerne?"

Now that I'd agreed to stay home, relief finally washed over Lord Simeon's face. "The journey is planned for three days from now. This goes without saying, but while I'm gone, please be careful. Don't go wandering around all over town."

"Yes, all right." But instead of just giving an obedient reply, I thought I'd try asking him for one favor. "When you get back, can you tell me about everything that happened there? This includes His Highness and Lady Michelle's relationship, of course, but...if anything more serious does happen, I want to know every detail! In fact, that's *more* important!"

He paused before replying. "If anything does happen, I promise to tell you, but only within the frame of things I am able to talk about."

"That is not an especially generous promise."

"Can you please grant me a little sympathy? This is a conflict that crosses international borders."

Lord Simeon stood up as he spoke. Realizing that he was about to go, I grew quite flustered. "You're leaving already?"

"I slipped out while I was working. I must get back before His Highness notices."

We'd only just met again after so many days, and he had barely sat down long enough to warm the chair. Now I wouldn't see him for some time because he had to escort His Highness on this trip. I couldn't help but feel bitter, and it showed on my face as I looked up at him.

He looked away. "Once everything is dealt with, shall we meet to spend some

more relaxed time together?”

“Will you be able to take time off work?”

“Oh... If it’s for one day, I think I could manage it.”

“One day? That’s all?”

“After our wedding I’m planning to take a more substantial amount of time off, so please, just hold on for now.”

I suppose I have no choice. If he says he’ll take time off after our wedding, then he must be talking about a honeymoon. We’ll be able to relax and enjoy it properly...so I’ll just look forward to that and be patient for now. I’ll think of this as the preparation phase!

A smile appeared on my face. I nodded. Lord Simeon gently cleared his throat, then embraced me.

I reached out my hands and removed Lord Simeon’s glasses, then I gazed, spellbound, at the beauty of his face without them. He took off my glasses as well. I closed my eyes in anticipation of the warmth of his lips as they drew closer, one sweet moment of anticipation—but then a frantic knock at the door interrupted us.

How frustrating! We were just getting to the good part!

Lord Simeon fumbled to put his glasses back on. “What is it?” he asked, irritated.

Natalie leapt into the room. “My lady,” she stammered, “you have another visitor.”

“Who could possibly justify such a commotion? The only person who could be arriving so suddenly with no notice is Julianne, surely?”

“No, it’s not Lady Julianne, my lady. It’s, well, you know...*a certain other person!* ”

“What other person?”

Just as I was about to press for more information, footsteps approached from behind her. “Terribly sorry, Miss Marielle. I have a favor to ask of you, so I

thought I'd stop by. I left in a hurry, so I hope you'll forgive the lack of notice this time as well, but—Simeon? What are you doing here?"

A commanding presence appeared to accompany the forceful voice. He froze at the sight of the two of us together. "Did you come here to tell her in my stead? There is such a thing as being *too* helpful, Simeon. This is a personal request from me, so it's only natural for me to come and ask her myself."

Lord Simeon and I slowly exchanged glances. The prince was, after all, a proper gentleman. He was not the type to dismissively fire off his orders via a letter or messenger.

Now, not only was I visibly not laid up in bed, but he had caught me at a moment when I was feeling very full of life.

Lord Simeon appeared to be at his wits' end once again.

Chapter Six

Lerne's picturesque scenery made it especially popular in the summer months, but the winter landscape had a charm of its own.

For us city-dwellers, a vista that let us gaze out over the distant mountains was a refreshing change. The sharp, chill air also had a different feeling from that of the city. Buildings were only sparsely dotted about here and there, and a walk past the vineyards and orchards led to a small river. Cross a low, narrow bridge with no guardrails, and at the very end of the river was a pond.

Each and every one of these sights was covered in heaps of pure white snow.

It was indescribably peaceful—the sort of place where you could seclude yourself away in deep solitude. *This ambiance would make a great setting for a story. Since I'm here after all, I hope I can etch all kinds of different scenes into my memory.*

I walked up to the edge of the pond. The surface was frozen solid, with not a water bird in sight. I tried putting the tip of a toe onto the surface to test it, and it gave no sign of cracking. *Perhaps we would be able to skate here.*

As I peered down, a voice behind me said, "That's dangerous."

A hand pulled me back, putting me off balance. My foot slipped on the ice and I was on the verge of falling, but his strong arms held on tightly and kept me upright.

"Didn't I tell you not to wander off on your own?" complained Lord Simeon with a displeased expression. I took the hand he offered and stepped back onto solid ground.

"I was just trying to be tactful. I had no intention of separating myself from the group any more than this."

I looked a little way into the distance, where Prince Severin and Lady Michelle walked ahead of us. The two were completely silent as they strolled along the snowy path.

We'd arrived at Lerne at quite an early hour, and the weather was good, so it

had been decided that we'd go for a walk in the surrounding countryside. Lady Michelle's expression had become far softer compared to the day of the tea party, and even though she was still quite reticent, she did have some conversations with His Highness, as one would hope. All of this was enough to convince me that she had indeed let her guard down somewhat. His Highness, too, seemed to be glad to have come to such a quiet and unpopulated place. It was clear from looking at him that he preferred this calm sort of setting to larger and more frenetic gatherings.

That's why I had thought it might be best to give them some space to be alone with one another. Admittedly, the knights guarding them could not leave too great a distance, so it wouldn't have been possible for them to be *completely* alone...but it was a question of them *feeling* alone.

"His Highness looks happy, doesn't he?" I said to Lord Simeon, as we began to walk some way behind them.

"He does."

"I wonder how Lady Michelle is feeling. What's your impression, Lord Simeon?"

"She appears calmer than she was earlier, definitely. And there's no sense that she was pressured into coming here."

He had replied without hesitation, and indeed, my impression from looking at her was just the same. Lord Simeon and I had been with them for a while, as it wasn't possible to leave them alone right from the start of our walk. During that time, Lady Michelle had not appeared to be overly guarded. On the surface, it appeared that things were going well. And yet...

He continued, "Do you still have your doubts? The wish to come here, to the holiday home, was Miss Michelle's in the first place. It's not an idea that came from His Highness."

"Or perhaps the marquess made the decision and presented it as Lady Michelle's wish."

Lord Simeon shook his head. "Even if that were the case, if Miss Michelle did not object, there's surely no problem."

“Yes, as long as she truly isn’t bothered by it.”

“Are you still expecting their engagement to be canceled? You seem to be continually hoping for there to be something untoward going on beneath the surface.”

“I’m not *hoping* for that, I can assure you.”

Even I was hoping above all else for His Highness to be happy. Only, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn’t get Lady Michelle’s demeanor at the tea party out of my mind. After seeing that pale face, grim with resolve, I couldn’t help feeling uneasy no matter how well things *appeared* to be going right now. On that day, she had hardly been able to even look at His Highness. When she had been on the verge of fainting before, wasn’t it a little odd for her to have made such a dramatic turn?

They had apparently met several times since the tea party, and she had gradually let her guard down more and more. Perhaps I was only holding on to my misgivings because I hadn’t seen those steps in between. But even with that in mind, I was not entirely convinced.

“Dear me. Is having so much concern for other people’s emotions an affliction associated with being a romance novel author? And if so, could you not also foresee a plot where they overcome their obstacles and end up together after all?”

“A development like that would still require them to have been attracted to one another in the first place.”

“But aren’t there stories where one partner doesn’t like the other at first, but they’re ultimately moved by the other’s passionate courtship?”

“Lord Simeon, you are becoming rather knowledgeable about these things!”

“I’m going to great lengths to understand my fiancée better, that’s all.”

I giggled and nestled up to Lord Simeon’s arm. It tickled me to picture this definite man’s man reading romance novels aimed at women. The image was adorable, and a little amusing. *I wonder what face he makes when he reads them?*

“Although,” he continued, “I do wish you’d pay even half as much attention to my feelings.”

“That goes without saying. I would never forget about you, Lord Simeon.”

“I do wonder occasionally. It’s ‘fangirling’ that reigns supreme in your mind, is it not?”

“Yes, but fangirling over *you* . You’re still the one who has pride of place.”

In response to this assertion, Lord Simeon looked down at me with a complicated expression. “But in the end, you’ve merrily joined us on this trip. Could you not have paid my feelings a bit more mind?”

“I see what you mean, but it was His Highness’s personal request, so...”

Admittedly, this was—at least halfway—a mere excuse. But it was still true that I had been in no position to deny the request.

When His Highness came to my house, Lord Simeon had raised his concerns directly and frankly to him, asking him not to bring me on the trip. His Highness considered this request, but the argument was not especially persuasive.

“It sounds as if your concern is not based on any concrete information,” His Highness said, “but on your own personal worries. The ambassador told you about the Easdale faction’s response to recent events, but he wasn’t aware of any specific plans.”

“I acknowledge that,” Lord Simeon replied, “but there are always incidents occurring in Lavia due to the inter-faction conflict. It’s not completely out of the question that such an incident could happen on this trip.”

“Perhaps not, but the most likely target seems to be Earl Cialdini. I could see how I might become mixed up in this, for example...but it’s hard to conceive of how Miss Marielle could be dragged into it. To the Lavians, she’s an unrelated bystander at best. They don’t even know her name. They don’t have time to be wasting on anyone like that, I’m sure.”

“Even if she’s not *dragged* into it, Marielle is quite capable of plunging herself into it.”

They both turned to look at me at once. His Highness took on a solemn tone

and said, “Miss Marielle, you’re not a child, so with the situation in mind, you can promise not to artificially put yourself in danger, can you not?”

“With my physical body,” I replied at last.

“What other kind of body do you have!? I haven’t the foggiest idea what you’re talking about, but your role is simply to make friends with Miss Michelle. She was apparently rather frail as a child, and she’s always lived in the countryside. She doesn’t have any acquaintances amongst the nobility, and when she is put into polite company, she draws in on herself, too timid to know how to act. I’m sure you’d make an excellent source of companionship and advice for her. I know you prefer to be such a wallflower that no one even notices you’re there, but I’m sure if she spoke to you, she’d quickly find herself able to relax and open up. You are, after all, a rather colorful character...though you have many characteristics that I find impossible to make sense of. In that regard, I think it might be mutually beneficial for you both. Can I please ask this of you?”

My role had changed a great deal, it seemed. Rather than helping bring the two of them closer together, I was to become a friend and ally to Lady Michelle. I found that to be quite a noble sentiment, and I wanted to help if I could. I looked at Lord Simeon.

His Highness, too, turned back to Lord Simeon and implored him once more. “I understand that you’re concerned for your fiancée’s safety, but don’t you think you’re being a little overprotective? There’s not necessarily any danger at all, and you’ll hardly be the only knight on duty. It is a concern, perhaps, that Earl Cialdini...that Lutin will be present, but given the current circumstances, he surely won’t do anything too objectionable. The consequences could be far more dire than last time. Anything he does could lead to an international incident, including any attempts at getting close to Miss Marielle. I, too, promise to pay as much heed as I can. So will you *please* allow her to come?”

If His Highness asked with such determination, even Lord Simeon could not oppose him. He agreed, however reluctantly, and my attendance was confirmed.

On a personal level I was very excited to be there, that much was true, but it’s

not as if I had started running wild.

"It's quite peaceful here," I told Lord Simeon as we walked. "Nothing's happened, so is there really a need for you to be so apprehensive? You can worry later, if problems do start to develop. For the time being, we're free to enjoy ourselves. Could we go skating on the pond we just passed, for example? I think it would be an excellent way for His Highness and Lady Michelle to deepen their bond with one another."

Even if he lacked a knight's training, His Highness was still quite athletic. I was sure that if he showed off to Lady Michelle by catching her when she fell, she'd be suitably impressed. She would no doubt feel quite a thrill in her heart.

"Would it not be more accurate to say it's what *you* would like to do? You said so yourself a while ago, I recall."

"It's one of the great joys of winter. Do you dislike skating, Lord Simeon?"

"I enjoyed it well enough when I was a boy, but it has been more than ten years now."

Interesting. Still, I had the feeling that even after all this time, Lord Simeon would still be able to skate very well. *And if not, I'll gladly enjoy watching him slip and fall!*

It was too cold to stay outside for long, so it was not long before we returned to the holiday home as a group. We rested in a warm room while a maid brought in hot tea and light refreshments. While partaking in the delicious food, I tried suggesting the idea to Lady Michelle.

"Skating?" she replied.

"Well, why not? We walked by a pond that seemed perfectly suited to it. I'm sure we can prepare skates quickly enough, so why don't we all go together tomorrow? It would be ever so much fun."

I took a glance at His Highness as well. *Prince Charming can't possibly be about to say that he can't skate, can he?*

"Why in blazes are you looking at me like that? Even I've gone skating before, I'll have you know. Sounds like jolly good fun. Why don't we try it, Miss

Michelle?”

Lady Michelle returned a bewildered expression, as if this wasn’t a proposition that particularly tempted her. “Oh, but I’ve heard that pond is actually quite deep. It’s too dangerous, I’m sure. Apparently the ice can be very thin in places. I don’t believe we can skate on it.”

My shoulders sagged. “Oh, really? It looked so promising. What a shame.”

She smiled kindly. “You’re far more animated than you appear, aren’t you, Lady Marielle?”



“Perhaps I am. In my mind I’m always such a meek and quiet person, but in your company, Lady Michelle, I feel so wild and uninhibited by comparison.”

“That is a new low of self-deception,” cut in a male voice.

I pretended not to hear His Highness’s jibe. I continued, “When I look at you, I see a model of how a young lady from a good family should behave. Modest and somehow fragile. Even though I’m not a man, I find myself instinctively wishing to protect you.”

“But, I...”

Her face was thoroughly adorable even when her smile looked somewhat troubled. *Yes,* I thought to myself, *I know exactly what His Highness sees in you.* Ostentatious beauties are enjoyable enough to look at, but they tend to be strong-willed enough that they can survive in high society quite comfortably even on their own. Sometimes a man is merely an addition to their existing life. In Highness’s case, it was unlikely that he would find himself socially outranked by anyone...but I nonetheless suspected that for men, the ideal species of flower was one they could actively shelter from the wind and the rain, in order to help it blossom and thrive.

“Lady Marielle, you always seem so perfectly ladylike. At the tea party the other day, you never lost your nerve, even when meeting the princesses. I was so impressed by your confidence.”

“But to begin with, I was actually quite nervous! Only, when I started talking to them, I found they were easygoing people, so I felt reassured. If you spend more time in the company of people like that, who are so free of pretension, you’ll gradually become more used to society in general. Although, in practice, I suspect meeting princesses will always have some nerves associated with it!”

We shared a bittersweet laugh. No matter how casually they’re willing to converse, if a princess or two stands before you, there’s no way to let go of all formality.

“But apparently nerves aren’t required when talking to me,” muttered His Highness.

“This is a conversation between two women. Don’t stick your nose in. Oh,

that's right!" I clapped my hands. An excellent idea had occurred to me. "Lady Michelle, if you don't mind, I would love to introduce you to my friend at some point."

His Highness sat sullenly at the edge of my vision. Lord Simeon turned to him and shook his head in sympathy. *He's the one who said he wanted me to make friends with Lady Michelle. What reason could he possibly have to feel dissatisfied?*

"Your friend?" asked Lady Michelle.

"Yes! She's someone with whom you don't need to stand on ceremony in the slightest. She's a distant relative of mine, and we happen to be the same age, so we've been close since we were young girls. She has a mellow character, and there isn't a mean bone in her body. She's kind and rather mischievous, with a sunny disposition. She's also the daughter of a baron, so her rank is rather lower than yours, but...you might actually find it more comfortable to talk to people like that. I'm sure Julianne would be thrilled to be your friend as well."

"Her name is Lady Julianne? If she's your friend, then I'm sure she must be great fun, just like you." Lady Michelle's eyes narrowed, almost as if it was too bright for her in the room. I saw both yearning and resignation in that expression.

If she'd lived her life thus far without any friends, I could understand that making them might feel like a distant ambition, but that was surely no reason to give up on the prospect altogether. *There's still plenty of time for her to make friends. Maybe she's convinced herself that it's impossible because she's so shy?*

Even though she conversed with a smile, it felt as if Lady Michelle had a wall around her. It was thin and transparent—you could see through it—but there was no way to breach it, and that was quite vexing.

Perhaps it's the type of wall that breaks down if you get to know her better? But I had the impression that it had been standing her entire life, which left me somewhat uneasy.

That night, we were joined by the marquess, the marchioness, their son, and —for better or worse—Lutin as well. We all gathered together around the dinner table, and there I asked again if we really couldn't go skating.

The answer came from the butler who stood in waiting behind the marquess. “Out of the question. The water is frozen in a thick layer at the edges of the pond, but the closer one gets to the center, the thinner the ice is. It’s extremely dangerous, and there have been numerous accidents there in the past. Not only is it frightfully deep, but it’s connected to the river, so the water beneath has a strong current. Given the time of year, if anyone fell in, they would be beyond rescue. Please be very careful. You mustn’t set foot on the pond at all.”

I suppose it really is impossible. It was a shame, but there was nothing to be done about it. It’s not as if I had a single-minded obsession with going skating, to be clear. I just thought that Lady Michelle might enjoy being freed from the pressure of stiff formal conversation for a while. I was sure that if she could play and frolic in a manner that let her avoid thinking so much, she would be able to relax. *So don’t look at me like that, Your Highness and Lord Simeon! Don’t look at me as if I’m a naughty child who didn’t get my way!*

If we can’t go skating, I thought, *perhaps I’ll suggest we go sledding. Or maybe we could have a snowball fight.*

While I mused over the possibilities, the marquess’s wife, Marchioness Bernadette, lectured in a harsh tone, “How could you even think of suggesting such a dangerous activity? What would you do if, heaven help us, anything happened to His Highness or Lord Simeon? How impulsive and thoughtless. Put all such thoughts firmly out of your head.”

But the one Marchioness Bernadette scowled at was not me, but Lady Michelle. Fearing that there had been a terrible misunderstanding, I hurried to say, “Oh no, this wasn’t Lady Michelle’s suggestion, but mine. I apologize, I thought the pond here was much the same as the one in Brunet Park. It was indeed quite thoughtless of me.”

She briefly turned her glare on me, then vigorously turned back with a haughty snort. Her gaze toward Lady Michelle remained just as harsh as before, as if she did not believe me at all. “But I’ve no doubt you tempted her into this notion with your own idle blathering.”

“Will you stop that?” interrupted the marquess.

Chided by her husband, the marchioness held her tongue at last. She turned

away with a standoffish huff, and an uncomfortable air fell over the dinner table.

Lady Michelle did not respond to her mother's comments. She merely shrank into herself and went silent.

She'd been blamed for a crime she did not commit, and it was my fault. I couldn't bear to leave things as they were.

However, I was a little dubious as to what I could do in this situation. The marquess and marchioness had welcomed me as something resembling a guest because, after all, I was Lord Simeon's fiancée and was there accompanying His Highness. However, their rank was so much higher than mine that they wouldn't normally have invited me into their home. If I offered my opinion, I couldn't expect them to give it much weight. More likely, it would only sour the mood further.

With Lady Michelle's reputation at stake, I looked at His Highness, hoping he would put in a good word for her.

However, a lifeboat arrived from a different direction.

"How annoying that we can't go skating," said Lutin in such a bright and carefree manner that he could be accused of being completely oblivious to the mood. "In all honesty, I also became rather excited when I saw the pond in question. It would be so much fun to throw all our cares away and romp on the ice, just like we were children again—don't you agree? We came all the way here, so we should enjoy all the fun and games we can. Even if skating is off the table, I'd love to go sledding, or have a snowball fight."

He looked me straight in the eye and gave a knowing wink. I did not know how to respond to this. I was grateful to be offered such support—it was very helpful indeed to have someone else at dinner who shared my opinion. However, I was not sure how comfortable I felt finding a kindred spirit in Lutin of all people.

So I stayed silent...but after a pause, His Highness expressed his agreement in my place. "I quite agree. It sounds as if we have no choice but to abandon all hope of skating, but playing in the snow in some other way would be capital."

Lord Simeon added, “Indeed, an escapade in the snow would be pleasant. It would be enjoyable indeed to forget it all and give in to our childlike instincts.”

By which he no doubt means he’d like to bury Lutin in the snow. At least, that’s what his eyes said as his handsome face stared daggers at Lutin. *Oh, how perfect! There’s that dark side I adore!*

Lutin returned an incendiary gaze. Invisible fireworks crackled between them.

This scene was interrupted by a voice so apathetic, it was as if “enthusiasm” was a concept entirely foreign to him. “A snowball fight just sounds cold, if you ask me. I have absolutely no interest.”

Here to pour cold water on the conversation now that it had finally recovered was the son of the family, Lord Camille. At sixteen years old, he was the youngest of all present. He hadn’t joined us for the daytime walk, and his eyes had not shown even a glimmer of enthusiasm as we’d begun to plan all this merriment.

He continued, “Why did we even come to this bleak wasteland? In the city we’d at least be able to go to the theater, or to gentlemen’s clubs. What a bother...and all for Michelle’s sake.”

“Hold your tongue, Camille,” said Marquess Montagnier. “That’s no way to behave in front of His Highness.”

That telling-off had the limited effect of prompting Lord Camille to turn his sullen face away. It seemed the marquess’s son was not fond of outdoor exercise.

“Do allow me to apologize,” said the marquess. “He’s been spoiled by his mother. All his grand words are merely a futile attempt at presenting himself as a grown up.”

The marchioness added, “The boy is rather frail, so he finds himself confined to bed at least once every winter. The truth is that he admires and idolizes men like His Highness, but he can’t say so directly, so he resorts to that kind of gauche prattle. You must accept our apologies.”

After the efforts of both parents to smooth things over, His Highness elegantly sipped from his wine glass and smiled. “I can’t say it bothers me. The

lad is at that age, after all. They all become self-important little rascals. I have an embarrassing memory or two myself. Camille, I hereby give you permission to cease your worrying. I have no intention of inviting you to join us. It's far better for you to spend all your time sitting in a warm room doing nothing."

His light mockery left the boy's pale cheeks flushed. But, while the only impact on him was some slight embarrassment, his parents saw a greater danger. Hearing the crown prince say that he did not want to spend time with their son made them very flustered indeed, as much as they tried to hide it. Though the impending marriage of Lady Michelle looked certain to return their house to its former influence, if the future king turned his back on their son and heir, it would all be for naught.

They changed the subject and made efforts to curry the prince's favor. His Highness, no doubt used to such responses, remained placid and played along with their conversation well enough. Lord Simeon behaved in the same manner, and we finished dinner with a purely surface level of harmony amongst the assembled party.

While the men remained seated in the dining room, Marchioness Bernadette stood and began to walk out, with Lady Michelle and I following soon after. I assumed this was to allow the after-dinner conversation to be conducted amongst two separate groups, with the ladies moving to the drawing room and remaining there until the gentlemen were finished chatting. However, the marchioness walked straight on without looking back at us for a moment. She simply walked away and left us there alone.

No servant directed us to any particular room either. Lady Michelle and I were simply left standing in the corridor.

I was, frankly, a little stunned. *What brazenly discourteous behavior!* It was an unimaginable breach of the etiquette required of a hostess. If she really loathed a guest and did not want to spend time in their company, she should have at least concocted some sort of excuse about not feeling well. Even that would not be the most admirable behavior, but leaving a guest to flounder alone simply was not done. This was essentially a silent declaration that she did not think of me as a guest at all; in her mind, it was acceptable to turn her back on me without even a single word.

When I thought of what I had seen and heard of Marchioness Bernadette's character so far, it was not such a surprise. When I first introduced myself to her, she had barely acknowledged me. Even with Lord Simeon, there was a sense that she looked down on him for his low rank, being from a mere earldom rather than a marquessate. *I suppose the family probably has some antagonism toward House Flaubert in general, so that must be part of it as well. From her point of view, my addition to all this must be akin to coming across a weed growing by the roadside.*

But upon reflection, I decided this could actually be to my benefit. Honestly, it was difficult to imagine having any kind of worthwhile conversation with her to begin with. For her to simply shun me was actually the more comfortable alternative.

I silently watched the marchioness disappear into the distance and offered an apology to Lady Michelle. "I'm so sorry for what happened earlier. You must feel wretched, and it's all my fault."

"Oh no, not at all," said Lady Michelle, smiling and shaking her head. "There's no need for you to be concerned about me, Lady Marielle. It was nothing out of the ordinary."

Her tone did not suggest that she was especially upset at being treated so coldly by her mother. In fact, she seemed almost comfortable with the situation. I wondered why that might be. Did she secretly have a defiant side hidden beneath her shy and delicate persona? Or had she never enjoyed a typical mother-daughter relationship at all?

Perhaps, I mused, this was typical of relationships in high-ranking houses. And yet, the marchioness had looked at Lord Camille with the eyes you'd expect of a mother. Certainly, it was possible that a son and daughter might be treated differently. My own mother did tend to meddle in my brother's affairs like a mother hen sometimes, while I was the one she could more often enjoy a friendly chat with. The same dynamic existed in Julianne's family as well.

Still, that didn't seem like enough to explain such a vast discrepancy. I had not seen anything to suggest Marchioness Bernadette had any motherly feelings toward Lady Michelle whatsoever. The opposite, in fact—I had the sense that

she might even hate her daughter.

Which lends some credence to the rumor I heard before...

"It's me who should be apologizing," said Lady Michelle. "It's extremely ill-mannered to simply leave a guest unattended like that."

I replied, "You've no need to be worried about me either. It's much like I said at the tea party. My low status means that I wouldn't normally be able to set foot in a place such as this. It's only natural that Marchioness Bernadette would not wish to spend every moment entertaining me."

"But Lady Marielle, you're the daughter of a fully-fledged noble house. You're deserving of respect."

I had tried to pass this off as a trifling matter, so I was somewhat taken aback at her unexpectedly firm tone. My surprise must have been evident, as Lady Michelle became quite flustered and hurried to add, "My apologies, I meant to say simply that it's not your fault that my mother is behaving in this manner, but mine."

"Yours, Lady Michelle?"

"You did not do anything wrong," she insisted with a hint of a bitter smile.

We decided to move out of the doorway so that we wouldn't bother the servants as they came and went. We walked up to the second floor, where one end of the corridor opened up into a wider space with chairs to sit on. The perfect place for a relaxed conversation.

Next to us was a large bay window. I suspected that in the warmer months, it would be very cozy to linger here. On this piercingly cold winter night, however, it did not seem as if we would be able to stay for long—a pity though that was.

Servants passed occasionally in the corridor before us, but none of them turned to look at us. They didn't try to beckon us to the drawing room, which had been prepared for guests with light and a warm fire, nor did they bring us any tea. I don't believe they intended to ignore us and leave us to suffer in the cold. Rather, I had the feeling they were avoiding us because they did not wish to involve themselves.

Lady Michelle's face, lit only by the dim light that spilled in from further along the corridor, seemed calm but lonely. The crown prince had fallen in love with her, and a path was laid out before her that led to her becoming queen one day. Her expression, though, held none of the radiance one might expect in that situation. Far from it - anyone could have seen right away that she was not happy amongst her family. But if so, couldn't her upcoming marriage to His Highness be seen as her way to escape from her current situation?

I desperately wished to know what Lady Michelle was thinking. It had been on my mind all along, and now that I was finally alone with her, it felt like a golden opportunity. I decided to be daring and ask her.

"You must have been awfully busy since the garden party. Things seem to have progressed very quickly indeed. I imagine there must be many aspects of the situation that have left you feeling quite lost at sea."

"Yes..." A brief answer accompanied by a smile. If she was happy about the events surrounding her, I'd have expected that being busy with all this might have left her feeling not just exhausted, but also exhilarated to some degree. Her expression gave no hint of that whatsoever.

I continued, "I understand that the royal family was quite anxious for His Highness to choose a princess. It must be a source of great joy for them that this is finally resolved. And, judging by what the princesses said the other day, it seems the palace as a whole is giving you a very warm reception."

Though she continued to smile, her hand clutched the top of her skirt. "Indeed. I'm very grateful."

"It is quite a fortunate situation. It's clear from looking at His Highness that he's enamored with you, and those around him have also welcomed you, so there's no doubt that you'll face no obstacles in marrying into the royal family. At least, it would be nice if life were that simple. I have to say, I'm concerned about how you might be feeling, Lady Michelle. Is there anything that's causing you anxiety? You don't look especially cheerful, so I am a little worried."

I had phrased this rather directly, and Lady Michelle stared at me in some amazement. Then she quickly put on a smile again and asked, "Oh, is that how I look?"

“To a certain extent. I haven’t spent much time in your company, so I don’t want to make assumptions where they’re not warranted, but I feel as if it’s not only that you’re a shy and modest person. If you have anything in particular on your mind, you’re very welcome to tell me about it if you like. If it’s something too delicate to tell His Highness directly, for example, I might be able to enlist Lord Simeon’s help, or suggest another way to handle the situation.”

Lady Michelle silently looked away. I could tell she was unsure of whether to say anything or not. But her pleasant smile soon returned, and she shook her head. “I’m grateful for your concern, but there’s nothing wrong. Nothing that’s worth you worrying about. This has all happened so unexpectedly, and that has indeed given me some measure of confusion and anxiety, but His Highness is treating me so well. Everything’s all right, I assure you.”

So she won’t confide in me that easily after all. To Lady Michelle, I was still little more than a stranger. She did not yet know if she could trust me or not. It was reasonable for her to be cautious for now and avoid saying anything imprudent.

I thought better of pushing her any further. There would be other chances to get close to her during my stay. There was no need to panic and start rushing things. “Oh, I see,” I replied. “I’m glad to hear you say so. I apologize if I caused any offense by saying something so forward.”

“Oh no, not at all. I appreciate your concern. Truly I do.”

“Well, His Highness did ask me to join for this trip to ensure that you had a friend you could rely on. I’d be so happy if you felt able to trust me, Lady Michelle, and I would dearly love to be your friend. If you’d like that, of course.”

Her hands, placed firmly in her lap, began to grip her skirt even more tightly. I pretended not to see this. Her face was hiding more than just a feeling of discomfort—of that I was sure. No, it masked something else entirely. *Just what is it you’re thinking? What can’t you say even though you dearly want to?*

All she replied with was, “Thank you very much for your kindness. I don’t deserve such words...”

“If you’d like to thank anyone, I’d suggest thanking His Highness. I’m just glad for the opportunity to make a new friend. I do hope you’ll let me introduce you

to Julianne. I know a number of other wonderful people as well. I'm not sure if it would be acceptable to introduce the crown princess to them, but...they are all people that His Highness knows, so maybe it wouldn't be a problem after all. I'd love for you to meet them all one day."

"You have a lot of friends, don't you, Lady Marielle?"

Her smile was awash with yearning and resignation once again. She appeared so forlorn that even I, in looking at her, began to feel my heart ache. *Perhaps it is her family's cold treatment that has left her this way.*

We continued chatting for a while after that, but no matter what I said, I could not spark her interest. All she did was express her thanks and give some vague impressions, carefully avoiding any clear agreement. *Maybe she just doesn't want to be friends with me after all?* I didn't have any sense that I was bothering her, but the results were quite dispiriting nevertheless.

After parting from Lady Michelle, I flagged down a servant and asked them to inform Lord Simeon and the others that I would be retiring early, then returned to my allocated guest bedroom.

But I had no intention of sleeping just yet.

It was too early to go to bed, so I hurriedly opened up my suitcase.

I took off my dress and changed into a simpler black one that I'd once again borrowed from Natalie. I replaced my footwear, too, exchanging my low-cut shoes adorned with ribbons for lace-up boots that were far more practical to move around in. I pulled my hair back into a bun and covered it with a white scarf. Finally, as the *pièce de résistance* , I put on an apron. Now the plain young noblewoman had disappeared, and in her place was a picture-perfect serving girl.

No matter how many times I see myself dressed like this, I'm still so impressed. The person staring back at me from the mirror was a commonplace servant of the sort you'd see in any noble household. Not a single detail stood out as even the slightest bit unnatural. *Perhaps I was born into the wrong class,* I mused.

With a glance around to make sure no one was watching, I slipped out of the guest room. Then, with a nonchalant expression, I began my investigation of the

manor.

Though I hadn't been able to get any information out of Lady Michelle herself, I was by no means ready to admit defeat. I had to find out more about her, if only to meet His Highness's expectations. If one thing was clear, it was that she was not living a carefree life—but while I still knew nothing about the problems she faced and the worries she was holding on to, it was hard to devise any sort of plan for dealing with them.

This was the perfect occasion to activate my exceptional ability to blend perfectly into the background. Of all the skills I possess, my true specialty is ensuring that no one notices my presence, so that I can hide in plain sight, overhearing useful gossip.

Here I go! Off to gather information!

The best place to overhear chatter of any sort would be wherever people gathered in the largest numbers, so I decided to start by sneaking into the kitchen, where the servants were still busy clearing up after dinner. Even if House Montagnier was on the decline, it was still a prestigious marquessate, so the number of servants milling about was fairly large. With all the commotion, it wasn't too difficult to casually blend in with them.

I listened in on the servants' conversations while helping to wash the dishes. Sadly, however, this did not yield any useful information at all. The female servants' attentions were entirely devoted to His Highness and how attractive he was. This was not entirely surprising, as both His Highness and Lord Simeon are handsome to a degree that one does not see every day. *And Lutin is reasonably good looking as well,* I admitted to myself. For House Montagnier's staff, who had rarely thrown anything remotely resembling a proper banquet in recent years, it seemed it was quite exciting to be entertaining guests of that caliber.

I had hoped that the more gossipy servants would make some comments about the rocky relationship between Lady Michelle and Marchioness Bernadette, but it seemed increasingly unlikely that this topic would come up at all. I didn't have time to waste, so I found a suitable moment to slip out and head somewhere else. But where to go? Above all else I wished I could spy on

the marchioness, but that seemed like it would be both impractical and unwise.

I was walking the corridors with a bearing that suggested I was in the middle of some task or another when an elderly female servant approached me. She hadn't seen through my disguise—rather, she asserted that if my hands were empty, I should go and retrieve some coal. *She didn't notice a thing, even in a one-on-one situation. Is she simply not paying much attention, or have I really become that convincing in the role? At this rate, maybe I could sneak into the marchioness's room after all...*

The marchioness had never looked at my face properly, so I was fairly certain she wouldn't realize it was me. But even so, a lowly servant of the sort that does kitchen work would never personally attend to the needs of the mistress of the house, so the only viable excuse to enter her chambers would be to clean when she wasn't there. That would not be especially worthwhile for me, and I couldn't do it at that moment regardless.

Besides, for now I'd been given a job to do. I went out the back of the manor in a hunt for coal.

It had been chilly enough just exploring the corridors, but it was freezing cold outside at this time of night. *The servants' clothes aren't very warm, are they? If I'd known I'd be doing this, I'd have worn some additional undergarments.* I wondered how the real servants staved off the cold, and whether the ones in my own household felt bitter about it in winter months. If so, I decided I would have to ask Mother to order warmer clothes for them.

What seemed certain was that if I didn't complete my task quickly and go back inside, I was at risk of dying from exposure. But alas, in the darkness, it was proving quite a struggle to figure out where the coal was stored on my own. I fumbled around, shivering, until I heard faint voices in the distance. *Someone's there!* Relieved, I walked toward them.

Please, I'm looking for the coal. Do you know where the coal is?

My feet raced forward as I yearned to get the answer and run back inside—but then I suddenly stopped in a panic. I had a sense that I recognized at least one of the voices.

I proceeded, but with soft footsteps, then hid behind a nearby storage shed

and watched. A man and woman stood talking amongst the shadows of plants and trees, the moonlight glimmering on the snow around them.

The woman wore a large shawl on her head that made it impossible to get any kind of look at her face. Nonetheless, I was sure it was Lady Michelle. Her dress was the same one she'd been wearing earlier. *When we parted, she had implied she would be returning to her room. What could she be doing here?*

The man facing her was tall and well built. His clothes suggested he was one of the servants.

They conversed in hushed voices, so I couldn't make out any details of what they were discussing. Nor could I realistically move any closer. Their body language suggested that they were speaking of a weighty matter indeed, and it was clear they had chosen this place to meet in order to avoid any prying eyes, so I had to stay hidden in the shadows and concentrate on listening. *Ugh, now would be the perfect time for that out-of-body experience. Is it really so much to ask for my spirit to just glide smoothly out of the top of my head?*

"...get back first, and then..."

"...is more than enough..."

I could make out frustratingly vague snippets, but nothing more. The most I could tell was that they were trying to come to an agreement about something.

The gravity of the situation made my heart pound in my chest. Was this man Lady Michelle's secret lover? Was my theory—which Lord Simeon had so vehemently denied—right after all? If so, I was very intrigued about what they were discussing with such intensity. *It can't be... It can't, but...perhaps they really are talking about eloping?*

It was so irritating that I could make out only a bare handful of words. *If only the wind was blowing toward me. At least I'd be able to hear a tiny bit more...and the shed would shield me from the chill.* The wind blasting at me from behind left me shivering so hard I could almost hear my bones rattling. I was frozen right to my very fingertips. Though I was highly intrigued by the pair before me, my body was fast approaching its limit.

Still I did my utmost to withstand it—until suddenly, the wind behind me

vanished. At first I thought it had paused for a moment, and I could have jumped for joy. But no, the wind was still blowing. Alarmed, I thought, *Is there someone behind me?*

My instincts told me to turn around, but before I could, I found myself held firmly in place. A large hand covered my mouth, rendering me silent.

As I fought to break free of my captor, Lady Michelle and her companion noticed the sounds of my struggle and turned towards me. “Who’s there?” she said.

I stopped dead still and tried to make myself invisible. For a moment, not a sound could be heard in the pitch-dark night except for the piercing wind.

Sounding relieved, the man said, “It was just the wind, I’m sure.” Lady Michelle nodded in agreement. It seemed I’d somehow managed to remain unseen. Yet the two seemed sufficiently unnerved now that they abruptly called a halt to their conversation and went their separate ways.

“Typical,” murmured a voice right beside my ear. “I’d hoped they would stay a little longer.” Despite the circumstances, the voice was bright and cheerful, as if its owner was enjoying himself very much. “That was a close shave. Your spying skills aren’t bad, though, I must say. With a little training, you could probably be a first-rate female intelligence operative.”

Instead of replying, I beat and clawed at his hands with my own. As I did so, a vague sense of déjà vu came over me. All of a sudden, I realized I was in a very different sort of risky situation than I’d thought.

“Don’t start screaming, all right? If you’re found here, it’ll be more trouble for you than for me.”

Don’t you think I know that? I gave a firm nod and the man finally uncovered my mouth. I exhaled and then breathed in deeply, filling my lungs with as much fresh air as I could manage. As cold as the air was, it was still quite a relief.

“Excuse me,” I said, “but how long are you going to keep your arm around me? I’d say it’s long past time for you to let me go.”

But my complaint had the opposite effect. Now he put his other arm around me as well and held on tightly with both. “My word!” I exclaimed.

“You might have noticed, but the weather is extremely chilly. You look as though you’ll freeze to death if I don’t warm you up.”

“Yes, it is very cold out here, and that’s precisely why I intend to go back inside to warm myself beside a fire. So maybe you’ll see fit to let me go?”

“Perhaps I could carry you inside, my lady.”

“No thank you. I’m quite capable of walking.”

I struggled against his grasp again, ready to put up a fight, but then his arms released me much sooner than I had expected. I took a few steps away, then turned to face him. On the top of the same formalwear he’d been dressed in at dinner, Lutin now had an overcoat draped across his shoulders. His motionless form amidst the winter scene still gave off that sense of his being a mysterious thief from a story. Without meaning to praise him too strongly, I must admit that he looked quite attractive. Of course, Lord Simeon was far, *far* better looking! There was not the slightest question in my mind about that! But Lutin was awash with a specific kind of charm, easygoing yet enigmatic, that Lord Simeon lacked.

“So,” he said, “what do you intend to do about the disquieting aura surrounding the daughter of House Montagnier? I wonder whose side you’re on. Will you align with your fiancé and serve the interests of the prince, or will you betray him and save the damsel?”

I paused before replying, “What do you know?”

“Hardly a thing. I only recently met the people of this house for the first time. I don’t know any specific details.”

I glared at the thief, exasperated. It felt like the most brazen of lies. *How dare he say a thing like that directly after suggesting that being Lady Michelle’s ally would mean betraying His Highness!*

But no matter how hard I could have pushed, it was impossible to imagine this man confessing his secrets under questioning. The deathly frigid temperature was also, undeniably, a pressing concern. And so, I simply did an about-face and started back toward the manor’s rear entrance. Lutin accompanied me with no hint that he saw this as anything out of the ordinary.

As we walked, I asked, “The man Lady Michelle was with... Have you ever seen him before?”

“I’m somewhat familiar with him. From what I’ve heard, Miss Michelle has had only two people she could trust—her wet nurse and that manservant.”

“Well, it’s clear that her parents don’t fulfill that role,” I replied.

Rather than saying anything, Lutin scoffed jovially. I scowled, displeased with the feeling that he was mocking me.

“I’m surprised that you of all people don’t know,” he said. “About the background behind the unusual relationship between mother and daughter in this family. Or rather, between Miss Michelle and everyone else in House Montagnier.”

I raised my chin haughtily. “My apologies for not knowing everything straight away. Today is only the second time I’ve met Lady Michelle, and I’d never spent any time in close company with her parents before.”

Lutin simply looked at me with an amused smirk.

This is such a frustrating conversation, I thought to myself. *So many vague hints left lingering beneath the surface, despite the almost distressing degree to which we’ve guessed what each other are thinking!*

But I could hardly say that out loud. It wasn’t appropriate to start gossiping about other people’s personal lives—about His Highness’s romantic difficulties, for example—with just anyone, and least of all with a man like this.

He replied, “Prince Severin definitely fell in love with the wrong woman. You’re far more skilled and have a much more appealing personality.”

“Oh, thank you for the compliment, but I already have Lord Simeon to do me the honor of finding me appealing. It would also be quite inconvenient to end up in a tangled web of romance with His Highness, and I *especially* have no need of *you* as a suitor, thief.”

“I asked you to call me Emidio. I do wish you would.”

No matter how aloof I was toward Lutin, it made no impact at all. When I looked at his face, with its ever-present casual smile, it began to feel faintly

ridiculous that I had put myself on edge to such an extent.

At last I reached the small back door. I opened it and leapt back inside. I hadn't found the coal in the end, but I was so cold and exhausted that giving up the search felt like the only reasonable choice. *The servant who gave me the order will probably be quite annoyed. Sorry about that!*

"You're shivering," said Lutin. "Why not take a moment to warm yourself before going back to your room?"

"And where might I be able to do that?"

"Follow me." He beckoned with a knowing expression and began to walk. I hesitated, wondering if it was wise to go with him. He paused and smiled wryly. "I'm not going to do anything."

"That's precisely what you said the other day."

"Weren't you the one who started touching me first that day? Besides, I'm not so unscrupulous that I'd do anything untoward to a lady who's turned so pale that even her lips are ghostly white."

I was still of two minds, but ultimately chose to follow him. I was intrigued about his motives too, after all. I harbored no illusions that he would reveal them directly, but I wondered if there might not be a way for me to wheedle some information out of him regardless.

What ultimately swayed me, though, was the sheer intensity of the cold. When I had returned to the guest chambers to don my disguise, there had been no fire burning in my room yet. It might have been simply that the preparation of the room had been planned for later, as I wasn't expected back so soon...but, based on Marchioness Bernadette's attitude, I feared there was a chance she might have intentionally asked them to leave the fire unlit. If so, the room would still be cold, and returning to that was a frightening prospect.

Thus, I went with Lutin. *I wonder if Lord Simeon will scold me.* My fiancé's sullen face appeared in my mind. Silently apologizing to him, I followed Lutin into what appeared to be a kind of small store room. Amongst a variety of tools, all of which looked as if they were used seldom if at all, sat a lone coal stove. Nearby was an oil lamp—and both were already lit, just as one would hope. The

room was perfectly provisioned.

"You see," said Lutin, "I'm not immune to the cold either, if I go outside at night in the middle of winter. Not even the servants come here, so it's the ideal place to rest and have a conversation in peace."

"No doubt, although I didn't really come here to engage in conversation." As I spoke, I hurriedly sat down by the stove to warm myself up. My fingertips were so cold that the pain had given way to numbness.

Heat radiated from the red-hot coals and began to circulate through my body. The shivering finally subsided, and my shoulders sagged in relief. *Good heavens, fire is such a magnificent thing. But I am concerned now that only my front is warm, and my back is as cold as ever.*

The very moment I had that thought, Lutin took off his overcoat and put it around my shoulders. It was as if he had read my mind.

"Thank you," I said reluctantly.

"You're quite welcome." Then he chuckled and said, "At first glance your disguise is expertly crafted, but the noblewoman is still there after all. Your hands, especially. They're so dainty that anyone with particularly sharp eyes will see right through you."

After he pointed this out, I stared intently at my own hands. Indeed, any young lady from a noble family—even a plain one from a low-ranking house—would have no sign of the rough skin that comes from doing manual labor. The callus on my middle finger, formed from years of holding a pen, stood out by its very presence.

"Trust a master of disguise to pick up on the smallest details. Although, now that you mention it, your hands were what led Lord Simeon to identify you as a fraud. Isn't that right?"

He grimaced, as if this was a rather unpleasant memory. "Indeed, I quite underestimated him. Any young man who grew up as a commoner wouldn't have perfectly smooth hands, that much is clear. Physical work leads to corns and calluses. I wouldn't have thought the result would be so different from the hands of a knight, however. He must be a very fussy person to notice such a

slight detail. Not what I expected of a young nobleman."

What could this be called but sour grapes? I could not stop myself from bursting out laughing. At last I said, "Is Emidio your real name? Earl Cialdini from Lavia... Is that your real identity?"

"For now, yes."

"And what exactly is that supposed to mean? You're saying it's simply a lie after all?"

"No, it is not a lie in any way, shape or form. You must understand, I'm not the type of person to play my role visibly. Nor am I especially well known in Lavia. 'Earl' is a title I have, but it's essentially meaningless. I have all sorts of other titles, and I switch between them as I need to."

I paused to take this in. "I'm struggling to understand. Ultimately, aren't you saying it's an alias?"

"All my titles are real. They are just titles, after all."

I cocked my head, wondering what he could possibly mean. It did not sound as if he was forging documents, but rather that he had various official documents that specified different names and titles? That would not be an easy trick to pull off. He had also hinted at working behind the scenes rather than in a visible manner. Could it be that he himself was an intelligence operative? And if so, was his burglar persona a mere facade that allowed him to sneak around in high society? That would be quite remarkable, I thought, since you would expect it to be the other way around.

"But what's a man with all these identities doing marching into Lagrange? I'll tell you this now, His Highness and His Majesty know all about you. You're not deceiving them at all."

"You're quite right. They know full well. They're completely aware that I really did come here to negotiate Princess Henriette's engagement."

I stared at him. "Is that the honest-to-God truth?"

"Of course. Or should there be some other reason I'm here?"

"That's what I'm asking you."

He made no reply, and I simply shrugged rather than pressing him further. *I suppose it was inevitable that he'd evade my questions.* But if there was really no ulterior motive, I had to wonder why he'd need to be sneaking around all over the place.

There was a lot that I didn't understand about the situation, and I was burning with curiosity. However, the warmth had also pushed all my fatigue and drowsiness to the forefront. I did not have the energy to continue this war of words.

In any case, the deathly chill was gone, and I had no need to spend too much time with Lutin. I stood with a yawn. "In that case," I said, "you should keep a close eye on your surroundings. The Easdale faction might be targeting you."

"You're worried about me? How kind of you."

"Not at all. It's simply that if anything does happen to you, I'd like a front-row seat so I can use it as reference material in the future."

I began to shrug off the overcoat and return it to him, but he politely pushed it back onto me. "I won't let you freeze again on your way back. I'll lend it to you."

"Playing the gentleman today, are you?"

"I'm always a gentleman. And how could I not show kindness to the woman I love?"

I let his prattling go in one ear and out the other as I put the overcoat back on my shoulders. "Yes, I'm sure. Then feel free. Thank you, and good night."

As I started toward the door, Lutin called to me from behind. "Marielle, I'd strongly suggest that you stay away from Miss Michelle. Your assistance is not required. It would even be in Prince Severin's best interests for you to steer clear."

I turned back towards him. He was sitting on the edge of an old desk and looking at me with a smile that hinted at a deeper meaning. There was something truly abominable about his attitude. It stirred up an intense desire to revolt against any course of action he suggested.

“Unfortunately, I’m not so heartless that I could stay away from a friend who’s clearly troubled. Nor is His Highness the type of person who would simply ignore Lady Michelle’s feelings.”

“I see. She’s your friend, is she?”

I ignored his provocation and immediately left the room.

I hurried along the most direct route back to the guest bedrooms I could find, careful all the while to ensure that no one saw me. The lights in the manor had been dimmed, and the darkness made it much easier to keep myself hidden. I encountered no one—at least, no one who questioned my presence—and I managed to return to the second floor without incident.

Until, that is, I was almost at the door to my own room, when I was stopped short by my name being called.

“Marielle!”

I was stunned for a moment, but I quickly recovered, calming down upon realizing that it was quite all right. The voice that resounded was that of my beloved.

His form came into view as he approached. Lord Simeon was the only one who would notice me wherever I was and however I was dressed. I felt beautifully warm inside my heart, and a smile began to spread across my face.

The closer he came, however, the more my buoyant feelings sank, until they plummeted like a stone. For when Lord Simeon stopped and stood before me, he wore a truly terrifying face.

Chapter Seven

It was obvious that Lord Simeon was angry before he even opened his mouth.

“Where have you been? I’ve told you over and over again not to wander off on your own!” This was not the tone of his usual grumbling. His voice held genuine anger. My whole body was paralyzed with fear.

I mustered up enough courage for a hesitant reply. “I...thought I would do a little bit of investigating. What’s so wrong with that? Nobody realized it was me.”

“How can you treat this so casually? His Highness also told you to be careful, did he not? You made a promise. Why aren’t you keeping it?”

He scowled at me. The only emotions in his light blue eyes were reproach and indignation. The mood was such that I felt entirely unable to reply in a cordial manner.

It appeared he was about to continue lecturing me, but he was interrupted by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs nearby. He quickly grabbed my arm and dragged me along to my room with enough force that it hurt a little. When we went inside, I saw that the fireplace was indeed dark and silent. All that burned was the small lamp I’d left behind after getting changed. I was quite certain that the bedding would not be warmed either.

Lord Simeon spent a moment listening to the sound of those footsteps walking past the door, but then turned his attention back to me.

“I came to see how you were and found the room in this state, with you nowhere in sight. Do you have any idea how worried I’ve been? I was searching high and low for you.” Though he kept his voice down to ensure it could not be heard outside, it was filled with undisguised rage nonetheless.

I hung my head. “I’m sorry. I was intrigued by how Marchioness Bernadette acted at dinner, so I wanted to learn more about Lady Michelle’s status in the household. I am truly sorry that I left without saying anything. Only, if I’d waited for you to come back, there would have been no time left to go at all.”

“Did you not at least think to somehow let me know what you were doing? Do you have no understanding of my feelings whatsoever? Your room looks as though it hasn’t even been used. Naturally, when I saw that, I feared you might have been kidnapped on your way back!”

“Sorry,” I stammered. “But if I’d left a note, there’s every chance that someone else would have seen it. As for the state of the room... It was like this to begin with. I suspect the servants have been told that they don’t need to take proper care of me...”

“I’m not interested in your excuses!” His powerful voice struck me so hard that I shrank back in shock. *It’s true,* I thought to myself. *Ultimately, all I’m giving him are excuses. Of course Lord Simeon would be angry.*

As I stood before him, my shoulders sagged, Lord Simeon fell silent for a moment and controlled his breathing.

How should I apologize? I had the feeling that if I kept replying with “sorry” and nothing more, it wouldn’t be taken as a true apology. And yet, I couldn’t think of anything else to say.

“And what is *that* ?” he asked in a low growl.

I raised my head. For a moment, I didn’t understand what he was getting at. But, when I followed his gaze, I understood. The overcoat I had borrowed from Lutin was still draped over my shoulders.

“Oh...” *He caught me!* Those were the words that floated into my head, but I wasn’t sure why. I hadn’t done anything to justify a guilty conscience, so what exactly was I trying to hide?

Then I reconsidered. Was that really true? After all, there was no denying the fact that—despite having a fiancé—I had spent time alone with another man. Not just any other man, but that man in particular.

On the other hand, I’d done so with no ill intentions, nor had I even expected to meet him in such a place. I had also resolutely ignored all his overzealous attempts at wooing me.

But, even so... I could have immediately run away from him, and I didn’t. I had nonchalantly stayed and chatted with him, and even borrowed his coat.

And that was why I felt so guilty. *Should I have turned down Lutin's offer, regardless of how cold it was?* My behavior was beginning to feel like a betrayal of Lord Simeon's trust.

"Did you meet...*him* ?" he continued at last.

It seemed Lord Simeon saw it the same way. The accusatory tone of his voice felt quite different than before. I hurriedly took off the overcoat.

"Y-yes, I did meet him, but only by coincidence. That wasn't my intention when I—"

"What were you doing with him?"

"What do you mean? I wasn't doing anything!" I shook my head as hard as I could. *It's not like that. It's not! I didn't betray you, Lord Simeon!* "It's nothing like you're implying! I happened to see Lady Michelle having some sort of secret rendezvous, and that was when Lutin appeared. I was freezing cold, so he took me to a room with a coal stove and lent me his coat to warm me up, but that's all. I swear, I didn't do anything!"

Lord Simeon responded to my full-force denial by silently biting his lip—rather hard, by the looks of things—and turning away. I could tell that he was doing his utmost to restrain his anger. His hand, balled into a tight fist, was trembling. He took several deep breaths. From the clear difficulty he faced in regaining his composure, it was clear as day that he remained unsatisfied. *Does he not believe the words I'm saying? Or can my actions this evening be counted as infidelity after all?*

Tears began to well silently in my eyes. I hung my head in shame and draped Lutin's coat over the back of a chair. After a moment I spoke again. "I apologize. I was rash and thoughtless. I hadn't forgotten about your words, or His Highness's, but I thought it would be all right to take a look around the manor. But you're absolutely right that I broke my promise. No matter what excuses I make, I still betrayed you. I truly apologize for that."

I turned towards Lord Simeon again, but, unable to face him, I continued to look at the floor. I felt as though it would be cowardly to start crying at this moment, so I fought back the tears that threatened to burst forth. "I had only a brief conversation with Lutin, primarily about him and his position in all this. I

quickly grew too exhausted to continue, so I left him there as soon as I was warm enough."

Still nothing from Lord Simeon but silence.

"I swear to you, that's all that happened. We did nothing that would cause me to lose face in society. Won't you please believe me?"

I resolved that whatever he said next, I would accept it. No matter how much fault he found with me, and even if he said he would break off the engagement. The least I could do was suffer the consequences of my own actions—no matter how painful that might prove to be.

Still facing away from me, Lord Simeon shut his eyes tightly. He put his fingers behind his glasses and covered his eyes as if he was thoroughly drained. He let out a deep sigh, rubbed his eyes for a moment, then lowered his hands.

When he turned back, his eyes lacked the violent fury they'd held a moment ago. In its place were shades of anguish. "It's not that I doubt your words. If you tell me it's not as I fear, then I have no reason to doubt that nothing untoward occurred. I don't believe you would behave in an immoral fashion. Even so, when I think of that man getting close to you in private, in a place where I'm not there to see, the blood rushes to my head. It's plain old jealousy, I'm afraid. That much is my fault. I'm sorry."

Even at a moment like this, he was trying to be impartial. It was painful, witnessing his strenuous effort to discipline himself. I shook my head. *No, I don't think it's your fault at all, Lord Simeon. I'm the only one at fault.* And yet...jealousy? I hadn't expected to hear that word come out of his mouth.

He continued, "But there's something else I've been trying to say to you. Something I need you to understand. How can I convey it to you? What must I do? Perhaps I simply lack the proper skill with words. I keep trying to tell you, then growing ever more annoyed when you don't realize what I'm getting at." He paused. "It's...rather lonely."

This time he quietly cast his eyes downward. It was a lonely expression indeed, and it made my heart ache.

He went on. "More than anger, what I feel is an unbearable loneliness. It's as

if all my efforts are in vain. You're so close that I could reach out and touch you, and yet, I can never reach you at all."

"You can't...reach me?"

Lord Simeon's hand moved toward me—and then, just before touching my cheek, it dropped, lifeless. "Do you really not understand why I'm in such disarray? Surely you can't believe I'm annoyed with you for breaking a promise and nothing more? I tell you over and over again that I'm worried about you, but all you hear is a lecture, a rebuke. I was worried about you tonight, Marielle! Truly, I was. Not because of Lutin. He's not such a scoundrel that I can't trust you to take care of yourself around him. But what if you encountered something worse? What if you found yourself in a situation from which there was no return? I try to tell myself I'm thinking too much, and remind myself of His Highness's comment that I'm overprotective, but I can't help being anxious. You're important to me, and that's precisely why it worried me so much that you disappeared."

A feeling cut through my heart, strong as the wind and bright as the sun. It opened a hole inside me, through which Lord Simeon's words—and their meaning—soaked into every inch of me. All of a sudden, I was acutely aware that I'd gotten so used to him rebuking me, I'd stopped even considering why he did it.

"But since you don't understand that I feel that way, it leaves me feeling very alone. It cuts into me, this sense that on your part, there is no particular concern for me. No matter how many times I try to plead my case to you, I meet with so little success that it's as if I'm standing alone, raging at nothing. Though we're engaged, and we're both waiting for spring to come, there's a vast difference in the level of enthusiasm between us. You simply don't feel as strongly toward me as I do toward you. And that...is an incredibly lonely feeling."

"P-please, stop a moment." I was glad he had opened up to me, since I knew now what I had been doing wrong, but how had he misunderstood my feelings so badly? "No particular concern for you? That couldn't be farther from the truth. Clearly, it is my fault that I made you feel like that, and I deeply apologize, but it's absolutely false. I love you, Lord Simeon! If anything terrible were to

happen to you, I'd be worried sick about you as well. I'm so sorry that I didn't understand your feelings—I regret it with all my heart—but it's not because I don't care about you. I was negligent, that's all. I was thinking of you as someone I can presume upon to let me do whatever I wish, just as my family does. If I act like a fool around my parents, or my brother, they always forgive me in the end. I was treating you like that, and expecting you to let me get away with anything. I'm truly sorry."

But Lord Simeon shook his head with a weary face. "You say you love me, but it's nothing more than 'fangirling,' isn't it? You find me interesting, like the main character of a story. Someone who gives you a thrill of excitement. It doesn't mean you love me in any real sense."

"That's not true!"

"How exactly is it not true? It seems entirely accurate from where I'm standing. Your own enjoyment is always your top priority. Whatever dangers may lurk, if the situation is intriguing enough, you'll dive in head-first with no hesitation. Your foremost criterion in evaluating what you like and dislike is whether you can 'fangirl' over it or not. I'll grant that if something happened to me, you would worry about me...but that's hardly specific to me. You call everyone your 'friend' straight after meeting them, and if they look troubled, why, helping out a friend is just a matter of course. That kindness is undoubtedly a virtue of yours, and it's one of the things I love about you. Yet, at the same time, it leaves me keenly aware that I'm worth no more or less than anyone else. There's nothing special about me at all. It's cruel of you, quite frankly. You unabashedly show me your favor, while not loving me like a real flesh and blood person. Is there anything more empty and futile than that?"

The torrent of words he'd directed at me this time was not terrifyingly full of violent fury, the way he'd spoken to me earlier. Instead, the tone of his voice struck me as more sullen than anything. I'd never have imagined hearing all this from Lord Simeon. This pleading for me to love him. He was a man who always remained fair and open-minded, tending to judge himself more harshly than others. For him to appeal to me with complaints like this surely meant putting all of his pride on the line.

Have I forced him to state all this so openly? Have I put him in a position

where he couldn't avoid saying it, even if it means throwing away all his pride?

I spent only the briefest of moments considering how to react. I was spurred on by instinct, not the workings of my mind, as I moved close to him. I stood on tiptoes as high as I could and entwined my hands behind his neck. My eyes reflexively closed as well, so I couldn't see the inevitable shock on Lord Simeon's face. *This is rather shameless behavior, I confess. If anyone heard about it, they would surely furrow their brows and accuse me of lacking any self-control.* After all, this was a move that should be left to a gentleman, not one for a lady to attempt herself. Even I, a lady often described as wild and eccentric, had enough decorum to know that.

But at that moment, I had no other choice. This action spoke far more eloquently than any words I could string together. That was the degree to which I was brimming, overflowing, with love for Lord Simeon. I was consumed by my desire to touch him.

Unfortunately, it was not only our lips that touched. Our glasses collided with a sharp *clink* . It hurt slightly—for him as well, I'm sure.

I pulled back immediately, and lowered my heels back to the ground.

His gorgeous face looked at me in stunned silence.

"Lord Simeon, you've misunderstood quite dramatically. In all honesty, when you said all that, I wondered for a brief moment if it might be true after all, but it's not. I confirmed it just now without a shadow of a doubt. You are not the same as other people. Not in any way. You are Lord Simeon. You are the one and only person who is completely irreplaceable. I have never felt the way I feel when I embrace you."

As I spoke, I kept my hands clasped around him. Now that I no longer stood on tiptoes, it was an awkward position, with my hands hanging down from his neck somewhat inelegantly. Still, I couldn't bear to let him go.

He still said nothing, so I continued. "I'll be honest with you, so promise you won't be angry, all right? The truth is, I also fangirl over His Highness and Lutin. Every young maiden dreams of being swept off her feet by a prince, and a thief turning out to be some sort of intelligence operative is too delicious a character setup to ignore. Besides, they're both very attractive men. But—and this is

important—I would never, ever even *dream* of wanting to do anything like this with them. Not because I'm not allowed to, but because I do not want to. They're people whose beauty I appreciate because I have an eye for beauty. I have no desire to be physically close to them."

Still silence.

"There are many people who set my fangirl heart racing...but you're the only one I want to do *this* with, Lord Simeon. Not because of the mere fact that you're my fiancé, but because, all reason aside, just looking at you sets my heart ablaze. Surely that means I feel that you're special to me? If this isn't a special kind of love, what could *ever* be described as 'love'? I cannot even fathom what more it would take."

Any hint of loneliness was gone from Lord Simeon's expression now. Instead he sighed and gave me a reproachful glare. "...That was rather clumsy." He rubbed the spot where it had hurt when our glasses collided.

I raised my voice. "Well, my apologies! There was no helping it. It's the first time I've ever initiated an embrace like that. It would be more surprising if I could carry it out in a smooth and coordinated manner despite my lack of prior experience."

"Hmm, I suppose. At times I do forget that you're only eighteen."

He moved his hands to his glasses, and I thought he meant to put them back in alignment, but instead he swiftly removed them. I took mine off as well, and we each set down our glasses on the desk.

Then, in one sudden motion, he drew my hips toward him. My eyes closed of their own accord. I was not used to him being this forceful.

"Nnn..."

This was not a reserved embrace of greeting, nor was it a mere momentary surprise attack. He held me so tight, for so long, that it took my breath away. When I gasped for a single strained breath, the angle at which he enveloped me shifted, and he only pushed further.

"Nnn...nnn..."

But breathing was the last thing on my mind. He was toying with me in such a manner that I had no idea how to respond. My hands fell from around his neck, and by instinct I tried to push him back—but his large body did not yield an inch; he just held me tighter and tighter. I was trapped in his arms, and there was no escape. Lord Simeon bore down on me with a single-minded passion the likes of which I had never seen before.

It was a feeling all new to me, and it sent shivers through the very depths of my being. It hurt a little, and scared me a little, but it had a singular sweetness to it as well. Desire welled up inside me...a desire for the two of us to be blended together even more profoundly. All power, all resistance, left me. I felt as if my body was about to melt away, like the wax of a candle.

All that kept my senses from melting along with it was that I was at risk of suffocating to death.

“Nnn... Nnnnnn!”

I can’t take this, it’s too much, it’s impossible, it’s impossible I’m telling you! It hurts and I’m going to die!

I held my breath right up to the very limit of my body’s capacity.

Then, when I was just on the verge of passing out, Lord Simeon finally released me. I didn’t care about good decorum or my reputation anymore—all I wanted was some air. He propped me up as I hung limp and gasped for breath.

With a chuckle in his voice he said, “That’s more in line with what I was hoping for.”

Ugh, what does he expect from me!?

But I did know what he meant. I had enough background knowledge for that. I am a romance novel author, so it would be entirely remiss of me to suggest that I didn’t know what he meant!

Still, the idea that a scene like this might occur in my own life had never once entered my consciousness. For some reason or another, I saw the very idea as something entirely separate from real life. It might happen in a story, but that was all.

...And I should never have seen it that way, now that I think about it.

"I thought I was going to die," I gasped eventually.

"Perhaps you shouldn't have stopped breathing."

Of course I stopped breathing! Who can endure something like that and manage to keep breathing! It's the only normal reaction! Isn't it!?

Lord Simeon laughed at my visible indignation. But even as I scowled at him, one glance at his well-formed lips made my whole body turn hot as I thought about what had just happened.

It feels a little late now, I thought to myself, *but...I'm embarrassed. Ugh, surely it's foul play for him to act like that. For him to be so overwhelmingly sweet in such a forceful and merciless manner.*

Even my ears were red hot. But despite that, I suddenly let out a sneeze. "Oh, excuse me," I said afterwards. *How embarrassing. Why now of all times? It makes me look foolish.* After all the effort spent warming myself up before returning, it seemed Lord Simeon and I had talked for so long that I'd gotten cold again.

"No need to feel self-conscious," he replied. "Though I am wondering, all of a sudden, why this room is so cold in the first place." With an expression that suggested he had only just now realized properly that this was the case, he took a glance around the room. "What happened to the fire?"

"There was never one lit in the first place. Marchioness Bernadette's orders, most likely." Anger rose on Lord Simeon's face, but I shook my head. "I doubt it's contempt for me specifically. If you compare the circumstances of House Montagnier and House Flaubert, it's understandable that they'd have some deep-seated jealousy and indignation toward your family. The marquess and his wife are known for being very proud people. They're not in a position to do anything against you directly...but they can target your fiancée instead."

"But I can't imagine—"

"And they have ample reason to detest me. I'm from a house that's not worthy of any particular note, so my own status is very low. Despite this, they have to feign politeness and treat me as a guest in front of you and His

Highness. They must find it extremely unpleasant."

"The very idea is preposterous," he replied. "Regardless of a guest's social rank, if you've welcomed them into your home, treating them with the proper respect is a matter of basic courtesy. In fact, it would be more embarrassing for them to treat a guest poorly. Anyone who cares one whit about honor and prestige would do their utmost to avoid overlooking even the smallest detail."

"I quite agree, Lord Simeon. However, what you describe are the thought processes of a person of sound mind." I smiled wryly and caressed his cheek.

He took my hand and wrapped it inside his own. "You're cold."

"Oh, sorry." I tried to draw my hand back, but he held on to it.

"That's not what I mean. I'm sorry I didn't notice sooner that you were quite this cold."

He embraced me again, immersing me in his warmth. Then his eyes briefly rested on the overcoat on the back of the chair, and he immediately looked away sullenly. "I'll summon a maid, so I'd suggest you get into bed."

"It's already so late, so it hardly matters if there's a fire or not. Once I fall asleep, it's all the same."

"How will you get to sleep when you're practically frozen solid?"

I considered for a moment. "Perhaps you could hold me for a little while longer, then?" I presumptuously nestled my cheek against his broad chest. "If we stand like this, I feel very warm."

Lord Simeon's body heat and heartbeat radiated through his uniform. I wondered if it was my imagination that his heart was beating rather quickly.

Meanwhile, my own heart continued to dance, just as it had done for some time now.

"Falling asleep like this would be very cozy indeed."

"Am I to take that as an invitation?"

"Oh, certainly not," I replied. "I'm far too tired to do something that requires that much energy."

Without letting me go, Lord Simeon slumped over with a fatigued expression. “Sometimes I fear you may be an irredeemably wicked woman.”

But even as he grumbled, he stooped over and wrapped one arm around the back of my knees. He easily lifted me up and carried me over to the bed, where he lowered me down and then reached for his belt.

Is he about to undress? My heart, which had been dancing a light waltz, instead began to engage in some sort of frenzied folk dance from a tropical island.

“Lord Simeon, I... You must understand, that’s not what I was getting at.” In a panic I started to get up, but he held me back.

“Nor am I a man with so little self-control. I merely intend to play the role of a bed warmer until you fall asleep.”

A bed warmer? Admittedly, he would make a splendid bed warmer, and it wouldn’t conflict with what I said... But even so!

He removed the belt around his waist, and his sword as well, and put his saber on the bedside table. Then he lifted his hands to the stand-up collar of his jacket, which was always tightly fastened right up to the top, and began to unfasten the buttons without a moment’s hesitation. As the white shirt gradually appeared beneath it, the dancer in my heart spat flames.

A breath caught in my throat. *Th...th-th-th-this is...!*

“N-n-no, Lord Simeon, that’s far enough! Please, you mustn’t undress any further!”

I fought with all my might to stop his hands, which had reached halfway down by this point.

Lord Simeon looked to the side with something of a peevish expression. “I told you, I don’t have anything untoward in mind. Though if it bothers you, I’ll stop.”

I shook my head rapidly. “You misunderstand! The way it is now, with your jacket half unbuttoned... It’s sublime! It would be much worse if you took it off entirely!”

“What the devil do you...?” He looked back at me with a perplexed look.

I looked up at him, spellbound and struggling to contain a nosebleed. “And if you don’t mind, could you undo the top two buttons of the shirt underneath? If I had just a fleeting glimpse of your clavicle, it would make it absolutely perfect!”

This image! The Demon Vice Captain, always firmly enclosed in his cold uniform, showing just the slightest of chinks in his armor! Having a peek at the forbidden territory hidden beneath, from which a tremendous sensuality flowed like a river! This, exactly this, was the essence of everything my fangirl heart desired!

Lord Simeon shut his eyes tightly and seemed to be forcibly holding back words. Then he suddenly moved his hands very quickly and unfastened all of the buttons before vigorously throwing off the jacket in practically the same motion.

I couldn’t help letting out a loud sigh of disappointment. If he undressed as unreservedly as that, it had quite the opposite effect on me. Being able to *almost* see, but not quite, is far more enticing. *What a waste!*

“My word. What am I to do with you?” With an angry look, Lord Simeon lifted the covers off the bed and rolled me over, almost as if he was throwing me. I let out a yelp. Then he rapidly took off his boots and leaned over me as I attempted to right myself. In seconds I found myself tightly wrapped up in both the bedsheets and his embrace.

“It always comes back to that, doesn’t it?” He sighed. Then he untied the bun and let my hair flow across the sheets. “No matter what happens, no matter where you go, you’ll never change.” He spoke in a resigned and sorrowful voice while brushing his fingers through my hair.

I turned to look at his face. He was so close that I could read his expression clearly even without my glasses. He did not appear to be angry. “I’m sorry. Indeed, I can’t change, much like you couldn’t suddenly become a shallow playboy. This is who I am.”

“I understand that, but...” He let out another deep sigh.

“Lord Simeon, I apologize for making you suffer. For making you feel so lonely. I was lacking in consideration for your feelings. It was very unkind of me, and I’m truly ashamed of how thoughtless I was. I regret it with all my heart.”

He just continued to look at me.

“But, as I said earlier, I really do love you, Lord Simeon. I don’t merely idolize you from a distance, or anything like that. You’re not just a handsome man, you’re also one that can be overly serious and inflexible, even a bit tactless. Those aspects of you may frustrate me sometimes, but they’re all part of what makes you who you are, and what I love is all of that put together. Even when you act in ways I can’t fangirl over at all, my love for you doesn’t change.”

I reached out my arms as well, and the already narrow distance between us vanished altogether. I clung on tightly to him, eager to feel every bit of his warmth and dependability.

“Incidentally, when I talk about ‘fangirling,’ you might think of it as a highly specialized word, but the feeling that sets it off is not unique to me. It’s something that exists in everyone’s hearts. Some people see a puppy or a kitten innocently rolling around on the floor, and they find it so unbearably cute that their heart starts racing. Or in your case, as a knight, perhaps when you see a sturdy young warhorse with a glossy coat, you yearn to ride it. There are people who think the latest models of ships are too thrilling for words, people who feel overwhelming joy when they enter a room filled with antique books, people who find themselves spellbound by high-quality silk and lace, people who adore seeing the smiles on their family’s faces more than anything in the world... All sorts of different things move people and set their hearts ablaze. That is what it means to be a fangirl—or fanboy, of course. It’s finding what you love, what you find truly wonderful, and letting yourself be excited about it. It’s a natural part of how the human heart works.”

I softly kissed his nose, just as he had kissed mine not so long ago.

“The one I fangirl over most of all is you, Lord Simeon. You’re the one I find more attractive than anyone else, the most interesting, the most adorable. You’re the one I most want to have by my side. How could that not be the case when I love you more than anyone and anything?”

Lord Simeon's arms were suddenly filled with strength, and he moved in to kiss me deeply. This time I accepted it calmly. My love for him overflowed infinitely from every place where I sensed the heat of his body on mine.

"I'm sorry for causing such a misunderstanding," I said at last. "And for making you worry."

"And I'm sorry for accusing you in such a childish manner."

We nuzzled cheek to cheek. I felt just the slightest hint of a beard growing on his face. The color was so pale that it had never stood out to me before. *I suppose he is a man, after all.*

"If I leave you feeling dissatisfied, or anxious, then please, accuse me in whatever manner you like. Otherwise I'll simply go at full gallop with my fangirling. Sometimes I need to be reined in a bit."

"It would be hugely helpful for me if you could restrain yourself before it reaches that point." But even as he said that, he smiled. It was his usual smile, kind but with a hint of exasperation. He wasn't angry any longer. It seemed we had managed to get through this without causing him to lose his affection for me after all. I was incredibly glad.

I had better be more careful from now on. I mustn't be so inconsiderate that he really does give up on me.

But there was no chance that I would stop being a fangirl. It's like breathing for me; it's not something I do on a conscious level. As long as I live, I will never stop seeking the thrill that comes from being a fangirl.

Concealing my fangirl heart would be the same as revealing nothing of my heart at all. It would prevent us from ever being a proper married couple who could be open and trust one another. Lord Simeon had fallen in love with me knowing I was like this, so I didn't want to hide anything from him. I just had to be careful not to be so self-centered that I caused him harm. I would have to guard against my worst excesses by reminding myself that he was the most important thing to me, and that I couldn't stand to lose him.

I basked in the warmth of lying nestled against him in the bed. Heat had returned even to the frozen tips of my fingers and toes. My whole body, which

had grown rather tense, gradually began to relax. I let myself give in to my drowsiness, and felt sheer bliss as I slowly began to drift off.

“You’re no longer cold?”

“I’m very warm now. This feels so good. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“I agree completely.” That voice, whispering right into my ear, was so dear to me.

“Once we’re married, we’ll be able to sleep like this every single night, won’t we?”

“Absolutely.”

“I wish our wedding wasn’t so far away...”

In response, I heard a flustered cough as he cleared his throat. “Can you please exercise just a touch of moderation? If I fail to control my passion, don’t expect me to take the blame.”

“...Excuse me...?”

“Marielle? Have you fallen asleep?”

Asleep? No... I’m... Oh, I’m so tired... I can’t even keep my eyes open any longer.

But I still have things to tell him. I have to report everything I found out about Lady Michelle and Lutin.

But I didn’t stand any chance against the incoming waves as they swept over me, heavy and snug and calm.

All tomorrow. Tomorrow.

That was my last thought before I had no choice but to give in.



Chapter Eight

When I awoke, Lord Simeon was no longer beside me, but the fireplace burned brightly, warming the entire room.

I rang the bell and a serving girl appeared right away and provided me with tea. I drank it while still in bed as she arranged the room, which included filling the wash basin with hot water. When I finished the tea, I rose from my bed and washed my face. All in all, it was a perfectly refined way to start a new day. I could almost believe that the events of the previous night had been no more than a dream.

But they had been quite real, of course. *And if it was a dream, I shall have to run to Lord Simeon this very instant and make it real!*

I writhed in delicious agony as I recalled some of the finer details. Putting aside the first half of our time together, the second half was so sweet, so precious, that it was almost beyond words. That passionate kiss would be etched vividly into my memory forever. It would never fade as long as I lived. To think that Lord Simeon would do such a thing. He was always so polished, so reserved, so formal. Even when he grew irritated with me, his behavior had always been physically restrained. *And yet, last night he exploded with such violent passion. My goodness, it's simply too much for me! He really is like the love interest in a story! My very own romantic hero!*

It was still morning, but I wished to scream dramatically into the sunset. *Lord Simeon, I love you! I love you so very much!*

"Excuse me, my lady, but is...something the matter?"

Having finished dressing me, the serving girl had taken a large step back. She wore a look of fear on her face. Her words made me return to my senses, and I hurried to put a sufficiently prim and proper smile on my face. "Oh, no," I stammered. "I see now that you've finished. You've done an exemplary job. Thank you so much."

Relief washed over her face upon hearing my expression of gratitude. *She must have been worried that I was displeased with her, that perhaps she'd*

spoiled my good humor.

That's all, I'm sure.

Today I was being attended to very considerately indeed. No doubt Lord Simeon had said something on my behalf. There would never have been any admission that I was intentionally being mistreated, of course. It was plausible enough that the servants had simply been negligent in their duties. I felt sorry for the servants, who had likely been blamed for my mistreatment when they bore no responsibility for it. The servants had treated me with respect, at least —unlike the heads of the household.

Suspecting that she might harbor some guilt over my treatment thus far, I produced a box of chocolates from my suitcase and handed it to her, with a suggestion that she quietly share it with her colleagues where no one could see. The chocolates had been intended as a present for Marchioness Bernadette, but I suspected that she would not be entirely eager to receive them anyway. It would be a waste to give her a gift only for it to be thrown away out of spite, so I felt it was better to give it to someone who would appreciate it.

After eating breakfast in my room, I decided to go and find Lord Simeon. I expected he was either still in his own room or in the company of His Highness.

Since Lord Simeon and I had spent much of the previous night resolving the misunderstanding between us, there had been no time to discuss anything else. I still had to tell him about Lady Michelle's clandestine meeting and relay what I'd learned about Lutin.

But all thought of this left my mind as soon as I stepped out into the corridor, where I heard a shrill cry from downstairs. "Somebody! Anybody! You must hurry! It's my lady, she...!"

The words made it clear in an instant that something serious had happened. *But who does "my lady" refer to? Is it Lady Michelle?*

A disquieting chill came over my whole body. Overwhelmed with fear about what might have happened, I rushed down the staircase toward the source of the commotion. A crowd had gathered, made up of people who worked in the kitchen and laundry room.

At the center of them, screaming, was an elderly womanservant. “Please, someone, help her! My lady fell in the pond! She’s sure to die! Hurry, save her!”

The men of the assembled crowd ran straight outside, aside from the butler, who ran up to the second floor to inform the marquess. The female servants looked at one another, faces filled with terror. I ran out through the front door as well, sensing that the crowd behind me was growing ever larger as more people arrived.

The pond? Does she mean the pond I happened upon yesterday? I don’t recall seeing any other ponds nearby. But...how could Lady Michelle have fallen in? What’s going on?

The words I’d heard from the butler yesterday, and from Lady Michelle herself before that, rang in my ears. I’d been told that the pond was highly dangerous. That if anyone fell in, it would be impossible to rescue them. *And she’s... That’s where she’s... Oh, please, let them get to her in time. Please, God, save her!*

I ran like the wind, slipping occasionally on the snow-covered paths. I had left while still wearing my decorative low-cut shoes, so my feet were soaked in an instant, but this was no time to let the cold stop me. The hem of my dress became thoroughly soiled as I retraced my path from the day before, running across the very same small bridge.

Gathered on the bank of the pond was a collection of servants from the manor and other residents of the surrounding area. Many of them were pointing, and all to the same spot near the center of the pond. There, the frozen surface of the water had cracked open, forming an ominous gaping maw.

When I saw the feminine shawl lying near the hole, all color drained from my face.

She...fell in there? Lady Michelle is under there...? That can’t be true. It can’t. How could this have happened? If she...fell in there, then it means...

Even if she hadn’t immediately lost consciousness—and if she had then somehow managed to rise to the surface—she’d have collided with the ice above her head. There’d have been no way for her to get her face above the surface of the water. The frigid water would have quickly sapped all strength

from her limbs, and her waterlogged dress would have weighed her down like a stone, dragging her into the murky depths of the water.

I stood silent. Imagining that scene made me feel as if I myself was drowning. I clutched my chest as ragged breaths fought their way in and out of my lungs. My heart throbbed painfully. I couldn't stop it. Just as all strength drained from my legs and I was about to collapse onto the ground, a pair of strong hands came from behind to support me.

Lord Simeon had arrived. So had the other knights, and His Highness. All of them looked at the pond with expressions that spoke of sheer disbelief.

"Lord Simeon," I uttered.

Still holding me tight, Lord Simeon turned his intense gaze toward the middle of the pond. Two villagers had been taking a few gingerly steps across the surface of the ice, testing whether it might not be possible to reach the hole, but one quickly cried out, "No use! It's too dangerous, there's no way we can get any further than this!" New cracks began to form beneath their feet as they rushed back to safety.

The ice was much more fragile than it appeared. No matter how determined the rescue effort might be, it wouldn't be possible to walk to the center of the pond.

The pair exchanged ideas.

"I suppose the ice has thinned out because the weather's been so good these past few days..."

"Maybe it would be better to break the whole lot and get there on a boat?"

"That won't work. The broken ice would get in the way so much, you'd be stranded partway. You wouldn't be able to get any closer to the middle or get back to shore."

"Sad as it is, there's no use attempting the impossible..."

A lone figure staggered past both us and the two villagers. As His Highness approached perilously close to the pond, the knights gave chase and caught him.

“Your Highness!”

“You mustn’t, it’s dangerous!”

With a dazed expression, His Highness shook off the arms that held him back. “Un... unhand me...”

“We cannot. Please, you must be patient.”

“Unhand me!”

His Highness’s voice sounded hollow. He didn’t even look at the knights, but stared blankly at the hole in the ice. The knights applied all their efforts to pull His Highness back, their faces distorted by the strain.

“Forgive us, please. Walking onto the ice would be suicide. You mustn’t get any closer.”

His Highness struggled for breath, as if he wished to speak but the words were trapped.

I was in much the same state. Instead of words, tears began to emerge. *Can nothing be done? Is there really no one who can save Lady Michelle?* It felt deeply unfair, so much so that my whole body trembled. As I began to sob convulsively, Lord Simeon held me even tighter.

At that moment, two more people ran over from the direction of the manor: Marquess Montagnier and his butler. The marquess, too, had an entirely different expression than usual. He appeared to have lost all presence of mind. He puffed and panted, gasping for breath as he ran, not even noticing His Highness’s presence as he began to kick up an immense fuss. “What the devil are you all doing!? Go and save Michelle! Now!”

The servants glanced uneasily at one another, unsure of how to respond to this command. The marquess thrust at them, trying to push them toward the pond.

“My lord!” said the butler beside him.

“You must rescue her! Don’t just stand there! What in the hell are you waiting for!? Get Michelle out of there right now!”

“Please, my lord, restrain yourself!”

The pleas did not register. The marquess laid hands on the butler, too, attempting to force him in the direction of the pond.

The villagers scattered, afraid of getting mixed up in this any further.

“Hurry! You must save Michelle! I can’t lose this, not now! This golden opportunity was finally in my grasp, but if Michelle dies now... You *must* save her! Whatever it takes!”

He was interrupted at last by a soft voice. “Marquess, stop.”

His Highness’s vacant expression from mere moments ago was gone. Perhaps he’d regained his senses amid all the commotion. Instead, his hand was balled into a fist so tight it looked as though he might squeeze blood from it. His Highness appeared to be making a strenuous effort to control the expression on his sallow face.

The marquess turned around suddenly. Upon realizing at last that His Highness was present, he grew even more flustered. “Y-your Highness, I...”

“I understand that you’re upset, but no one can step onto the ice. We simply do not know where or when it will break underfoot. We cannot risk any further victims arising from the rescue attempt. Which means...we have no choice but to give up.”

His voice trembled despite his efforts to keep it steady. He could not prevent the pain and regret from seeping into every word. *I’m sure that if there was any hope at all, he’d be jumping into the pond right now.* But it was clear as day to all present that there was no point in attempting a rescue.

And that, even if one were to be attempted, it was probably too late.

I was sure His Highness wished he could react like the marquess, raving indiscriminately. But alas, the crown prince was not in a position to be seen in such a state, so he fought his hardest to contain his emotions. That powerful sense of self-restraint was a credit to Lord Simeon’s closest friend and master...and yet, at the same time, it was terribly painful to witness.

In contrast, the marquess had reached a condition where he was entirely unable to speak in a coherent manner. With vacant eyes, he just repeated the same nonsense over and over again in a kind of delirium. It was far from the

haughty demeanor of a nobleman who proudly boasted of his family's history and lineage.

A heavy silence fell, broken only by the marquess's ramblings, which flowed like an endless curse being muttered. The dazzling morning sunlight only made this pathetic sight even more striking.

The old woman who had told everyone about the accident was Lady Michelle's wet nurse, Agatha. She always attended to Lady Michelle on her own, and today, too, she had apparently been accompanying the young lady on a walk. Her face buried in her apron, her shoulders quivering, Agatha explained what had happened to the assembled family and guests in the manor's small salon.

"The wind blew her shawl onto the pond, you see. We agreed she'd have to simply accept that she'd lost it, since it was too dangerous to try and retrieve it. At least, I thought she had agreed with me, but perhaps she hadn't after all. It was a memento of Lady Daniella, so I imagine she was determined to get it back no matter what. We walked on, and then... Well, I only turned away briefly to pick some rose hips, and by the time I looked up, she was gone. And then...it seemed too terrible to imagine, but I had to go back to the pond and see..."

As Agatha spoke, the butler and housekeeper stood waiting by the walls with meek expressions, while Lord Camille sat beside his mother, yawning. He had been sleeping until mere minutes earlier, and was clearly displeased at having been roused against his will.

Sitting alone, apart from everyone else, was Lutin. He didn't wear his usual smile, but he still gazed upon the scene with eyes that suggested he found the latest development very interesting indeed. Noticing I was looking at him, he gave me a furtive wink. I furrowed my brow and returned my attention to Agatha.

Agatha descended into wild sobbing as she finished her explanation. At that point, Marquess Montagnier shouted with a trembling voice. "What in blazes were you doing!? You should have been keeping an eye on her! And as soon as you realized what had happened, you should have jumped straight into the pond to rescue her! It's all for naught, all of it, and you're the one to blame, you

useless...worthless...”

With bloodshot eyes, he raised his walking stick overhead. For an instant I felt a chill run through me, but Lord Simeon immediately grabbed the stick and prevented the act of violence.

“Stop this at once. Hitting her won’t achieve anything.”

“Let me go! It’s this...this idiot’s fault that it’s all gone to waste! I’ve worked so hard, suffered through so much, invested so much money...and now, thanks to this foolish woman, I...!”

Marchioness Bernadette puckered her face in response to her husband’s shameful behavior. She had remained calm throughout, showing no hint of grief.

Shockingly, the only one visibly grieving as a result of Lady Michelle’s accident was Agatha. The young lady’s mother, and her younger brother, looked as if they were hearing a story about someone they had no connection to whatsoever. Even the marquess, who had entirely lost his composure, had not voiced even one word of lamentation relating to the loss of Lady Michelle herself.

What is wrong with this family? Their daughter has suffered a terrible accident, and the circumstances are quite hopeless, with no sign that rescue might be possible. How can they be so unfeeling?

“Dear,” interrupted Marchioness Bernadette, finally calling her husband to a halt as he continued to berate Agatha. “Stop this at once and calm yourself. It’s thoroughly disgraceful to behave in such a manner in front of His Highness the Crown Prince.”

“Oh!” he replied, sharp realization in his tone. In an instant, he went from berating an elderly woman to obsequiously begging forgiveness. “My word, yes! Your Highness, please allow me to apologize profusely for this incident. My daughter’s imprudent behavior has caused you such inconvenience... Please, if there’s any way you can forgive me...”

The disgust that His Highness had been trying to suppress finally showed clearly on his face. Even so, he spoke no words of censure and replied calmly.

“It’s not a question of forgiving you or not. This is a tragic accident, a source of great sorrow. No one is at fault, other than destiny, perhaps. I shall return to my chamber to rest, and I suggest you do the same.”

His Highness rose, and the marquess followed hot on his heels. “Your Highness,” he stammered, “I beg you, do not let this be cause for you to forsake me. I’m still assisting with Princess Henriette’s engagement, remember. During your future reign, House Montagnier will be your most ardent supporter, I assure you. I promise, without a shadow of a doubt, that you will be able to rely on us more than any other house. So, please...”

“Indeed, I’ve no doubt.” After doing his best to pacify the marquess while hiding his fury, His Highness made haste out of the room.

The knights followed. Lord Simeon called my name and took me out into the corridor with him. Then he paused and asked, “Are you all right?”

Rather than following His Highness straight away, he had inquired as to my wellbeing. That day was the first time I’d ever cried in front of him, and it seemed to have worried him. I can’t say I had fully recovered from the initial shock, but on the return journey to the manor I had regained a great deal of my usual presence of mind. I was composed enough that I did not need him to remain by my side, especially if he had other matters to deal with. “You needn’t worry. Please, attend to His Highness.”

Lord Simeon nodded, albeit with some hesitation. “I must ask you to return to your room. Go there directly, without taking any detours, and stay there until my return.”

“Certainly. Only...there is something I’d like to...”

“Hold on for now, please. Just do what I say. I’ll visit you afterwards.”

“Overprotective as always,” spoke a jovial voice behind me.

An icy glint appeared immediately in Lord Simeon’s eyes. I turned my head to follow his gaze and saw Lutin, who had just emerged from the doorway. “Is she a child? Let her do as she wishes, at least within the confines of the manor.”

“The manor’s not exactly safe. Why, I can already see it’s infested with vermin.” Lord Simeon wrapped his arms around me as if to emphasize that he

wouldn't let Lutin interfere.

Lutin shrugged with a look of feigned innocence. "You're a far smaller man than you appear if you feel a need to desperately cling on to what's yours for fear of it being stolen. Perhaps it's you that's the child. Marielle, isn't it about time you grew disenchanted with him? He may have the face of a ladykiller, but inside he's rather more like...this."

"And thus we depart." Ignoring Lutin's mockery, Lord Simeon dragged me away.

I caressed Lord Simeon's hand and glared at Lutin, who grinned all the while. "I won't be disenchanted, you can be sure of that. Much as Lord Simeon doesn't renounce his love for me even when I act the fool, I love Lord Simeon just the way he is."

Lord Simeon let out a small sigh and looked down at me as we walked away. I smiled up at him.

"Apologies," he said at last. "Given the circumstances, I've no doubt you have all sorts of things you're intrigued about and wish to investigate further. I must insist, however, that you do not act on your own. We can't yet confirm if what happened was really an accident."

Lord Simeon's words came as no surprise. Once I had calmed down and begun to think clearly, I had also noticed various details that stood out as suspicious. It was increasingly hard to believe that this was purely an accident. It was to be expected that Lord Simeon would realize this as well.

"I understand," I replied. "But if you're reporting to His Highness, couldn't I join you? I also have some information that I'd like to share and discuss. I can imagine that His Highness would prefer to know everything he can sooner rather than later."

Lord Simeon paused to think for a brief moment, but then shook his head. "We must leave him be for now. His Highness will continue to be upset for a while. Once he recovers, he'll be better equipped to judge, in his role of crown prince, how best to proceed. To facilitate that, I'd prefer to allow him some time to himself."

It was a thoughtful and entirely reasonable approach, so I was inclined to agree. Even so, if he was anxious about His Highness's state of mind, it made me even more eager for him to hear what I'd discovered. "But what if all hope is not yet lost? What if it's too early to draw that conclusion? If there's still a chance, isn't it better to let His Highness know?"

Lord Simeon looked at me with a puzzled expression.

I glanced around for anyone lurking nearby, then lowered my voice. "Last night I chanced upon a rather curious scene. Thinking about today's events in light of what I saw then, this accident seems quite suspicious...and gives me every reason to believe that Lady Michelle might still be alive."

As I spoke, I was self-conscious that my own wish that this was true was also part of the equation. Nonetheless, the situation was undeniably suspicious. I wanted to believe that he would listen to me properly, and not treat the idea merely as my own false hope.

And, though not dismissing it as foolishness at all, Lord Simeon shook his head and immediately whispered a reply. "If so, all the more reason not to tell him at this stage. We must wait until we have more reliable information."

Reporting to His Highness should come only after a thorough investigation, in other words. This prudence was very much in keeping with Lord Simeon's character.

It was true that as of that moment, my thoughts had not yet risen out of the realms of wishful thinking. I decided that Lord Simeon's opinion was entirely valid, and that I would do as he said.

And so, I parted ways with Lord Simeon on the second floor and started toward my own room. I stopped suddenly on the way, however, when I found myself in the place where I'd spoken to Lady Michelle the night before. I gazed through the bay window at the landscape outside.

Perhaps I shouldn't have simply backed down and left. I should have forgone politeness and gotten straight to the heart of the matter. I'd been so calm and patient, believing I had all the time in the world to get close to her little by little. I hadn't reckoned on an event like this.

It's so easy to take for granted that tomorrow will be much the same as today. I suppose you only learn otherwise when you experience a loss.

Despite my lingering hope that Lady Michelle might be alive, the fear that it was indeed impossible threatened to blot it out. I had flickers of horrifying thoughts that this might not have been a mere accident, but a murder.

Lady Michelle herself had volunteered that the pond was dangerous. She was the one who first told me. Rather than expressing any enthusiasm for my suggestion that we go skating, she had replied with a firm dismissal of the idea, her words full of caution. Why would she have stepped onto the ice so carelessly? Even if she did want to retrieve a precious memento, this seemed unthinkable. This particular misgiving did grant me some hope that she might be alive, but it also led me to suspect that she might have been murdered.

I felt that if I'd taken greater pains to make her talk, I might have been able to prevent it. That if I'd told Lord Simeon and His Highness everything I knew at an earlier stage, they might have watched her more closely.

I lamented my own decisions, fearing I might have made a mistake that could never be fixed.

I drew my face close to the window and let out a heavy sigh. Just then, I heard a pair of voices approaching, accompanied by the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs. I listened closely. One of the voices was Lord Camille's.

This area at the end of the corridor was akin to a small room without a door, so the walls were sunken farther back than those of the corridor itself. I decided that if I stood behind the wall on one side, I probably wouldn't be visible from the staircase. Lord Camille's room was in the opposite direction, so it also seemed unlikely that he would walk in this direction. I suppressed my presence so that he wouldn't notice me there, then focused all my attention on the conversation.

"Ugh, how irritating. Why did I have to be woken up? I'm cold and tired and I hate it. All Michelle ever does is annoy everyone. Although, since she was kind enough to kick the bucket, surely we don't need to entertain the prince anymore and we can go back to the city? Or maybe I can just go back on my own."

“My lord,” said the servant accompanying him, “you’re speaking awfully loudly.”

But Lord Camille seemed unmoved by those words of caution. “Seeing Father make such a fool of himself is honestly just depressing. I’d prefer not to have to watch it. It’s pathetic, especially when he puts on such airs the rest of the time. He tries to look down on the likes of House Cavaignac and House Flaubert, insisting that we have far more tradition and social standing, but as soon as he loses his trump card, he falls to pieces. Where’s that social standing he’s so proud of if he acts like a servile bootlicker around the prince? It’s utterly shameful. It makes me sick to have a man like that as my own father.”

He spat out those last words, his voice dripping with disdain. It seemed he was his usual self, with his typical distorted perspective.

“As for Mother, I’m sure she’s actually over the moon. Even if Michelle’s marriage would have given us a tie to the royal family, I doubt she could ever bring herself to truly be happy about it if Michelle was the one she had to thank. I wouldn’t be surprised if she’s fine with our house being on the wane and was opposed to the whole thing.”

“My lord!”

“With Michelle dead, I’m sure Mother’s the most relieved of all. Now she doesn’t have to look at her least favorite eyesore anymore, and can stop pretending to be her mother. Now that the daughter of that hateful woman has seen fit to tragically off herself, I bet she’s all smiles and laughter on the inside.”

“My lord, you mustn’t say such things! We have guests in the house. Please restrain yourself.”

At this rebuke from the servant, Lord Camille fell silent at last, and continued in the opposite direction, away from where I hid. Only after I watched him enter his room did I step out into the corridor again and return to my own.

Well, I had all but confirmed it already, but it seems it’s true. Lady Michelle is not Marchioness Bernadette’s child.

When she had made her debut in society, I had heard a few snippets of gossip suggesting that this might be the case. Though it had been made known at a

much earlier stage that Lady Michelle existed, she had never officially been referred to as anything but the marquess and marchioness's true born child. Until the very day of her debut she had not been presented in front of other people at all, so that was the first time anyone in society had met her. There had been no celebratory banquet thrown when she was born, nor had there been any sort of unveiling after that, so most people forgot that House Montagnier even had a daughter.

Apparently, even those who were close to Marchioness Bernadette did not know that she was with child until after the birth. This was not entirely uncommon; there are some women who do not show very visibly, and there are many cases where a pregnancy is not made public until after a successful birth. If Lady Michelle had been born in the winter at their estate outside of the city, and then the family had returned to the city the following spring, it would be entirely believable that nobody knew that the marchioness was expecting.

However, when she conceived Lord Camille not long after, the news was publicized at a very early stage, and he was unveiled to society shortly after his birth. To hide one child away while making everyone aware of the other was too striking an inconsistency. And that was why whispers began to spread that perhaps she wasn't really Marchioness Bernadette's daughter.

Stories of children born to mistresses being adopted into the family were not especially rare. If the wife had borne no children herself, there were even cases of illegitimate children being named as the successor. However, this house had Lord Camille to serve as a legitimate heir, not to mention that Lady Michelle was a woman, so there couldn't have been any succession dilemma.

But for a marquessate on the wane, it would be very appealing to have their daughter chosen as His Highness's princess. And there, I suspected, lay the answer.

I sat down on a chair in front of the fire. I felt more informed, now, as I looked back on Lady Michelle's countenance during the tea party. The aura of tragedy that surrounded her, so overwhelming that she looked as if she might faint on the spot, was all because she had been wracked with fear and guilt at having to deceive the royal family about such a significant matter.

If she were to be engaged to someone of lower status, she would have been able to marry them even if it became public knowledge that she was illegitimate. For her to be the crown prince's bride, however—the future queen—such a blemish would be impermissible. And so, with no legitimate daughter to put forward, the marquess had pretended that Lady Michelle was his wife's child so that he could use her to gain power. In all likelihood, the "Lady Daniella" that Agatha had inadvertently mentioned was Lady Michelle's real mother.

The marquess's greed and stubbornness was the root cause of everything. He was determined to regain his house's former influence, even if it meant lying to the royal family.

I let out a deep sigh. *As soon as I remembered the rumors, I should have told His Highness.* I had kept it to myself out of a desire to focus on confirmed information and avoid sharing a baseless rumor that amounted to little more than slander. However, I realized now that this might not have been the right choice. If I had asked His Highness to look into it rather than waiting for Lady Michelle to confess on her own, it might never have come to this.

If staying quiet while I gathered information is what made it impossible to prevent these terrible consequences, then...what should I do now?

Lord Simeon soon returned to my room as promised. He informed me that His Highness was not in quite as much disarray as feared, and was, outwardly at least, taking the situation relatively calmly. He had even expressed concern that I might be frightened on my own, so he had sent Lord Simeon away to be by my side. Lord Simeon had a sense, however, that he might have wanted to be entirely alone so that he could cry in private. The knights were also now watching him from something of a distance, feeling that it might be better to allow him his space rather than attempt to console him.

Sitting across from Lord Simeon, I told him everything I knew based on the prior evening's events, Lord Camille's tirade, and the gossip I'd heard in society.

"So," he replied, "you're suggesting that Lady Michelle did not in fact lose her life in an accident, but rather faked her own death in order to run away?"

"I'm lacking any solid evidence. However, I do suspect it's a possibility."

He silently rested an elbow on the armrest of his chair and placed his head in his hand to think.

I continued, “I don’t deny that I’m *hoping* that this is true, but there’s more of a basis to it than merely my own wishes. I’ve already mentioned the secret meeting I witnessed. I couldn’t hear any details of what Lady Michelle was discussing, but it seemed to be a rather serious matter—and besides, it’s far from usual to have a meeting outside in the freezing cold at such a late hour. There can have been no other reason but to avoid prying eyes. It seems entirely plausible that this was the man Lady Michelle was planning to elope with.”

“Who was this man? What did he look like?”

“I couldn’t see his face, but he was tall and solidly built, with the bearing of a servant.”

“But from what you’ve said, I understand that Miss Michelle didn’t have anyone inside the household that she could call an ally in any meaningful sense. At most she had that wet nurse.”

“Lady Michelle is certainly hated by Marchioness Bernadette, and probably by Lord Camille too, but we don’t know how the servants see her. Even if they’re unable to openly be kind to her in the marchioness’s presence, it’s not inconceivable that someone might see how much she suffers, fall madly in love with her, and develop a burning desire to rescue her.”

Lord Simeon responded to my theory with a reproachful glare that included an exceptionally large helping of doubt. “I can’t rule out the possibility, but it is only one possibility, so I ask you not to be overly fixated on it. You have a tendency to see torrid love affairs in every situation, but that is not the only force at work in this world.”

I felt slightly offended at his incredulous reaction. *What is he talking about? The world is overflowing with love stories and love songs! People are always longing to be with the one they love. It’s one of our most basic urges. It relates to the continuation of our species. If there’s a man and a woman, the ingredients are there for love to blossom.*

I leaned forward, eager to defend my point of view, but he lightly slapped my forehead. “As I said, I don’t intend to rule out this possibility. I’m only saying

that you shouldn't exclude all others. Incidentally, if the accident was faked, that would make the wet nurse a co-conspirator, would it not?"

"You might be better able to judge that than me, Lord Simeon. What impression did you get when you saw her earlier? Were you suitably convinced that she was responding as you'd expect of a woman who had lost someone—a young lady she saw practically as her own daughter—right before her very eyes?"

Agatha had made a huge commotion when she came to tell everyone what had happened, and she had also sobbed intensely while explaining after the fact. Yet, considering all that, everything she said had been remarkably easy to follow. Her voice had not trembled so much that her words were left unintelligible, nor had her sobbing been such a hindrance that she could hardly speak at all. She had managed a complete explanation that allowed everyone present to understand the circumstances. There seemed to be something of a mismatch between how upset she appeared on the surface and how calm she was underneath. This excessive play-acting could not be explained away by mere *hope* that Lady Michelle was still alive.

Lord Simeon, who was trained in the art of questioning, readily agreed. "Yes, those were crocodile tears. The wet nurse was far more composed than she appeared. Which is precisely why I'm also considering the possibility that she is the one who did harm to Miss Michelle."

"What reason would she have to do such a thing?"

He paused. "Indeed, that's something we don't yet know. From what I've been told, she has taken care of Miss Michelle ever since she was born, and has never been close to the other servants. In light of what you told me earlier, it's likely that she originally worked for the mistress...for Miss Michelle's birth mother. She probably moved to House Montagnier with Miss Michelle."

It seemed that Lord Simeon had also been doing a little investigating. What he said only raised my hopes even further. "Then Lady Michelle must be alive, surely! She must have simply run away, with Agatha's assistance!"

But Lord Simeon met my elation without any change to the hard expression on his face. Coldly he replied, "Perhaps. However, if so, it means she has

betrayed His Highness.”

My heart, which had momentarily come alive with exultation, grew just as cold as his voice. It seemed Lord Simeon had no sympathy for Lady Michelle’s plight. Rather, he seemed angry with her. Choosing my words carefully, I said, “Do you believe that Lady Michelle would have made this decision lightly? It must have been an extremely difficult choice for her.”

Putting aside the question of whether it was an elopement or not, one thing was clear: Lady Michelle could never have married His Highness. The marquess had thought it possible to deceive the royal family, but his plan was very unlikely to have succeeded. Rumors about the young lady’s parentage had already begun to spread, and they would only be spread further by the houses of other candidates for the prince’s hand who had been dropped after Lady Michelle was chosen. They’d no doubt have sought proof and continued their onslaught until Lady Michelle was brought down. Far better for her to run away now than to wait until it reached that point.

Furthermore, rather than merely absconding, she had crafted a scenario where it appeared as if she had died in an accident. In doing so, she had preserved the honor of her house. What more could she possibly have done?

I explained my thoughts, and Lord Simeon replied, “She should have revealed everything to His Highness and left the decision in his hands. His Highness could have found a more suitable way to resolve the matter. Disappearing in a manner like this has simply caused an excessive amount of turmoil. His Highness has been made to suffer such grief, and she even reduced you to tears. I can’t say I’m in an especially forgiving mood.”

Lord Simeon’s ire was perfectly understandable, but I still found it rather unfair for Lady Michelle to be blamed like this. “That must seem like the most obvious solution to you, Lord Simeon, but that’s precisely because of who you are. You know His Highness’s character better than anyone because you’ve spent so long by his side. No one else would even consider it as an option. Most people cannot simply tell the royal family that they’ve been lying to them. If His Majesty the King or Her Majesty the Queen had heard about it, who knows what sort of a rage they might fly into? I’m quite certain that she felt she had no other choice but to betray His Highness. It was not something she would have

done if she could avoid it."

After a pause, Lord Simeon cast his eyes down and let out a long breath. Then he changed his tone and sat up straight again. "In which case, isn't the best course of action to simply leave it be? Suppose we do find Miss Michelle hiding somewhere. What would happen after that? Even if she was brought back, she could no longer marry His Highness. Nor would she want to return to her own house, presumably."

He was right. It was no longer possible to sweep this matter under the carpet and return things to the way they were. And yet, even so, I wanted to find Lady Michelle. "I wish to confirm with my own eyes that Lady Michelle is alive and well. I won't be at ease until I do. Consider His Highness, as well. Is it better for him to hold onto his grief forever, believing that she died suddenly in an accident? Or is it better for him to learn the truth and come to terms with it? Well, Lord Simeon? Which do you think His Highness would prefer? No one knows him better than you."

He was Lord Simeon's closest friend, and the man he was sworn to serve. By comparison, I hadn't spent much time with His Highness, but I already had a sense that I could trust in his strength of character. I had spoken to him on various occasions, and even been somewhat disrespectful to him at times, and though His Highness had responded with his fair share of quips, he had always forgiven my boldness and never become seriously angry. I had found him to be a kind and broad-minded person. I was sure that he would forgive Lady Michelle once the truth came to light.

Is it unreasonable of me to hope for that? For my own part, I knew that in such a situation, I would prefer to live with the reality that the connection I'd seen was never there in the first place, rather than with the grief of it having ended so tragically.

I stared expectantly at Lord Simeon for a moment. Eventually he nodded, sighing. "Indeed, you speak the truth. However, the first step is confirming that Miss Michelle is indeed alive. If His Highness hears any word of it at this stage, it will only cause him unnecessary heartache. Suppose it's not a trick, and she really has died. We must avoid giving hope prematurely, only for it to later be dashed."

“Yes!” My relief and sheer joy would not let me be still. Lord Simeon understood! I leapt out of my chair and threw my arms around him. “Thank you, Lord Simeon!”

He accepted my embrace with a warm smile. “It’s all because you discussed it with me properly rather than rushing into action on your own. Two heads are better than one.”

I sat down in his lap and kissed his cheek. Lord Simeon bashfully adjusted his glasses. Despite us having exchanged kisses on many occasions by now, affection still left him struggling to conceal his awkwardness at times. It was too adorable for words.

“But,” he continued, “in terms of searching for Miss Michelle, I’m unsure of where to begin. Should we question the wet nurse?”

“I’d prefer it if you refrained from applying too much force to an elderly woman. Your questioning might be a reward for me, but for her, I’m sure it would be terrifying.”

“It’s intended to be somewhat terrifying. It’s *your* response that’s abnormal.”

Abnormal? But his intensity as the Demon Vice Captain is one of Lord Simeon’s greatest charms! Though Lutin had made fun of him for it, for me, seeing an otherwise merciless and strict person be bashful, flustered, and timid in my presence left me fangirling very hard indeed. The stark contrast made him all the more appealing. *Lutin just doesn’t understand!*

“But is there anyone else who might have information?” he replied. “Anyone you have in mind as our next port of call?”

I nodded at Lord Simeon’s question, a grin on my face. *Yes, there is definitely someone I have in mind!* “I can think of a man whom you can question to your heart’s content. He should know more about the man I saw last night. In fact, he proudly hinted at knowing far more about the situation than I did. You needn’t show him any mercy whatsoever.”

Lord Simeon reacted with surprise for a moment, but then he smiled maliciously. He had clearly guessed who I was referring to.

Chapter Nine

Conveniently, our target was to be found in his own room, so there was no need to go on a hunt for him. He responded immediately to a knock on his door, and he gladly opened it when asked. Even in circumstances such as these, he received me with the same jovial, teasing smile as always.

“What an unexpected pleasure that you came to see me of your own accord. Have you finally decided to abandon your fiancé and move on to me?”

“Do you really have a taste for such frivolous women? I’m here purely because I have something to ask you.”

“Well then, please come in.”

He opened the door wider. Lord Simeon appeared from a blind spot in the corridor and walked past me, entering the room before I did. “Your kind offer of hospitality is much appreciated.”

Lutin’s face darkened immediately. “I don’t recall saying that *you* were welcome.”

I stepped out from behind Lord Simeon. “Nor did I say I would be entering alone.”

“What cruel trickery, Marielle,” he lamented in an exaggerated tone. “Your visit sent my heart soaring on high, but you had to knock it back down to earth. I didn’t think you were such a *femme fatale* .”

“If I’m talking to a villain, I’m hardly going to play the saint.”

We barged farther into the room, pushing him back. No one else was present, which was something of an anticlimax, as I’d wondered if the strongman might be serving as his bodyguard again. *Is Lutin not concerned that he might be a target of foul play?*

Of course, this was beneficial for us. If the strongman had been there, Lord Simeon would have made short work of him, but if we could avoid all that bother, so much the better.

“If you’re to play the *femme fatale* , I’d rather you fully committed to it and sneaked over here to see me on your own, without any parental supervision.”

Though he spoke as casually as ever, Lutin glared at Lord Simeon very guardedly.

His words gave Lord Simeon, who already cut an intimidating figure in all black, even more of a threatening quality. Though he was thin as a rake compared to the strongman, his physique was still more imposing than the average gentleman, as you’d expect of a trained soldier. And, having seen his strength in action—in Lutin’s presence, no less—I’d go so far as to call him a monster.

I wondered if it was my imagination that I saw a modicum of fear in Lutin’s eyes?

“You seem awfully stylish in that black coat of yours,” he said. “Planning on going somewhere nice?”

“No, it was a request from Marielle.”

He turned to me with a quizzical expression. “That seems...odd.”

I smiled at him. “It makes such a strong impact, you see. He’s simply so delectable in it.”

Lutin looked at Lord Simeon with disgust. “Funny. I’d have thought the spiffing royal guard uniform would be the one to set ladies’ hearts ablaze. What’s that in your hand, anyway?”

“A prop, that’s all. No need to concern yourself with it.” As Lord Simeon spoke, he lightly slapped the item in question against his gloved palm.

“What game are you two playing here?” Lutin took on a defensive stance, as if he was prepared to flee. Lord Simeon took one step forward, and Lutin retreated a step to match.

“We came here to ask you some questions,” said Lord Simeon. “We’d appreciate it if you would cooperate willingly.”

“Then perhaps you might approach me in a more cooperative manner? It’s not exactly polite to threaten me right from the start.”

“I’m not threatening you. Is there a reason you feel threatened?”

“What a thing to say! You come in here, proudly brandishing that...what is it, a riding crop? Marielle, you must see that you’re engaged to a man who resorts to violence at the drop of a— Hold on, what exactly has you so spellbound?”

Upon catching sight of my expression, Lutin lost all his restless energy. I was busy fighting an intense urge to roll around on the floor. “Ohh... It’s...simply...per...fec...tion!”

“What’s so perfect about this situation!?”

“Don’t you see? Look at the scene I’ve been allowed to witness! The cruel brute cornering the mysterious thief! Dressed all in black like the Grim Reaper, and holding a black riding crop in his hand! Whips that curl and slither like a snake are fine too, but the type of whip that I fangirl over specifically is this straight variety, the riding crop! This sight is so electrifying, I can hardly bear it! It’s everything my maidenly heart yearns for, come to life as if from a dream!”

“Maidenly!? None of that sounds maidenly in the slightest!”

“Marielle, could you please calm down a little?” For reasons I couldn’t fathom at that moment, even Lord Simeon expressed his disapproval. *Goodness gracious... When he furrows his brow like that, ever so slightly, it’s sheer perfection as well.* “If you start behaving so strangely, it makes me feel as though I’ve descended into perversion along with you.”

Lutin let out a sudden breath and leaned against a chair. “You’re sufficiently strange on your own! My word, the two of you seem to have some unusual interests.”

I sat down without asking, as did Lord Simeon. However, while I expected that we’d each take a separate chair, Lord Simeon in fact sat down on the armrest of the chair I chose. He crossed his legs slightly and played with the riding crop in his hands.

I began to scream inside. *Does he mean for me to fangirl myself to death!? I absolutely MUST put this scene in my next book!*

“Typical. A delectable bunny rabbit is right before my eyes, but the guard dog won’t stop baring his fangs, so she remains out of reach. I have no interest in

feeding you treats, so would you kindly hurry up and tell me what this is about?" He sat down across from us. "I can only assume it's related to Miss Michelle."

"It is indeed," I replied. "You've saved us some time. Last night, you said you knew something about the man Lady Michelle was talking to. We'd like you to tell us who he was."

"Why bother asking now? It's too late, isn't it?"

"Do you really believe that? You of all people should know better. The accident was probably faked with the help of the man Lady Michelle was talking to last night. And, considering that Lady Michelle is the one who proposed visiting the holiday home in the first place, she likely had this plan in mind all along. Lady Michelle must still be alive—and I want to find her."

Lutin's expression, his whole mood, shifted in the blink of an eye. All his fear vanished. He rested his chin in one hand and laughed derisively. "If she faked her own death and ran away, why not simply leave her be? If you drag her back against her will and force her to marry the prince, no one will be happy. Next time she might really commit suicide."

It was clear that Lutin also thought Lady Michelle was alive, so I felt no hesitation in continuing along this avenue. "That's not my intention. I hope to work together with her to find a happy resolution to all this. I'm not convinced that secretly running away will really solve Lady Michelle's problem. Where can she possibly go? How will she live? Can that man really support her—and if he can, will she be comfortable living the rest of days in perpetual fear of being spotted? It's hard to believe she'd be truly happy. It also feels cruel to leave His Highness in this state. It's painful to be forced to accept that the person who was walking beside you only yesterday has suddenly passed away. I don't want him to keep suffering like that."



“But let’s suppose you do find Miss Michelle. All possible outcomes are sad for him, are they not? I’d argue it’s better to leave him with the beautiful memories of who he *thought* she was. It would also let him keep a measure of his princely self-respect.”

His response felt cold and emotionless, and I was desperate to raise my objections. However, Lord Simeon replied first. “You’re selling His Highness short. He’s a thoughtful and considerate man, and more accepting than you realize. He’s not the sort of narrow-minded person who can’t take other people’s feelings and particular circumstances into consideration.” He wasn’t merely objecting because his hackles had been raised. He presented all this with a matter-of-fact voice and face. “His Highness wouldn’t resort to accusations and punishments. He would find the most suitable way to resolve the matter for everyone. It would have been better if everything possible had been revealed to His Highness, and the decision left in his hands. I’ll grant that Miss Michelle couldn’t have known that, but still, it would have been best.”

Lutin scoffed. “The words of a faithful lapdog. You could never speak ill of your master, of course.”

“I’m merely speaking the truth. Even though he is the crown prince, and even though we originally became close because I was told to be his school chum, if he were a person who wasn’t worthy of my time, I’d have broken away from him long ago. In fact, if I felt any unease about him inheriting the throne, I’d have used my influence to arrange for him to be disinherited. We nobles have the power to do such things...and, when necessary, we see ourselves as *obligated* to do such things. That is, to be frank, the very purpose of political influence. If all power is concentrated in a single monarch, and there’s no way of holding them back if they begin to lead us astray, it leaves the kingdom’s future in grave danger. We share the duty to protect the kingdom by supporting the royal family and, at times, criticizing their decisions. And no one understands that more clearly than the royal family itself.”

Lutin remained silent, and Lord Simeon continued. “His Highness is a master worthy of our allegiance—one who works tirelessly on our behalf. Accordingly, we must serve him and pay him the respect he deserves. If either side renounced their duty, it would upset the balance and lead to the kingdom’s

ruin. As of now, I feel that Lagrange is maintaining the balance exceptionally well. Wouldn't you agree? After all, isn't that exactly what you came here to investigate, Earl Cialdini?"

I was somewhat surprised by Lord Simeon's words, as I had not been thinking about anything but Lady Michelle. Was this related to Princess Henriette's impending marriage into the Lavian royal family? If Lutin—that is to say, Earl Cialdini, the Lavian intelligence operative—was investigating the political situation in Lagrange, there must surely be a connection.

"In the House Pautrier incident, for example, you carried out a burglary using an elaborate scheme...or so it seemed to the outside world. Your true goal remained hidden. It was much the same when you targeted House Bachelet before that, was it not? Earl Pautrier is fully retired by now, and no longer has full use of his body, but back when he was still active, he was an important army leader. Baron Bachelet, meanwhile, is involved with the Ministry of Finance. They, like all your other victims, had some connection to the most important branches of the Lagrangian government. In many cases it wasn't a member of the house itself that was a key figure, but a frequent visitor. One such as myself, for instance."

Lord Simeon softly and steadily beat the riding crop against his own shoulder. Even after hearing him declare himself a key figure, I would defy anyone to be brave enough to laugh. Admittedly, it was true that he held a number of titles. He was the heir to the prestigious House Flaubert, he was Vice Captain of the Royal Order of Knights, and...

"I am the man often described as the future king's closest confidant. I am a personal friend of the crown prince, and it's likely that in the future I'll have a huge amount of influence on the kingdom's political affairs. It's only natural for you to have a great deal of interest in me, no?"

Lutin did not answer, but his fearless smile was now accompanied by a piercing sharpness in his blue eyes.

"The primary reason you spent so long infiltrating the various houses before stealing the treasures is that you needed to remain undercover for as long as possible. You had to observe all the comings and goings, and overhear

everything you could. You also stole more from those houses than just gemstones and works of art. When we investigated more deeply, we established that all sorts of letters, records of social engagements, and so on, had gone missing as well. The heads of those houses were so preoccupied with Lutin's theft of their precious treasures that they didn't even notice the other items were gone."

Letters? I thought to myself. *Records of social engagements? Why would he take those? And...when had Lord Simeon investigated all that? Didn't he tell me that investigating a thief was outside of the royal guards' jurisdiction?*

And yet, if those letters were written between people in important positions... If their contents were related to national politics, or diplomacy, or military affairs... It occurred to me that perhaps each individual letter might not have included any key information, but by putting them all together, he might have been able to draw connections between them. From mere fragments, he could have gained all sorts of confidential information.

And he had been doing that as a means to investigate Lagrange's political landscape?

"Well," Lord Simeon added, "I'm sure you also took your time because you enjoyed the thrill of it all, but nonetheless, your main goal was to gather intelligence, was it not? And your ulterior motive for joining us here in this holiday home was to observe His Highness at close range."

I looked up at Lord Simeon, flabbergasted. There I was thinking he'd spent all this time in a continual state of turmoil due to me or Lutin or both, when underneath, this is what he'd been focused on. Was this also the reason he had been so busy lately? Was he preoccupied with this investigation? While betraying absolutely nothing on his face, he'd gathered evidence and concluded his search without me realizing a thing. That was simply the kind of person he was. *My word,* I thought, *he really is just so...* "Wonderful..."

I nestled up close to him. *I'd expect no less from the vicious military officer I love so much. The Vice Captain is so conniving, I can hardly stand it!*

"Marielle," said Lord Simeon, "we are in the middle of a serious conversation."

“Must you behave so amorously toward him right in front of me?” added Lutin. “It’s very disheartening.”

They both stared at me. I realized I was trembling in a fangirl frenzy.

Lord Simeon cleared his throat and returned to the matter at hand. “The engagement to Miss Michelle must have seemed an ideal opportunity to form a more detailed opinion of His Highness. After all, you haven’t yet committed to quelling the Easdale faction. For now, you’re still maintaining the balance. It’s beginning to lean slightly toward the Lagrange side, but the scales haven’t tipped all the way yet. Depending on what you learn during your visit, you’re still considering letting the negotiations break down and allowing Lavia to ally with Easdale instead. And that is precisely why I intend to show you that if you are betting on Lavia’s future, His Highness is by far the safest bet.”

His voice filled with confidence, Lord Simeon fixed his gaze on Lutin. Thus far, Lutin had seemed evasive and resistant to every word, but at this point, he finally nodded his agreement.

For the first time, I felt able to believe that he truly was a diplomat. As he responded, he no longer seemed highly amused by the situation, nor did he make any jokes. Instead, he wore the determined face of a negotiator. “If that’s how you wish to play it, then I’ll gladly play along. I’ll be watching with great interest to see what Prince Severin does once all is revealed. But no telling him in advance about this conversation, of course. Cheating is against the rules.”

“There’s no need to tell me that. Nor is there any need to forewarn His Highness.”

Lord Simeon smiled as if all this was simply a matter of course. For me, however, the scene of two men making a wager set my heart racing. *How dashing they both seem! I definitely want to put this in one of my books.* But I couldn’t help noticing they didn’t settle the deal with a handshake. *I suppose they fundamentally have too little affinity for one another to do that...*

In any case, this meant Lutin had agreed to cooperate. I immediately leaned forward. “So, tell us. Where is Miss Michelle right now?”

“I don’t know that much,” he replied. “I know a few details about the wet nurse and the man, but not much more.”

“Aha, but you do know about the man, at least. Well, go on. Who is he?”

“He’s a manservant named Gaston. He’s mainly entrusted with manual labor. You seem inclined to believe that he eloped with her or some such, but my understanding is that Miss Michelle became acquainted with him only recently, and that they don’t have any romantic attachment to speak of.”

“But in that case, why did she put her trust in him?”

“Who can say? I’m not privy to any of the specific details. However, I’ve heard that the man is not paid very well considering how grueling his work is, and it seems he has a lot of grievances with his employer. That said, he’s apparently worked at a number of different houses, never for more than a short stretch of time, which leads me to suspect that he himself might be the root of the problem.”

I was mildly astonished. “You know an awful lot about the servants’ lives.”

“You were conducting similar investigations, I believe. Only, I heard the story directly from the serving girls, without even putting on a disguise. The young women couldn’t help but have a keen interest in their male colleagues. If a certain someone was fond of gambling and always flat broke, or had a terrible drinking habit, then they’d be the first to know. Yes, it seems Gaston’s appearance is acceptable enough, but on the inside he is quite worthless.”

So, while Lutin was telling me to stay away, he had been busy gathering information? If he were an ally, he’d be a valuable one indeed. But it was concerning that Lady Michelle’s accomplice was rumored to be such a scoundrel. “I wonder if it was wise for Lady Michelle to rely on a man like that...”

Lord Simeon stood. “Since we know his name, catching him should be a simple matter of going downstairs and asking after him. We should do it right away.”

I nodded and rose from my seat as well. I wondered for a second if Lutin would join us, but he stood without being asked. “I said I would play along, and I meant it. I’ll help retrieve Miss Michelle and make sure that she has a reunion with Prince Severin. Oh, and if Marielle will be joining us, she should dress properly for the cold weather. Or would you prefer me to warm her up again?”

Lord Simeon's eyebrow twitched in response to these deliberately chosen words. *Lutin really does not miss any opportunity to provoke. And here I'd started to see him in a different light.* "I appreciate the offer, but I have a far better source of warmth than that stove of yours." I placed a hand on Lord Simeon's arm.

Lord Simeon cleared his throat awkwardly and then said, "Marielle, leave the search for Miss Michelle to the two of us. You should wait in your room."

"Goodness, after all this you mean to exclude me? I can't allow that. Besides, if she's found by Lutin, who looks dangerous at first glance, and you, who are a force to be reckoned with in terms of sheer intimidation, why, she'll be left quaking in fear. You can't simply set a hunting dog and a wolf on a delicate young lady."

"You're comparing me to a dog as well now, are you?"

Ignoring his objections, I walked to the doorway ahead of them both. "I'll be ready to leave in no time flat, so I highly suggest that you wait for me. Otherwise, I'll write a passionate love story about the two of you."

"What kind of a threat is that!?" asked Lutin.

"I thought your readers only liked romance between men and women!" cried Lord Simeon.

"There are some people who like both," I replied. "More than you might expect. And at the very least, I know Julianne would be thrilled."

The two men looked at each other with faces of pure despair. I turned my back on them, hitched up my skirt and ran back to my room.

Our expectations of being able to catch Gaston right away turned out to be somewhat optimistic. When we asked the servants about his whereabouts, we were told that he was out on an errand. He had apparently gone to a nearby town to stock up on coal and groceries for the holiday home.

With an ominous feeling that there might be more to his absence than a mere shopping excursion, I asked one of the servants to check whether his belongings were still in the manor. She made a face at me and demanded to know why I'd ask such a thing, but Lord Simeon and Lutin persuaded her to go and look,

although she did so reluctantly.

Gaston's belongings were nowhere to be found.

The errand had originally been meant as a task for one of the other servants, and Gaston had asked her if she'd mind if he went instead. She had every reason to agree, since it was deathly cold out and the goods to be retrieved were quite heavy. She suspected he might be intending to shirk his duty and meet a girl along the way, but it was relatively common for servants to do these things—and let each other do these things without asking too many questions—so she had not thought anything of it.

The three of us immediately knew his real reason, of course. Lord Simeon summoned his men and sent half of them to track down Gaston. He told the remaining half to continue guarding His Highness while keeping a close watch on Agatha. If it came down to it, there would be no choice but to make Agatha tell us where Lady Michelle was, so he told the latter group to confirm that she was in her room and not let her out of their sight at all costs.

"Is that really enough people for the task at hand?" I asked impatiently. "Surely such a small group of men can't find Gaston when we have so little idea of where he went. We should leave right away and help them."

But Lord Simeon shook his head. "If we all go out wandering all over the countryside, it will only reduce our chances of success. Gaston left using a wagon, so if they follow the grooves left by its wheels, it should be relatively easy to gather reliable information. We should stay here until we have a clear indication of which direction he was moving in."

When he put it that way, his point did seem valid, but I was restless nonetheless. I asked Lutin, "What about your henchmen? Don't you have them hidden away all over the place?"

He shrugged. "I didn't exactly bring a whole crowd of people with me. I don't have any large-scale deceptions planned that would require it."

"How inconvenient!" I stamped my feet in frustration, at which Lutin smiled wryly. I was the only one in such a hurry; Lord Simeon had a composed expression.

“Keep calm,” said Lord Simeon. “He can’t have gone far with a young lady in tow. It’s also entirely likely that they’ve secluded themselves somewhere nearby. After all, those of us staying at the holiday home, including the members of House Montagnier, are only doing so temporarily. We’ll all be gone soon, so rather than risking unwanted eyes seeing their escape, they’ll probably have chosen to hide and wait for us to leave.”

“Yes, indeed,” said Lutin. “If they’ve planned this as meticulously as one would expect, they’ll most definitely have prepared a hiding place. They won’t be expecting any search parties after convincing everyone that Miss Michelle is dead, so there’s no need for them to scamper away like mice. I imagine they’re quite close by.”

If both of them were in agreement, then I was sure they were right. Still, I was eager to confirm that Lady Michelle was safe as soon as possible, so it was a challenge to simply sit and wait.

In an effort to distract myself, I brought up another question that had been bothering me. “How did they make it look as though she fell through the ice in the center of the pond? It would have been far too dangerous to walk across and purposely break a hole in the ice. When the villagers tried to walk across, it began to crack under their feet when they’d barely taken a few steps. Lady Michelle is lighter than them, but even so, I doubt she’d have been able to safely get that far across.”

Lord Simeon stroked his chin as he considered this. “That’s true. Perhaps they filled a barrel with something heavy and pushed it onto the surface of the ice? By the time we arrived, all traces of a barrel being rolled across would have been covered up by the snow that had fallen around the edges of the pond, but it’s likely that the signs were there underneath.”

I clapped my hands together. *Of course!* If a barrel was gently pushed onto the ice, it wouldn’t make a large sudden impact the way people’s footsteps did. If it then kept rolling, it would soon reach a more central point where the ice was thinner. There, the ice would be unable to bear the weight and would crack under the pressure, sending the barrel sinking beneath the surface with a *plonk* . All that remained then was to leave the shawl nearby. Throwing it far enough would be a simple matter of tucking a stone inside it.

“That reminds me,” I said. “His shopping list included coal, didn’t it? I was also meant to retrieve some coal from outside last night. I wonder if there was a particular reason more coal was needed? Did they run out unexpectedly when there should have been plenty?”

“Ah, yes,” Lord Simeon replied. “If they appropriated one barrel full of coal, that would be roughly the right amount of weight, especially if you consider the weight of the barrel itself, and...wait, why did *you* have to go and retrieve coal?”

“Don’t worry about that. My, what a relief! That question has been vexing me all along. One more reason to believe that Lady Michelle is still alive. I’m sure she didn’t really take her own life, and thank goodness for that. Spectacular investigatory skills from the black-hearted military officer!”

“I’d prefer you not to describe every little thing I do as ‘black-hearted,’ if you please. It makes me sound unpleasant and strange.”

“Besides, even I knew that,” Lutin added. “Wait, why are you opening your notebook? You really carry that with you everywhere, don’t you?”

I hurriedly wrote down the entire conversation thus far. Even if I might not use it as source material for a long time, I simply had to make a record to ensure I didn’t forget.

I couldn’t use this case as a model too directly, of course. It involved too many real people experiencing too much pain and heartache, so there was a risk of it upsetting His Highness, Lady Michelle, and others. Still, I hoped to eventually use the structure of it in some form and turn it into a story that would thrill and excite my readers.

Ideally, a story that even Lady Michelle can enjoy. That’s the future I’m striving for.

Lutin expressed some curiosity about my notebook and asked if he could take a look at the contents, but I flatly refused, of course. It contained secrets about all sorts of people—secrets that were not for his eyes. All the names were abbreviated to initials or replaced with randomly chosen substitutes, but anyone with enough background knowledge would know who they referred to. An intelligence operative from a foreign country was the last person I would

allow to read it.

I ran behind Lord Simeon to avoid Lutin's attempt to grab the notebook from my hands. Amused, Lutin tried to follow and reached out for it, but Lord Simeon slapped his hands with the riding crop.

This scene, which I'm sure from the outside looked like nothing but friendly horseplay, was still ongoing when the knights who had gone to track down Gaston returned.

"We found a wagon abandoned by a shed. It bore House Montagnier's crest. We checked with the shed's owner just to be sure, but he showed no sign of recognizing the wagon. It's almost certainly the one that Gaston was driving."

"Excellent work. Lead us there right away."

"Yes, sir."

All of a sudden, we were finally about to set off. At that very moment, however, His Highness arrived and interrupted. "Simeon, what are you up to? You appear to be deploying the knights."

His Highness still thought Lady Michelle was dead, but his outward expression was just as composed as always, as if he'd recovered from his grief already. I wondered how much effort it was taking to maintain that facade. I wanted to find Lady Michelle as soon as possible in order to relieve him of his misery, but at the same time I knew it would force him to confront another painful reality. I feared that ultimately there would be no consolation for the poor prince.

"Apologies," Lord Simeon replied, "there is a matter that has attracted my curiosity, so I'm investigating it. I'll be away from your side for a short time."

His Highness furrowed his brow. "And what exactly is this...matter?"

Lord Simeon bowed his head. "I cannot tell you at this stage. I promise I will report to you in full when I am able, so please forgive me for the time being."

His gaze shifted from Lord Simeon to Lutin, and finally to me. "You've certainly assembled an unusual troupe to take on this investigation. You're even taking Miss Marielle with you?"

"She doesn't seem willing to stay behind."

“Ah, indeed.” His Highness nodded, looking at me as if I was a naughty child. *How unkind! I’m putting in all this effort for his benefit!* “You can leave her in my care, if you prefer.”

Lord Simeon appeared to be considering this option, so I hurriedly grabbed Lutin by the arm. “Certainly not! I will be joining no matter what! Unless you would rather have a passionate love story about the two of you to look forward to.”

Lutin wore a conflicted expression that was rarely seen on his face. “You’re touching me and threatening me all at once. I’m not entirely sure how to feel.”

Lord Simeon sighed. “I understand, Marielle, so kindly get away from *him* .” The word dripped with displeasure. “He’s not safe to touch.”

“Do you have to torment me as well?” said Lutin. “The way you put it, it’s as though I’m dirty somehow.”

“I’m glad to have helped you gain some new self-awareness. Anyway, Your Highness, we’ll be going now.” Lord Simeon pulled me away, ignoring Lutin’s complaint.

His Highness made no further attempt to stop us. “I can’t say this makes all that much sense to me, but if it’s a matter you see fit to investigate, then I’ll leave it in your hands. Do you need me to do anything?”

“Not for the time being. However, you’re not as well guarded as usual, so I’d ask you not to go outside.”

“Understood.”

Lord Simeon lightly bowed his head one last time and then started to walk. I curtsied to His Highness, and tried to convey my feelings with my eyes and face as a substitute for being able to tell him anything. *It’s all right, trust me! Please, don’t worry!*

“Seeing you with such enthusiasm makes me feel endlessly uneasy. I beg you, don’t do anything rash.”

Oh dear, he seems to have gathered entirely the wrong message. How on earth did that happen?

His Highness saw us off, and we mounted the horses that had been brought to us. Lord Simeon asked me, as if it had only just occurred to him, “Are you confident enough on horseback?”

“Yes, I’m perfectly well trained.”

As part of my education in being a proper lady, I had of course been taught how to ride a horse. I’d kept falling off over and over again, and my older brother had laughed at me incessantly. No matter how hard I worked at it, my dressage skills had never improved, and ultimately my teacher had given up on me. Still, I had one strength, and that was making the horse run where I wanted. Delicate control was not so easy, but roughly speaking, I was able to ride a horse.

No, I was not worried at all. I puffed out my chest with pride. Lord Simeon nodded, then signaled his men to lead the way. We set off, following the knights.

Chapter Ten

The wagon was by a shed next to a farmer's field, as if it had been casually left there after being used for some farm work. The horse had been taken away, leaving only the wagon itself, so it blended into the scenery without looking the least bit unnatural.

I was slightly impressed at how well thought out their plan was. If we hadn't consciously gone looking for the wagon, it probably wouldn't have been discovered for a while.

Finding the wagon was only the first step, however. The real search started here. Lord Simeon and Lutin looked for footsteps in the snow and found some leading away from the town. They looked at the road stretching out before them.

"Perhaps they went to the neighboring village?" asked Lutin.

"Or perhaps they're hiding in the forest," Lord Simeon replied.

Since they'd investigated and decided on the rough direction almost immediately, there was no cause for me to interject at all. But still I wondered, *If Lady Michelle is out there, where would she be hiding?*

The road itself was wide and had no dwellings alongside it, only fields. Beyond that was nothing but forests and mountains. If indeed they hadn't gone too far yet, it was feasible that they were in the forest, but it also seemed possible that they had turned off from the road and gone to the nearest village. Only, the country villages tended to be quite sensitive to outsiders turning up on their doorstep. The cat would be out of the bag as soon as they spotted an unfamiliar young noblewoman, so I had the feeling that wasn't the ideal hiding place.

If they were hiding in the forest, as Lord Simeon had suggested, the risk of discovery would be much lower. However, given the time of year, they would have the cold to contend with. *Perhaps they've prepared some sort of cabin as a hideaway?*

Lord Simeon decided to split the search party into two teams. He sent his

subordinates to the neighboring village, while we three were to investigate the forest nearby.

When we reached the pale white trees, we descended from our horses and walked on, leading them by the reins. Lord Simeon took the lead, paying a great deal of attention to our surroundings. Occasionally he turned around, walked past Lutin and me, and took a lengthy look behind us.

Lutin offered me an arm. “Are you having any trouble walking?”

“No, I’m fine.”

I politely refused his offer and continued to traipse through the snow as it crunched under my feet. I’d purposely worn boots that wouldn’t be overly slippery and a dress that wasn’t too long. I’d also spent plenty of time going out walking on my own in the city, so I was hardly a damsel who spent all her days in seclusion.

“Eek!” I cried, as I then tripped on a root hidden in the snow. It seemed I had been overconfident. I fell face-first into the snow, and my horse nudged me with the tip of its nose as if to ask if I was all right.

“It’s quite different from walking in the city,” said Lord Simeon, helping me up, “so please be careful.”

“Ugh, I will...” I wiped down my snow-covered hair and clothes.

I fumbled for my glasses before realizing my horse had them in its mouth. “Oh no! Those aren’t for you to eat. Give them back!”

I hurriedly grabbed them. If they were broken, I would really be in trouble. *Eurgh, they’re drenched in snow and saliva.* I took out my handkerchief and wiped them, then promptly received a headbutt in my back, as if my horse wished me to get a move on. “My word! Why are *you* trying to rush me?”

As Lutin watched my arduous struggle, he was clutching his chest and laughing uproariously. “You and your horse make an excellent comedy duo!”

Lord Simeon, too, had looked away and I could see his shoulders bouncing up and down with mirth.

Hmph!

I borrowed Lord Simeon's arm and proceeded with greater caution. "Can Lady Michelle really be hiding in this sort of place?" I asked. "Even walking through it is a challenge."

Lutin took over the reins of my horse. "Perhaps it was their goal to make us have that thought."

"This forest is not completely unmaintained," said Lord Simeon. "It may be narrow here, but it is a decent path. Locals who know the area would likely have no trouble making their way through."

Lutin added, "And these footsteps must belong to someone. They might have been left by the pair we're searching for, or by villagers who were hunting. Ah, it looks as though someone fell down there recently. Whoever passed through must have been rather like...a certain someone."

"Would you like to experience it too? I'll gladly help you do so."

"I told you, Marielle, don't touch him."

"And I told you not to treat me as if I'm dirty!"

Even though it was winter, the world around us was far from silent. As we walked, birds took off from branches and sent snow falling to the ground in clumps, and rabbits hopped away from us leaving tiny footprints. I wondered if the sounds on the other side of the bushes were being made by foxes or martens.

But aside from the sounds of nature, all we heard for a while was our breathing and the sound of our footsteps in the snow. Though I was getting more used to walking here, it was still rather tiring. Just as I was starting to grow breathless, Lord Simeon suddenly stopped. He wasn't taking a break for my benefit, however. His eyes were fixed straight ahead.

I looked in the same direction, but I still saw nothing but snow and trees. "Lord Simeon?"

"Smoke," he said in a hushed tone.

I cocked my head and tried to catch the scent on the wind. "Can you smell it?" I asked Lutin after a moment.

He sniffed as well. “Not at all. But if there’s smoke up ahead, it means there must be people too.”

“Indeed!” Vigor returned to my tired body. Buoyed by the thought that I only needed to keep going a little longer, I kept moving, and soon I, too, was able to clearly identify the scent of smoke.

“There it is! You’re so impressive, Lord Simeon.”

“Hunting dogs are known for their keen sense of smell,” said Lutin.

“Yes, quite,” replied Lord Simeon. “After all, they have to chase after thieving foxes.”

Leaving the two men alone to scowl at one another, I walked on. Finally, amongst all the snow-covered trees, I came across a slightly dilapidated cabin. It seemed as though it was probably built by villagers for the shared use of hunters and woodcutters. Smoke rose from the chimney—a sure sign that it was currently occupied.

My hopes were raised so high that I could not hold back. I ran as though possessed, even as I almost slipped and fell on the snow. My breath ragged, I ran right up to the cabin.

A horse was tied up outside in the area used for storing firewood. It was wearing a bridle and reins but no saddle. Nor did I see a saddle lying anywhere nearby. This was probably the horse that had been pulling the abandoned wagon.

Lady Michelle...is inside here? In this cabin...?

I steadied my breathing and knocked on the door with a trembling hand.

I could hear the sounds of people moving inside but no one came out. Nor was there any answer to my knock. I knocked once more with the same result, then waited what seemed like rather a long time. Just as I was growing impatient and thinking of shouting through the door, it finally opened a crack.

The face that peered out was that of a young man. He was fairly tall, and not unattractive, but there was nothing pleasant or reassuring in the eyes that looked down at me. He did not give off any sense of being an agreeable

individual.

He glared at me and spoke in a low, threatening tone. “Who are you?”

Struck by this naked hostility and guardedness, I flinched ever so slightly. “Excuse me, I’m looking for...”

Just as I spoke, a hand reached from behind me and pushed the door open slightly further. The man looked past me with some surprise on his face.

“Good day to you, Gaston. We’ve been looking for you. You were supposed to be taking care of an errand, I believe. Would you mind telling us what you’re doing here?”

Lutin forced the door open fully and pushed past me into the cabin, with Lord Simeon following right behind. Gaston was compelled to take a step back.

I poked my head out from behind Lord Simeon, intending to take a look around the inside of the cabin. But before I even saw a thing, my name was called.

“Lady...Marielle!?”

It was a kind voice, somewhat deep, and with a feeling of self-assurance. *It’s her—no doubt about it!*

As I turned to look, the joy that exploded in the moment I saw her almost immediately changed to surprise. “Lady...Michelle...?”

Standing before me was a plainly dressed young man.

No... She only looked that way because she was dressed in men’s clothing. The face was undeniably that of Lady Michelle. However, her beautiful white-blonde hair had been cut off almost entirely.

She stood by the fire with a petrified look on her face. I found myself quite unsure of what to say. “Lady Michelle,” I stammered, “you certainly look...different.”

Lord Simeon and Lutin also looked rather surprised at the sight of her.

Changing her appearance like this really was a decisive move. It meant that even if she was seen, she wouldn’t be recognized straight away. Anyone who

didn’t know her would definitely believe she was a young man. She was relatively tall, and the thick winter clothing hid the curves of her body. A very, very close look revealed that her hair and skin were too pretty, too well cared for, but at first glance, one would never think she was a young lady.

It was another drastic action on top of faking an accident as a cover for running away. It made her seem entirely unlike the fragile person I’d thought she was. In fact, she seemed to be bold and full of courage.

But right now, there was no color in Lady Michelle’s face except the pale white of fear. “Oh...” As she looked over at us, she took a few wandering steps, as if searching for an escape route.

I hurried to reassure her. “It’s all right! Please don’t worry! We’re here as your allies, Lady Michelle! We didn’t come here to apprehend you or force you to go back.”

“But...”

I pushed past Lord Simeon and rushed to Lady Michelle’s side. She looked as though she was about to run away, so I took hold of her hand. “Oh, thank goodness. It’s such a relief to see that you’re all right.”

The warmth in her hands as she squeezed them back enveloped my heart in calm. This sensation told me in no uncertain terms that this person was still alive. I drew my hand up to Lady Michelle’s cheek and silently gave thanks to God. *Thank you. It’s truly a blessing.*

“I just wanted to see with my own eyes that you were all right. I’ve been worried sick about where you might be and what you might be doing.” My eyes grew damp as the joy and relief swept through me. Lady Michelle said nothing, so I continued. “It was too painful, too sad, to think that you might really have died. I had to see for certain that you truly were still alive.”

Before my own feelings could overflow into tears, I felt a few warm droplets on my hand from Lady Michelle. Her lips quivered. “I’m...sorry. I’m...so sorry!”

She crouched down and covered her face. I crouched beside her and put my arms around her. Now she did look fragile, but she embraced me back much more firmly than I expected. It was another physical confirmation that she was

there, alive, and it only made me more joyful.

“There’s no need for that. We know you were backed into a corner. This can’t have been an easy decision, can it? We don’t blame you for it. We’re simply relieved to see you.” I paused. “And...His Highness needs to know as well.”

Upon hearing those last words, Lady Michelle lifted her head. Her cheeks still sodden with tears, she shook her head. “He can’t... You mustn’t tell him...”

“You needn’t worry. He won’t force you to marry him. In fact, we already know that it was impossible to begin with. Only, His Highness is in such a state of grief. Seeing him like that is just too sad. I believe it’s much better to tell him the truth rather than letting him go on believing you’ve died. It will still be difficult for him, being forced to acknowledge that the connection was never possible to begin with, and that he must give up on you, but he’ll get over that in time. Tragic memories of a loved one who died are quite different, however. They’ll remain in his heart forever. I want both you and His Highness to be happy, so let’s all decide on the next step together. His Highness will definitely forgive you—I know it. So will you please be brave and talk to him?”

Lady Michelle stayed silent, with a face that suggested she was deeply troubled and unsure of how to react to my words. I was about to make a further effort to explain when Lutin tapped me on the shoulder.

“Rather than chatting on the floor, why not come over here and discuss this calmly? If you start pressing her for an answer the moment you arrive, of course she won’t know what to say. Besides, I don’t know about you, but I’m exhausted from walking all the way here. A spot of tea would be perfect.”

He pointed to a crude table and chairs, which would allow anyone staying here to comfortably enjoy a light meal. I nodded and stood, urging Lady Michelle to join me.

There were only four chairs, so Gaston sat down on a wooden box in the corner of the room. He seemed to have no will to take part in the discussion, and had been looking away the whole time. Even after sitting down, he stayed deathly silent and did not meet anyone’s eyes.

We didn’t need to talk to him for the time being, so we ignored him and sat at the table. Lady Michelle and I sat across from one another, while Lutin sat next

to her, and Lord Simeon sat beside me. Lutin had suggested tea, but alas, there didn't appear to be a teapot or cups anywhere in the cabin.

"I'm sorry," said Lady Michelle. "None of the provisions are here yet. Agatha is supposed to bring them later."

"Oh well," Lutin replied. "It's not as though one really needs to be drinking tea at a moment like this. A chair and a fire to warm us are more than enough."

Lord Simeon interjected, "If your throat is dry, there's plenty of water outside. I'd have no objections to you leaving and burying your face in it."

"I'm not so desperate and hard done by that I need to eat snow to survive!"

I decided it was better to stay out of their bickering. After seeing them go at it a number of times now, I had the feeling they were actually becoming rather good friends.

I smiled at Lady Michelle in an effort to reassure her. "You don't need to keep apologizing. I'm sorry too for surprising you like that. I was just so happy to see you, I got a little carried away."

"But how can you be happy to see me when you know I'm a liar?" She hung her head as though she could hardly even bear to be there.

I shook my head. "It's not as though you *wanted* to lie, though. You just couldn't go against your father's orders. Isn't that right?"

She did not reply, so I went on.

"I know it's rather inappropriate to talk of it so directly, but...I understand that you're not really Marchioness Bernadette's child—that you were born outside of House Montagnier. The marquess is the one who wanted to hide that fact and present you as a candidate for His Highness's hand, wasn't he?"

With an air of resignation, Lady Michelle closed her eyes and nodded firmly. "That's right. I am not a trueborn daughter of House Montagnier. My mother was originally a lady of the evening working at Tarentule."

Gosh! I thought. *I wonder if the Three Flowers knew her?*

"She caught the attention of my father, who was a frequent client of Tarentule, and he took her under his wing. She lived in a house he bought for

her in the city, and he visited her often. This continued until quite recently, in fact. Until last winter, when my mother caught a terrible cold and passed away."

"My condolences." I had guessed that her real mother was probably no longer alive. *So,* I thought, *it was only after this that Lady Michelle moved in with the marquess's family and made her debut in society?*

"Thank you," she replied, "but I'm no longer in a state of grief over my mother's passing. I'm not a child, and I have the fortune that she left me. I also had no particular desire for my father's support, but he moved me into the main house and ordered me to live as his trueborn daughter."

As Lady Michelle confessed, the men listened in silence. Even Lutin refrained from making light of the situation.

"I knew ever since my childhood that he didn't have any feelings of parental love toward me. All along, he had told me that one day he would make me marry for the benefit of his house."

She spoke in a composed manner, holding back her tears. She let out a resigned sigh filled with disgust toward her father.

"For that man, a daughter is nothing but a tool to bring profit to the family by being married off. To ensure from an early stage that he could use me as intended, he announced my existence to society—just my name—and pretended from the start that I was his wife's child. I expect he was aiming for the crown princess's seat all along. He'd have been forced to abandon that ambition if His Highness had gotten married sooner, but it took him a long time to choose a partner, so House Montagnier had a chance after all, and his eagerness only grew. When the invitation to that garden party arrived, he very literally danced with joy. He ordered me to win the prize and become crown princess no matter what. I was doubtful that it would happen, but in an ironic twist of fate, His Highness really did choose me."

Lady Michelle sighed again, with an expression that suggested she was entirely at a loss as to what to do next.

"Out of all those invited—the most beautiful, most dazzling young ladies in high society, from the most influential families—why did he have to choose

me? If I'd known it would happen, I'd have used any means necessary to avoid attending the party, but as soon as he chose me, it was already too late. I could no longer simply confess that I am a love child. I was deceiving the royal family, so I doubt my confession would have been met with a mere slap on the wrist. Not to mention that House Montagnier's reputation would be dragged through the mud. I could take a cold and detached view of that, see it as my father getting his just deserts, but the idea was too much for me. I'd feel too sorry for his wife and son."

"Despite the way Marchioness Bernadette has treated you?" I asked. *And Lord Camille's attitude has been rather heartless as well.*

I was about to express my further skepticism, but Lady Michelle replied, a bittersweet smile on her face.

"Yes. I can't honestly say that I like them, but...isn't it only natural that his wife would hate me? No one can be expected to show kindness to his husband's mistress, or the mistress's child. I feel sorry for the marchioness. I don't have an amicable relationship with her, but all along I've felt that I was the one doing her wrong by my presence."

But, regardless of what her mother had done, Lady Michelle herself is perfectly innocent! Few people would show that much consideration for a person who hates them.

Although His Highness had fallen in love at first sight, it was clear that there was more to love about her than just her looks. She was a very kind and reasonable person. His Highness had no doubt seen that upon spending more time with her.

I wondered if their engagement really was beyond all hope. Her father was still a marquess, so it's not as though she was entirely of common blood. *Her mother was a lady of the evening, though, which will make things rather difficult...*

"My father was ecstatic when he chose me," she continued, "but all I felt was terrible dread. I knew I wouldn't be able to keep lying forever. There'd surely be people who noticed some irregularities, and the servants could have leaked it to the outside world at any time. If the royal family investigated in detail, I'm sure

they'd have discovered the truth. I knew I had to wipe the board clean somehow before that happened. And yet, my circumstances did not permit me to refuse the proposal. I decided it would be best if I died...and that if I died in an unforeseen accident, no one would be blamed for it. It seemed to be the cleanest resolution for all involved."

Lady Michelle's confession was almost entirely in line with my expectations. There was only one aspect I still didn't understand, and that was Gaston's involvement. "So you weren't planning on eloping with this man?"

I turned my eyes towards Gaston, and Lady Michelle returned a cry of "Elope!?" She shook her head. "N-no, the very thought of... Absolutely not."

Lord Simeon and Lutin both looked at Gaston. He averted his gaze as though he was very uncomfortable with the situation. He stood and muttered, "I'll gather some firewood."

He left the cabin before we could stop him. The fire in the hearth was far from dying, and several pieces of firewood still lay in wait nearby. It seemed he had simply run away, probably with no intention of returning.

It made sense that Gaston would want to escape from a cabin full of nobles, so I decided it was better to leave him be. Lady Michelle also let him go without a word of objection. After the door closed behind him, she went on. "He was helping me, that's all. It was too difficult for Agatha and I alone to make it look as though I had fallen in the pond. We explained the circumstances and enlisted his help."

Lutin interjected, "Of course, Gaston can't go back to House Montagnier now. He'd be fired without so much as a letter of recommendation for his next workplace. Which means he can't have agreed to help you for free."

Lady Michelle nodded. "You're right. I promised him remuneration. He already wanted to quit his job, so he accepted a fee of fifty thousand algiers."

Lutin whistled crudely. "Fifty thousand! That's a generous sum."

He was not wrong. A commoner could probably live off that amount of money for three years.

"Remember, I have the inheritance from my mother. The money she saved up

while working at Tarentule was a considerable sum on its own, and she had a sizable jewelry collection. My father also gave her many gifts. I had always imagined I would get a job at some point, but in fact, the fortune I inherited is so vast that I could live my entire life without working a day."

"Lady Michelle," I said, "you shouldn't say anything else in front of this man."

Lady Michelle stared in puzzlement. "Why not?"

Lutin screwed up his face. "I'm not about to steal her fortune."

"What guarantee do we have of that? It's simply too dangerous for you to be around money or jewels."

Lord Simeon turned an icy glare on him as well.

Lutin shrugged his shoulders with an air of resignation. "I choose my targets in advance. Besides, does it look like there are any jewels tucked away inside this tiny cabin? Where, I ask you, am I going to steal them from?"

He raised a good point. I looked around the room, but I couldn't see any plausible hiding place.

"The money and jewels are all stored in the bank," Lady Michelle explained. "The house where my mother lived still houses a few antiques and works of art, but I have hardly anything with me right now."

Lord Simeon opened his mouth for the first time. "How is your property being administered?"

She recoiled a bit before replying, as though speaking to him made her uncomfortable. "Well, the house is currently locked and unoccupied."

"Who has the key?"

"I have it with me. After leaving here I intended to return to the house for a short time to retrieve mementos of my mother and such."

"And the bank deeds? Do you have those with you as well?"

"Yes." Lady Michelle's eyes turned away from him and toward a corner of the cabin. Not far from where Gaston had been sitting lay a scrunched up overcoat and a small bag. Upon laying eyes on them, Lady Michelle suddenly seemed to

grow suspicious.

Before she could stand up, Lord Simeon did.

He made straight for the door and tried to open it, but it barely moved aside from making a loud rattle. “Ugh...”

“Lord Simeon?”

“You must be joking,” said Lutin.

Lutin and I both stood as well. Lord Simeon shook the door a few times, then tutted. “It won’t open. It’s been bolted shut from the outside.”

“What!?” I cried. *What’s going on? We’re locked in? Who did this? Well, it must be Gaston, there’s no one else who could have done it, but...why?*

Lady Michelle let out a shriek. I hurriedly turned around and saw her kneeling down in front of her belongings.

“It’s gone... The pouch that had the key and the deeds inside it is gone!”

“Oh dear.” Lutin scratched his head. “It seems as though he was the one you should have been careful of, not me.”

“Gaston...stole them?” I asked. “But...”

“It surely doesn’t come as too great a surprise. I told you he didn’t have an especially good reputation. This very day, he said he was going out to buy goods for the manor, then he buggered off with the cash still in his hands. He had already committed one theft before we even arrived.”

I turned to Lord Simeon. “What does ‘buggered off’ mean!?”

“Is now the time to be asking that!? Besides, I’d rather you didn’t know!”

Lutin chuckled. “So even a young lady with your tendencies doesn’t know an expression like that. It means he ran away.”

“You don’t need to learn degenerate language like that!” said Lord Simeon. “Why are you writing it down!? Now, Miss Michelle, is there anything else missing?”

“N-no, I don’t think so. But without those, I...”

“It’s all right, Lady Michelle.” I put the notebook away and smiled at her. Lord Simeon and Lutin had not panicked at the loss of these precious items, and neither had I. *Letting you escape from under our noses was a blunder, Gaston, but I hope you don’t think you’ve already won just because you trapped us in here. Lady Aurelia has already played that game with me, so this is just the same sorry plan, reheated.* “No matter how fast Gaston tries to run, if Lord Simeon gives chase, he’ll catch him right away. We’ll definitely retrieve your valuables. So...don’t worry.”

As I spoke, I looked at the window. Even if the door was barred, the window could not be blocked without literally boarding it up. There was a lock on the inside, but none on the outside. The storm shutters were the kind that opened out upwards and downwards, so if they were shut, it would have been a simple matter of pushing them—and in any case, they had been left open, with plenty of light streaming in from outside. And even if the window itself had been jammed shut somehow, the window, unlike the door, would smash if hit with a chair. With a bit of care to avoid the fragments of broken smashed, we could escape with ease.

All your plans are about to go up in smoke, Gaston. If you think you can get away, you’re sorely mistaken!

I went to open the window, a proud smile on my face...but then the world before my eyes suddenly turned bright red.

“What...?”

For a moment I didn’t understand what had happened. I stood fixed in place. Lord Simeon pulled me back from the window.

“I see,” said Lutin. “So he started a fire.”

“What? But... What!?”

The situation finally began to register, but I had no idea how to react. On the other side of the glass was a curtain of flame. The window that had almost been our escape route was now blocked entirely by the raging inferno.

“And for it to grow this intense,” Lutin continued, “he must have sprinkled some oil around first.”

“We were somewhat careless,” said Lord Simeon.

Both of them had frustrated expressions, and understandably so. *I’m sorry, Gaston, I take back everything I just said. You’re an evil villain! You’re not only trying to commit theft, but murder as well!*

My voice wavering, I asked, “Is there no other way to escape?”

“If we could get to the roof...” Lutin began. “But no, there’s no way. We could never climb up the chimney.” He groaned and his mouth distorted into a half-smile.

I looked at the chimney. I wasn’t sure it was even wide enough for a person to fit inside. Besides, a fire had been burning in the fireplace this whole time, so it would be too hot to enter.

There were only two exits: the door and the window. The barred door, and the burning window. Which to choose...?

I heard a grunt of exertion.

It seemed the one who decided quicker than everyone else was, unexpectedly, Lady Michelle. With a bold and resolute motion, she had begun to charge into the door. *So much for the quiet and meek Lady Michelle! I knew all along that she was made of stronger stuff.*

I wondered if I should join her in this attempt, but Lord Simeon held me back.

“You’ve no need to worry about this. Stand back.”

Lord Simeon went over to the door. Lutin put a hand on Lady Michelle’s shoulder. “I’ll take over for you. I’m stronger, and my body is heavier.”

She withdrew with a polite apology, and she and I stood together and watched. Lord Simeon and Lutin worked in unison, repeatedly slamming into the door. The whole cabin shook each time, and the door clattered. It was taking longer than I had expected. The fire still burned beyond the window—a terrifying sight. The wall surrounding the window started to change color, and tendrils of smoke began to rise from it. Soon the glass broke, unable to withstand the heat, and tongues of flame burst through the hole.

The room filled with heat and smoke in an instant. I could hardly breathe.

There was nowhere to run in the cramped room. My skin began to feel like it was being scorched.

Lord Simeon noticed my choking coughs. “Crouch down as low as possible and cover your noses and mouths!”

Lady Michelle and I crouched by the wall and tried not to panic.

Over and over again, Lord Simeon and Lutin threw themselves at the door, and it began to have an effect. First the hinges broke, then the bolt, and then the door finally flew open. But this sent a new rush of air into the cabin, feeding the fire, making it roar up. I screamed and held my head in my hands. Lord Simeon ran over and lifted me up. Lutin pulled up Lady Michelle as well, and we ran outside. As the flames threatened to engulf us, we escaped them by a hair’s breadth.

At last we were outside and out of danger.

“Are you all right?” asked Lord Simeon.

“Yes,” I replied uneasily.

He lowered me to the ground. Both of us were drenched with sweat—a first for the icy winter. For once, I couldn’t feel the cold at all.

Lady Michelle and Lutin also took a moment to get their breath back. When I turned back to look at the cabin, I shuddered. The flames had overwhelmed it almost completely.

“Oh!” I cried in a panic. “We have to save the horses!” We had left them tied up outside the cabin.

But Lord Simeon shook his head and stopped me. “No need. It looks as though they were set free some time ago and have run off.”

“Really?”

Though, now that he said it, I could see no sign of them. Nor any sign of Gaston, of course. He seemed to have set the horses free so that even if we escaped, we wouldn’t be able to chase after him.

I seriously underestimated you, Gaston. My opinion has changed completely...no matter how irritating that is!

“Then, what should we do? Is there still time to catch him if we spread the word and arrange a search party? Or...perhaps it’s more urgent to send someone to Lady Michelle’s house, and her bank...”

“It’s not as bad as all that,” Lord Simeon replied in a casual tone before whistling with his fingers. He sounded out a rhythm—long, short, short, then long again. Moments later, his horse reappeared from amongst the trees and came trotting through the snow back to him.

“Gosh! What a clever horse!”

“The result of proper training.” He smiled boastfully as he put his gloves back on. The horse brushed its nose against him, fawning on him.

The horse I’d borrowed then returned as well. I was about to stroke it, but it suddenly licked my face. I didn’t know if this meant it liked me or was mocking me.

“Your horse has gone missing, I suppose,” Lord Simeon said to Lutin.

“I imagine Gaston rode off on my horse, since it had a saddle on it. The one that’s still missing belonged to the marquess...although I doubt it can have gone far.”

Lord Simeon investigated the tracks left in the surrounding snow, then mounted his horse. “I’ll go after Gaston, so please wait here.” He looked at Lutin. His voice took on a tone of intense displeasure. “However reluctantly, I leave matters here in your hands.” For a moment he averted his eyes just slightly, looking up at the trees, before returning his gaze to Lutin.

“Are you sure I can be trusted?”

“Very sure.”

Lutin smiled teasingly and put an arm around my shoulders. “Then you may leave with full confidence. I’ll gladly take over responsibility for Marielle.”

Lord Simeon did not rise to this bait and returned only a cruel laugh. “If you lay a finger on her, I suggest you come up with an epitaph for your gravestone in advance. I’ll be sure to inscribe it exactly as written.”

Having expressed his bloodlust for a moment, he kicked his horse’s side and

sped off like the wind. I watched as he vanished before my eyes.

Lutin shrugged. “As ever, he has the eyes of a hired killer. How can a respectable earl’s son have a bearing that puts even a professional to shame? Marielle, are you sure he’s not hiding some sort of terrible secret? Rethink your marriage while there’s still—”

At that point, he turned to face me and froze, swallowing his words. Lady Michelle had a rather shocked expression as well.

But I simply could not hold back anymore. “Oh my, oh goodness, Lord Simeon is so incredible! I want him to torment me even *more* maliciously!”

I barely stopped myself from rolling around in the snow, such was the state of fangirl agony I had been left in. The sight of Lord Simeon leaving was just so perfect, I couldn’t bear it. That vicious manner of his was too much! It was the very essence of Lord Simeon!

As I gazed spellbound at the road where Lord Simeon had been moments before, Lutin grumbled, “But I’m the one he was tormenting.”

“That was the best part!”

Wow, he really doesn’t understand at all. If only I had someone here to share this with. Julianne and I would stoke the flames of our fangirl passion together!

Unfortunately, Lutin was not so understanding. “You really are very strange. Not that I wasn’t aware of this, but it bears repeating.”

Lady Michelle looked bewildered and said, “He indeed seems like a wonderful person. Although, he does scare me a little.”

It seemed she was concerned enough for my feelings that she at least attempted to agree with my sentiment. But alas, I had no one there who truly shared my feelings, so I decided to talk to my horse about how dashing and impressive Lord Simeon was until I was satisfied.

Chapter Eleven

When my fangirl fire finally cooled, there was nothing left but to wait.

“I hope he finds Gaston quickly,” I said.

“Perhaps he’s already failed, but he’s too embarrassed to come back after making such a big show of riding off.”

I glared at Lutin, exasperated. “If he can’t simply catch up to him, he’ll think of another plan on the spot. He’s too skilled to waste any time.”

Perhaps, I thought, he had returned to the holiday home temporarily in order to mount a search party. He might have decided that was more effective than searching alone.

“He may be very skilled at his job,” Lutin replied, “but what about as a fiancé? He’s a small man, entirely strait-laced, and no fun at all.”

“He’s serious and trustworthy—and in what way is he small? He’s very open-hearted.”

“You say that even though he does his damnedest to hem you in?”

“Yes. I doubt he’ll ever feel like extending his generosity to you, but he’s touched me with a heart as big as the ocean. And like the ocean, it’s usually gentle, but sometimes the waves grow rough and choppy. The storm of love can be harsh and relentless, but it’s indescribably sweet at the same time.”

“Are you sure he isn’t simply showing you what you want to see? You are, after all, a young lady with little experience of the wider world. I could teach you about real love.”

“I thought deceiving people by showing them what they want to see was *your* specialty.”

We’d gradually become embroiled in an argument unrelated to the situation at hand. As ever, Lutin seemed to find nothing but amusement in my responses. His mockery annoyed me, but it was a better distraction than just standing around staring blankly. *Could he be doing that on purpose?* I considered. *No, it*

couldn't be.

Our bickering was cut short by a quiet interjection from Lady Michelle. "I'm...sorry."

We stopped and looked at her. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"It's my fault that you're in such trouble." She hung her head in shame, although her hair didn't hide her face. It was so short that it really did look like a man's haircut. It still seemed like such a shame. *I know it was a necessary part of her disguise, but her hair was so pretty!* "I asked Gaston to help, and it put all of you in danger."

"Gaston's the one at fault," I replied. "There's no need for you to feel responsible for his actions."

Lady Michelle shook her head. She looked up at us for a moment, then despondently lowered her head again. "I...I knew that he was a difficult person, because...originally, he was threatening me."

"Threatening you?" I replied, surprised.

Lady Michelle nodded.

I looked at Lutin, and he was listening with a face that suggested this was all quite obvious. *Did he know about this already? Just how much did he know about Gaston?*

"He happened to learn my secret, purely by chance, and...he came to me demanding money, or he would tell everyone. That's why I thought it would be better to ask him to join in with the plan."

"A bold move," I said.

It seemed that Lady Michelle was very strong indeed when her back was against the wall. She had made that clear over and over again by now. She was kind and gentle, but unyieldingly strong at her core—and, all things considered, didn't that make her perfect princess material? *Is there really no way for them to be happy together after all?* It wasn't as though Lady Michelle had run away from his Highness because she didn't like him. If the issue of her social status could be resolved somehow, perhaps it was still possible for them to marry.

When things have calmed down, I'll try to look for a way.

"Your secret? But the servants already knew that you're not Marchioness Bernadette's daughter, didn't they?"

"Well, yes, but..."

Her face grew quite troubled, so I hurriedly withdrew my question. "Oh, my apologies. I understand if you're not comfortable talking about it. I won't force you."

"Sorry again..."

It's fine if we don't go into detail at this stage, I told myself. *Perhaps she'll open up to me when we find a moment for the two of us to chat alone.*

Instead I asked, "Did Gaston readily agree to your plan?"

"Yes. When I offered fifty thousand algiers, he jumped at the chance. He said it would be better than continuing to do such horrible work while occasionally harassing me for petty sums of cash. Though in the end, it seems his aim was not only fifty thousand, but my entire fortune."

"I can't say I'm surprised," said Lutin, laughing. "Anyone who would try to extort you like that is the type of person who won't let a victim out of their jaws until they're bled dry. He knew that you had a hefty fortune, so he would never have been satisfied receiving only fifty thousand of it."

Lady Michelle nodded with a look of understanding. "Indeed. I also suspected that he would try to demand more in the future. Only, my plan was to disappear—and even if Gaston did come after me, by that time, my connection to Prince Severin would have been thoroughly extinguished, and his threats would be meaningless."

So Lady Michelle's secret is something that would be an impediment to marrying His Highness—is that what she's saying? But what else could there be aside from the circumstances of her birth?

"Besides, to even give him the fifty thousand algiers I promised him, I would first have to convincingly fake my death, escape successfully, and withdraw the money from the bank. There seemed to be little danger of him doing anything

before I achieved that."

"But because we followed you here," said Lutin, "it interfered with the plan and made him panic. He must have thought that instead of receiving the reward you'd promised him, he was about to be treated as your kidnapper. Even with the best of luck, he was still sure to be turfed out of House Montagnier without so much as a word. So why wouldn't he grab the key to the treasure and run?"

I cocked my head. "But even if he has the deeds, will the bank hand over the money just like that? If the owner of the deeds isn't present in person, they would normally go through a much more arduous identity verification process than usual. From his appearance, Gaston also doesn't belong to the right class to be withdrawing such a large sum of money. Surely they would immediately suspect it was a theft."

With a cheerful tone, Lutin said, "Perhaps he thought that if he dressed up finely enough, it would work? Only rich people use banks, Marielle. Those of Gaston's stature have no experience of them whatsoever. I can't imagine he has any real idea of their precautions and procedures."

I nodded. So even if the worst happened and Gaston managed to escape with the deeds, the chances of him being able to steal Lady Michelle's fortune were low.

"In that case, let's not torment ourselves thinking about it any longer. No matter what happens, your fortune will be protected, Lady Michelle. And in any case, Lord Simeon is certain to catch him!"

"This would normally be the moment where I would make a derisive comment. I wouldn't be so confident about that, or some such. But, honestly, I don't think the likes of Gaston will be able to escape from that terror of a man, so I'm sure it's just as Marielle says."

I smiled at him. "My, this is a rare privilege. Are you actually acknowledging Lord Simeon's skills?"

Lutin puffed up his chest. "If he lets a half-baked nothing like this slip through his fingers, after he saw through *my* actions and caught *me* red-handed, I'll never forgive him. Of course I expect the Vice Captain to catch his prey and bring back the trophy."

“How disgusting,” I replied. “You’re just pretending to acknowledge Lord Simeon’s skills, while in fact you’re singing your own praises.”

I shrugged dismissively and turned my back on him. My gaze was focused on the narrow path again to wait for Lord Simeon’s return.

That was when I caught sight of the group of men walking towards us from amongst the trees.

There was no sign of Lord Simeon among them, or any of his knights. Their ages varied from young to middle-aged to elderly. For a moment I thought they might have been locals who had come here after noticing the fire, but I soon realized that was not the case. They were dressed too well for that...and had too dangerous an air about them.

Lutin grabbed me by the arm and moved me behind him. “What a bother. I didn’t expect them to follow me here.”

I looked at them, and at him. “Who are these people? Are they friends of yours?” I paused. “Wait, I’ve just remembered something quite worrying.”

I’d forgotten amongst all the other commotion, but Lutin was a possible target of foul play. Could these men be the ones who meant to do him harm?

One of the older men took a step forward and spoke to Lutin in Lavian. “Earl Cialdini. Good day to you.” *It seems I might have been right!* “Apologies for accosting you so suddenly, but we are...rather eager to talk to you.”

“Must it be right now?” he replied. “As you can see, I’m enjoying a frolic in the snow with my lover.”

I interjected, “Your lover? Hardly! Besides, any way you look at this situation, it’s been a frolic in the fire, not the snow.”

In a flash, the men spread out and surrounded us, cutting off our path of retreat. Behind us, the fire still blazed dramatically. I drew in close to Lady Michelle.

“You cannot fool us,” said the man. “That woman is Marielle, daughter of Viscount Clarac, is she not?” He looked at me.

“What?” *How does a Lavian of the Easdale faction know about me?* I looked

up at Lutin, and he, too, had a puzzled expression.

"We gladly invite the young ladies to join us as well. If you come quietly, there'll be no need for us to use force. We only want to talk."

"But why her?" asked Lutin. "She has nothing to do with any of this."

"We've done our research. She's the fiancée of Simeon Flaubert, one of Lagrange's most influential noblemen and the most trusted confidant of Prince Severin. It even seems not to be merely a marriage of convenience, but one with genuine affection between them. We suspect she could come in very handy indeed." As he spoke, a disturbing smile spread across the man's face.

As I realized the meaning behind his words, I was left aghast. *They plan to use me as a hostage to threaten Lord Simeon and His Highness? In order to...what, make them halt the engagement between Princess Henriette and Prince Liberto?* It didn't seem possible—certainly not with me as the only motivation. "If you think I have that much value, I'm afraid I have to disappoint you. You've made a spectacularly false assumption."

"Have they now?" said Lutin. "Perhaps we'll find out. I'm certainly curious." His words had an implication that could not be ignored.

"Surely you can't be planning to go with them?"

"What else are we supposed to do in this situation? If we resist, they'll likely stab us and that will be that. If they then throw us into this conflagration behind us, no one would even be able to identify our remains." He spoke with his usual detached manner. As I looked around at him, at the burning cabin, and at the Lavian men surrounding us, I grew impatient. I didn't want to die here, of course, but that's also exactly why I didn't want to just go with them quietly! I had decided I couldn't cause Lord Simeon any unnecessary worry, and I intended to stick to that.

If we do as they ask and obediently go with them, there's no guarantee at all that they won't harm us. How can we agree to anything when we have no idea what they might do?

"What happened to your henchman?" I asked, my voice increasingly frantic. "The beautiful muscleman with the blond curls?"

“You’re referring to Dario? His appearance tends to stand out, so I can’t exactly take him with me when I’m out for a stroll.”

“Then why didn’t you arrange a bodyguard who *doesn’t* stand out?”

The men began to draw closer. Since Lutin appeared to have no interest in resisting, I decided to wash my hands of him. I whispered to Lady Michelle, “Can you ride a horse?”

“Ride a...? Well, yes, but...”

“I’ll sit in front and you can sit behind me. They appear to have all come on foot, so I think we can charge through them.”

There was nothing for it but to abandon Lutin and escape with Lady Michelle. It was his problem to begin with, so it only made sense to let him deal with it. We were mere bystanders caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. *It’s not heartless, it’s purely the reality of the situation.*

I watched the men as they approached. Before they could completely close the distance, I began a mad dash to my horse, pulling Lady Michelle along by the arm.

“Don’t let them get away!” At the elderly man’s instruction, all of his men all started running to catch me. Just as the one leading the pack was about to pass by Lutin, Lutin executed a magnificent sweep with his foot and sent him hurtling down into the snow.

“What a pain,” said Lutin. “If you had to come for me, I hoped you’d find a quiet moment when I was on my own. Then I’d have given you a little of my time, at least.”

He began to move with unexpected agility. He punched another man, knocking him out. Then he looked directly upwards and cried, “Dario!”

The very next moment, a shadow descended. A familiar figure leapt down—one that was imposingly large, yet landed with all the subtle grace of a cat, making no sound. His curly ringlets, so perfect that they hardly looked real, framed a face so beautiful it could have been a statue.

Upon the arrival of Lutin’s henchman Dario, the circus strongman, I couldn’t

help but shout, “So he was here all along!”

“I never said he wasn’t.” Lutin smiled as he withdrew a thin dagger from his breast pocket and skillfully deflected the incoming blows of the enemies’ swords. “His superhuman strength is not his only asset. Despite appearances, he’s also exceptionally skilled at keeping himself hidden. He’s been watching over me from the shadows, waiting for the Easdale faction to show itself. Although I must say, the Vice Captain seemed to have already noticed his presence.”

“Then why didn’t he come and save us when we were trapped inside the cabin!?”

“If he’d revealed himself then, all his efforts to stay hidden would have been for nothing. If we were really in dire straits I’d have summoned him, but the Vice Captain and I managed to take care of it on our own.”

“You can’t be serious!”

Dario darted about, making an elegant display of sending the enemies flying one after another. Lutin kept pace well enough with his own agile combat, but Dario was so impressive that Lutin came off as underwhelming by comparison.

It can’t be that he didn’t call Dario until the very last moment because then he would no longer be the center of attention...can it?

As Lady Michelle and I watched in a state of shock, the situation seemed to be turning around before our eyes. If this kept up, there would be no need for us to make our escape. I put a hand on my chest and breathed a sigh of relief.

At that moment, the elderly man took a whistle from his breast pocket and blew into it. A piercing trill resounded in the forest. “A signal?” I looked around with a decidedly uneasy feeling. “Don’t tell me...”

It was just as I feared. More men scuttled out from amongst the trees—reserve troops who had been waiting for the right moment.

“How many of them are there!?”

Lutin pointed to my horse. “Perhaps it would indeed be better for you to run away, just as you decided. Dario and I can manage here. If you can reach

civilization, even these fine fellows won't be able to do anything."

I hesitated. "Are you sure?"

"Are you worried about me?" he asked with a wink.

I stuck my tongue out. "No, you're quite right. If you say it's better for us to get out from under your feet, who am I to deny you the pleasure? Let's go, Lady Michelle!"

Ushering Lady Michelle to follow, I put one hand on the horse, ready to mount it. But before I could do anything else, my head jerked back as a man behind me grabbed my hair and pulled on it.

"Lady Marielle!" cried Lady Michelle.

I grunted with pain. "Let me go! You're hurting me!"

One of them had simply been too close. Lutin was preoccupied fending off several others and couldn't get to me. Lady Michelle jumped at the man's arm, but he swung his arm powerfully and sent her tumbling backwards. "Out of the way, brat!"

Not only that, but the man was wielding a sword, so the motion ripped a hole in Lady Michelle's clothes.

"Lady Michelle!" I cried.

She collapsed into the snow, but soon sat up. "I-I'm all right, only my clothes were damaged." She adjusted the fabric as best she could to cover herself, then stood. Thankfully, she appeared to have no trouble moving, so it appeared that she was indeed not injured.

But I was still trapped. I could not compete against the strength that was pulling me back.

Then suddenly, the man let out a yelp of pain and toppled over, landing with a *thud* . The horse had kicked him with its hind legs. Thanks to a most unexpected rescuer, my freedom was restored.

"What a good horse! Thank you most kindly. I'll give you some carrots later!"

The horse whinnied proudly. It might have been consciously trying to help, or

it might have just been reacting to all the commotion going on around it, but either way, I was saved. I hurried onto its back and offered a hand to Lady Michelle, who mounted the horse behind me.

"Go!" shouted Lutin, as Dario stepped in to guard our escape.

I gave the horse the signal, and it charged through the crowd of enemies and galloped along the forest path.

Though my greatest riding skill was, as mentioned, making the horse run where I wanted, galloping was still beyond the scope of a proper lady's education, so I had only ever learned as far as cantering. Furthermore, we were in the middle of a forest, where the ground was uneven and branches poked out menacingly. To avoid being thrown off or colliding with anything, I had no choice but to slow the horse to a canter. *Though it does feel rather leisurely for an escape attempt.*

I took a fleeting glimpse behind me. The enemy was giving chase on horseback. *So they did bring horses after all.* Here on the path they could conveniently do nothing but run behind me, but I was sure that as soon as we left the forest they'd immediately fan out and surround me.

As we charged forward, the edge of the forest grew closer and closer. I racked my brain.

"Lady Michelle," I said finally, "I have to turn soon." I pointed at a large tree surrounded by bushes that we were fast approaching. "When I do, please jump down from the horse right away. With snow on the ground, I don't think you'll be injured if you jump off when we're going at this speed. After that you need to hide immediately. Can you do it?"

"But what about you, Lady Marielle?"

"They'll notice that one of us has disappeared, but it's all right. I'll be able to ride faster on my own."

"Then let me!"

"You're in men's clothes and I'm in a dress, so it'll be easier for you to dismount. Please, we don't have much time and we'll never get away if we stay together."

We reached the turning point, and I slowed the horse down just a fraction. I pushed Lady Michelle. “There!”

She jumped down without resisting any further, and managed to roll to a stop on the ground without hitting anything. She lifted her head. Having confirmed with my own eyes that she was safe for now, I faced ahead again and did not look back.

The trees opened up around me. I was finally about to exit the forest. I kicked my horse in the side and said, “I may be a terrible rider, but please, run as fast as you can!”

The horse seemed to hear me and obey. It increased its speed significantly. My hair streamed behind me in the wind. I was moving up and down so violently, it was a struggle to stay seated. I strenuously gripped the reins and tried to bounce in the same rhythm as the horse. The landscape flew by me at an incredible speed. It was even more terrifying than the first time I’d ever ridden a horse. *But I have no time to be afraid!*

Nor did I have enough time to look at my surroundings. I simply held on for dear life. However, despite all my efforts, I could not compete against the skill of more experienced riders. My pursuers came ever closer. They were almost within arm’s reach.

Then my whole body flew off my horse’s back into the air, light as a cloud. I cried out, but it was too late to stop myself. I drew in my chin and curled up my body, and gritted my teeth so that I didn’t bite my tongue. I slammed into the snow. The impact took my breath away for a moment, but even so I knew I had landed safely. I pushed through the pain and sat myself up. *I’m not hurt. Thank goodness.* All my past experience of falling off a horse had come in handy. Experience is the best teacher, as they say!

I hitched up my skirt and started to run. I no longer gave a flying fig about decorum. Nor did I care if they laughed at my vain attempt at resisting. My creed is not to give up until the very end.

That said, I had absolutely no idea where I was going. My pursuers were moving at such speed that it was taking them some time to change direction, which had opened up some distance between us. Before they caught up to me

again, I had to find somewhere to hide. Somewhere a horse couldn't follow. Somewhere those men wouldn't go.

But in my haste, I tripped on the uneven ground. Before I knew it, I was sent tumbling into the snow.

My whole body ached. My lungs and heart had reached their limit. But I had to run away. The horses' hooves thundered ever closer. *If I spend too long down here, I won't just be caught, I'll be trampled underfoot!*

I desperately put my hand in the snow and began to push myself up. Just then, something flew right past me. Half a second later, snow that was kicked up from the ground struck me in the face. *Did that horse just dodge out of the way so that I didn't get crushed? And...was it even one of their horses? It looked different...*

I looked up and several horses were charging right toward me. But they all dodged around me—all but one, which stopped next to me, blocking me from one of my pursuers.

A strong voice resounded from nearby. "Simeon, don't kill any of them! We need them alive!"

"Understood," the man who had stopped to defend me responded coldly. "For now, I'll spare them their lives."

Atop his horse, he swung his saber with a force akin to the Grim Reaper. That man, that figure who had run to my defense, was...



He's here!

As Lord Simeon fought, His Highness descended from his horse and crouched down before me. "Are you all right?"

I looked back at him, baffled, and for reasons unclear to me, he let out a small puff of laughter. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing. You did very well."

He lifted up my head and wiped away some snow. *Ah, I see. I must be in a complete state of disarray.* After having my hair pulled, then racing away at speed, then falling off my horse and tripping, my hair would have been a complete mess. My glasses had also slipped half off my face, and my whole body was caked in snow. Who wouldn't have laughed at that?

"No need to be sullen," he said. "I didn't mean anything by it."

"I'm just exhausted, that's all. Do you think I could just lie right here and sleep for a while?"

"I think it would be awfully chilly. You'll catch a cold."

"I've never caught a cold. Not since I was born."

He paused. "I somehow find that very easy to believe."

What was that supposed to mean? I was suddenly reminded of an expression from a faraway land—something about foolish people not catching colds—but I'm from Lagrange, so that had nothing to do with me.

He continued, "Perhaps the colds were always more scared of you and ran away in fear. In any case, cold or otherwise, you're sure to get soaking wet."

He pulled me up, leaving me little recourse but to stand. As I wiped the snow off my body, I looked and saw that the Lavians had already been subdued. Those pursuers who had seemed so terrifying hadn't stood a chance against the knights.

Lord Simeon descended from his horse and ran to me. "Marielle!"

My word, it feels as though I haven't seen him in an age. His approach flooded me with joy and relief. I felt like if Lord Simeon was there, I would be fine no

matter what happened.

"Are you hurt?"

I was ready for an emotional reunion—but alas, we were in front of His Highness, so he did not embrace me. Instead he simply patted my shoulders and arms to make sure I was in one piece. It wasn't enough, and I felt quite dissatisfied, but I silently chided myself. This is not the right time to be demanding.

"No, I'm fine," I replied. "But Luti— I mean, Earl Cialdini is still..."

"I wouldn't worry. You can kill him, and he still won't die."

I had no response to this. *Well,* I thought, *he at least has Dario with him. I'm sure he's fine.*

But Lady Michelle was still in the forest too. We had to find her and let her know that the danger was over.

And...

I looked up at His Highness again. *Why is he here?*

Intuiting the meaning in my gaze, Lord Simeon said, "I've given him a rough outline, but I thought it would be difficult to talk anywhere that the marquess or his family might hear, so I asked him to join me here."

His Highness nodded silently.

"Did you find Gaston?" I asked.

"Of course. We have him in our custody, and we recovered Miss Michelle's belongings. To keep him out of our way, we requisitioned a farmer's shed and locked him inside."

Th-this is...almost too impressive. I know I should have expected this, but the whole matter had been executed even more skillfully than I'd hoped. *Too bad, Gaston. Bad luck for you that you had Lord Simeon on your tail.*

Hesitantly, His Highness asked, "Where's Miss Michelle?"

I nodded. "Yes, let's go and see her."

When I turned to look at the forest, a white plume of smoke was still rising in

the distance.

It's not that I was worried or anything, not really, but there was a small part of me, the tiniest part, that wondered if Lutin was still safe. He had been facing quite a number of opponents. I tried to tell myself I was being foolish.

As soon as we entered the forest, long before we even reached the cabin, Lutin appeared before us. "Good afternoon, Marielle. I see you brought quite a few helpers with you, but there's really no need. We already took care of things."

Dario followed close behind him, and the two seemed full of life and without a visible scratch on them. It was just as Lord Simeon had said: you can kill him, and he still won't die. Clearly, there had been no need to bother worrying about him.

"I was eager to make sure you got away safely," he continued, "so we hurried to catch up with you. I'm glad to see things went smoothly out here as well, though."

In the face of all my exhaustion, he still wore an easygoing smile. He reached out a hand to touch me.

Before the hand reached, Lord Simeon took a step forward and delivered a merciless punch to Lutin's gut.

Lutin doubled over, breathless.

"You told me I could leave in full confidence," said Lord Simeon, his eyes and voice frozen solid. "I was so sure that I could put our differences aside and take you at your word, at least in that respect. But perhaps I was a fool."

Lutin smiled bitterly. "I suppose I must...accept my punishment." He broke into a coughing fit and clutched his stomach. He was in so much pain, he could not even hide it. Dario stepped forward angrily, but one glare from Lord Simeon took the wind out of his sails. Last time he and Lord Simeon had fought, he had been soundly defeated. I could understand that he'd be scared of a repeat encounter.

Instead, Dario patted Lutin's back. Lutin turned his head to look at me. "I'm sorry. Did you have any difficulty getting away?"

I put my hands on my hips and let out a deep breath. *Yes, I did! It was INCREDIBLY difficult! I was terrified!*

But Lord Simeon had already punished him, so I didn't want to cause him any more pain. Besides, I felt that he had made the best possible decision for the situation at hand.

I asked him, "Your plan all along has been to use yourself as bait to lure out the Easdale faction, hasn't it?"

"You could say that, yes. It provides an excellent means of silencing the opposition."

And now they had brazenly shown their faces and taken action. He had said before that "Earl Cialdini" was not an especially well-known figure in Lavia. It seemed that he had been sent here to lay a trap for the members of the Easdale faction, who would have assumed he was assigned this diplomatic role purely because he was a distant relative of a Lagrangian noble family. However, all along his goal had been to reel them in.

Good thing I wasn't really worried about him. Honestly, I wasn't!

"I truly am sorry," said Lutin. "I definitely did not expect that you would draw their attention. I was sure they'd avoid laying hands on anyone other than me, since that would only provoke Lagrange for no reason."

"Yes," I replied, "that surprised me as well. Even if they desperately wanted a hostage, there were surely more qualified candidates than me. What fools they were."

"Perhaps. Or perhaps they were simply more perceptive than I gave them credit for."

He had recovered from Lord Simeon's blow at last and returned to his usual attitude. He turned to look at His Highness, but the latter did not say a word, nor did he let his facial expression betray anything.

Lutin just smiled cheerfully and spoke to me again. "As a sincere apology for putting you in such a frightful situation, I will gladly do anything. I will be your servant. Or would you prefer a gift, perhaps? I will get you whatever you want, even the most magnificent jewels. You need only ask. Oh, or maybe I should

just present myself as the gift.”

I wondered quite how seriously he was suggesting this. Another man present, one who did not see the funny side, was already resting a hand on his saber.

I replied, “If that’s a serious offer, then...I might ask you to repay me with some up-close and personal bodily contact.”

“Excuse me?” said Lutin. Though he himself had said he would do anything, he stared blankly in astonishment.

Lord Simeon’s eyes widened. “Marielle!?”

“Oh, but, it’s not your body I’m interested in, but his.”

I pointed, and everyone looked at the man in question with odd expressions on their faces. Cries of “Huh?” erupted.

The man himself also furrowed his golden eyebrows.

“Dario?” said Lutin. “Hold on... Was he your type all along?”

“Marielle,” said Lord Simeon, “what on earth are you...”

I stepped toward Dario, ignoring the others’ attempts to interfere. I could feel their faces staring at me, as if to say, “Really? Him?”

But I didn’t care. I reached out and touched his body without reservation.

“What are you doing, Marielle?” Lord Simeon objected. “It’s thoroughly improper! Stop it at once!”

I rubbed and patted Dario all over. His chest, his arms, his back.

“Marielle!”

“But this is my chance! It’s so rare to have the opportunity to lay eyes on such unusual subject matter, so I must investigate in detail while I can!” As Dario began to twist away, as if he wished to escape, I said, “Please don’t run away! Stay still!”

I checked every detail I could. I gauged the measurements of every part of him, and the degree of resistance when I pressed into his muscles.

His Highness and the knights stood in a state of shock. Lutin, too, blinked in

bewilderment. “Investigate? I...don’t understand. Investigate what?”

“Just as I thought, the sensation of actually touching him is quite different from the impressions I gathered from just looking at him. His muscles are so hard...and so thick! Apologies for the overfamiliarity, but I’ll gauge your waist measurement now.”

I wrapped my arms around his waist. To an onlooker, it must have simply looked as though I was embracing him.

“Marielle!” exclaimed Lord Simeon.

“Oh bother, my hands don’t reach. Does anyone happen to have a tape measure?”

“Of course they don’t! Get away from him. Do you want people to think you’ve thoroughly lost your mind?”

“Pish posh, the only ones here are a thief and a few knights and His Highness. Of course I’d prioritize information gathering over appearances.”

“And where do I fit into that list!?”

I rebuffed all Lord Simeon’s attempts at stopping me and investigated every fine detail of Dario’s physique from top to bottom.

“It really is an astounding example of what the human body can become with enough training! You often hear talk of people who are as strong as an ox, but I feel as though that doesn’t do him justice. He’s surely as strong as a bear, or perhaps an elephant! No, that still doesn’t suffice. How on earth can I accurately sum up these muscles? They’re beyond description!”

I wrote down everything I could think of in my notebook. I knew that everyone around me was recoiling in shock, but this was no time to be worrying about that. As an author, I had to face this challenge with everything I had!

Dario himself had stood locked in place so far, but suddenly his pale cheeks began to flush with color. Abruptly he changed his posture and drew his arms into a dramatic pose—one calculated to proudly display the full beauty of his muscles.

His Highness and the knights withdrew even further, but Dario ignored them

and showed me another pose. I hunched over my notebook, grateful for this and ready to draw some sketches...but in all honesty, his clothes were sort of in the way. *He finally poses for me, and I can't even see his muscles!*

But as if he sensed what I was thinking, or perhaps just because he was now sufficiently warmed up, he threw off his clothes in a flash. Those miraculous muscles sparkled in the winter landscape.

"Grrrr!" His fervor grew ever greater and he struck another pose.

I immersed myself in my drawing. "I can see how much you yearn for this! It really brings you joy when people admire your muscles, doesn't it?"

"Marielle," mumbled Lutin, "you are...a unique individual indeed."



By now, both he and Lord Simeon had given up on trying to stop me. They stood stock still. As Dario and I alone fed each other's enthusiasm, a timid voice spoke up. "Excuse me... I brought back Miss Michelle."

It was the knight who had gone to look for her. He returned just as my frenzied sketching had reached its zenith, and it drew him in as he wondered what was going on. Behind him stood Lady Michelle herself.

"Lady Michelle! You're all right!"

"You too, Lady Marielle. I'm so glad you're safe."

I ran over to her. She wore a coat that the knight appeared to have lent her, and below it I could see makeshift repairs to her torn clothes. It was clear that the day had not treated her entirely kindly, but she did not appear to be injured. Thank goodness.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "All of this is my fault."

"Those men weren't after you, Lady Michelle. That business was entirely the fault of this thieving earl here, so there's no need for you to apologize at all. More importantly..."

I put an arm on her back and gently turned her to face His Highness. The two of them gazed at one another. Lady Michelle, who had always seemed so terrified once upon a time, held her head high as if to say she was forever turning her back on that version of herself.

She walked over to His Highness of her own volition, and, as we all watched without uttering a word, she kneeled before him and bowed her head deeply. "I apologize from the bottom of my heart for causing you such pain. For the numerous deceits, and for betraying you. I am truly sorry."

Her voice quivered but was clear and firm. She waited for him to hand down his judgment.

But His Highness just looked down at her silently with a face that held no hint of anger, only sadness and pain.

Chapter Twelve

In order to discuss matters more calmly, and to get out of the cold, we borrowed a room from a nearby farming family. It was the same family in whose hands Lord Simeon had left Gaston, and despite their shock at receiving a visit from the crown prince himself, they did their very best to show sufficient hospitality, brewing hot tea for us and offering food.

The poor knights had no time to relax, however. Only Lord Simeon remained with us, while the others had to run about dealing with the new captives. The knights who had gone to the neighboring village earlier also came back and helped.

I sat down in the warm room and let out a sigh of relief. *My word, today has been nothing but one hardship after another.* I'd had no chance to eat lunch, so I was starving. I gratefully tucked into the chicken and cheese quiche that the farmer's wife served us. At my feet, the family cat waited expectantly for leftovers.

"This is absolutely delicious. You must be hungry as well, Lady Michelle. Why don't you have some?"

I offered the quiche to her, but she did not reply. She had hung her head in shame again, appearing completely daunted. *Ugh, no surprise that she'd react that way when His Highness and Lord Simeon have such serious faces.*

The cat stood on its hind legs and rested its paws in my lap expectantly, but I moved the quiche farther away. "You can't have any, I'm afraid. This is food for people." I'd once been told by a veterinarian that one mustn't give food to animals if it's been heavily seasoned, so unfortunately it couldn't have any. *But this boiled egg is fine, if you can put up with that.*

The only ones taking any food were me and Lutin. "Yes, it really is tasty," said Lutin. "The farmer's wife is an excellent cook."

"I wonder if she made this bread and jam herself as well? The soup is also exquisite."

Meanwhile, Lord Simeon and His Highness remained silent. The air felt heavy. *Honestly, there's no need for that!*

I said, "Your Highness, Lord Simeon, could you please put away those sour faces? You'll turn the food just as sour, which would be such a shame now that we can finally eat."

"If you're concerned about Dario," Lutin cut in, unnecessarily chipper, "you'll have to forgive him. He's always like that."

"I didn't ask for your contribution." I glared at all of them in disbelief.

Finally, His Highness took a deep breath and spoke. "You're right, of course. This won't do at all. Miss Michelle?"

She jumped in surprise. "Y-yes?"

His Highness smiled sadly at her reaction. "You needn't be afraid," he said kindly. "Simeon gave me the most important details. I fully understand the difficult situation you were in. I don't intend to punish you for it. So please...raise your head."

Nervously, she did so. Though he clearly wasn't angry with her, I suspected she'd have been quite hesitant no matter how he had reacted.

"Your Highness, I'm so sorry."

"You've no need to keep apologizing. At any rate, I'm glad you're all right. That, above all, is a tremendous relief."

Upon hearing these considerate words, Lady Michelle began to cry. My handkerchief was already dirty, so I took Lutin's and handed it to her.

He continued, "I'm also to blame for pushing ahead with the engagement when I could tell that you weren't enthusiastic about it. I selfishly hoped that you would be more comfortable once we got to know each other better, and with that in mind, I forced you to proceed with it. I'm terribly sorry."

"Oh no, Your Highness. No, you were always kind to me. I'm sorry for not being worthy of that kindness. Not when I lied to you so much. What I'm most sorry about is that I lacked the courage to confess the truth, and I instead let my lies keep piling up on themselves. I could have taken responsibility for my

actions, but instead I simply ran away, not even considering the heartache it would cause you."

"But if I had only realized you were pushed against the wall to such an extent... I was so thrilled at having finally met the woman of my dreams that all I could think about was finding a way to win your favor. In having so little consideration for your feelings, I'm guilty of the same crime as you. So please, stop worrying about it. It's water under the bridge. More importantly, I'd like you to consider what happens now."

Lady Michelle listened to His Highness's words with a sober expression. It was true—more important than what had happened so far was what would happen next. I listened nervously to hear what His Highness had in mind.

"The reason you were fretting so much, the reason you were unwilling to accept me as a partner... Was it only the problem of your birth—the fact that you are not a trueborn child of your house? Is it indeed true that you were overly conscious of hiding that secret, and that was the only issue? If so, could I ask you to put all of that aside for a moment? What I'd like to ask you is, if you ignore all of that complicated business, what do you think of me as a person? All questions of rank aside, am I someone you might find agreeable as a husband?"

This was met with only silence for a moment.

But what he's saying is...

As I watched them look at one another, the breath caught in my throat. His Highness knew the truth and still wanted to marry Lady Michelle? He was prepared to commit to a love that transcended all barriers of class?

My heart pounded in my chest. *Could it be? Is one of the most classic types of love story about to play out right before my eyes? My, His Highness is so marvelous, and so very dashing! This is just how a prince is meant to be!*

If he still loved her in full knowledge of the barriers that stood in the way, then all that remained were Lady Michelle's feelings. If she could return his affection, then I decided I would fully devote myself to supporting them. *Yes, I'll manipulate public opinion to make inter-class romance more popular! It's already somewhat trendy these days. It's a type of romance that many people*

dream about, after all. Perhaps I could coordinate the whole project with a theater as well. I can even pull some strings with my contacts at the newspapers and stir it up into a bigger topic of conversation. I'm sure the happy couple will receive tremendous approval from the lower classes. I'm fully confident about that!

There would be ways to get the nobles on board as well. Now was the time to really make use of all the information I had ever gathered. Plans began to form in my mind about which moves to make and when. I recalled various prominent nobles and their relationships to one another. Their personalities, their ambitions, their weak points, their houses' current prosperity... I'd make use of every tidbit of information to subtly push noble society into accepting Lady Michelle's marriage into the royal family.

Of course, she would have to cut all ties to House Montagnier. All the gloomy reminders of the past had to go. Instead of being a member of an excessively proud house desperately clinging to power, I decided we could make her into an archbishop's foster daughter or some such. *It's very possible. Completely possible. I'll show you all just how possible it is! Just leave it in my hands! I will move heaven and earth for this! So all that's left now is how Lady Michelle feels about him!*

My chest throbbed as I awaited her response.

She stared intently at him, and then...lowered her head. "I'm sorry, but..."

His Highness smiled sadly. "I see."

The prince's confession of love, all hope of this classic love story, had been flatly refused.

How unfair! My shoulders slumped dejectedly. *Why isn't she wrapped up in the excitement of this? How can anyone hear something like that and not fall madly in love with him? If you hear a prince say that to you and still aren't interested, there must surely be something wrong with you as a maiden. His Highness is dashingly handsome, and so kind. What could possibly be missing? Does she not like how pathetic he is? Or maybe she really does want a man who has some dirt clinging to him, metaphorically?*

"I really am sorry," she continued.

“It’s quite all right. If it’s not to be, it’s not to be. I’m sorry for troubling you.”

Though it wasn’t the outcome he had hoped for, His Highness had gracefully accepted it. Lady Michelle shut her eyes tightly for a moment, then stood as if steeling her resolve.

“You misunderstand. It’s not that there’s anything wrong with you. You’ve done nothing wrong, Your Highness. You’re a wonderful man, and so kind. I have nothing but the greatest respect for you. I wish I was someone who could accept your offer of marriage. But, no matter what, I can never be your wife.”

His Highness stood as well. “What do you mean? If you’re referring to the matter of your social rank, there are ways to resolve that. It might not be easy, but there are still ways. If you accept me, I promise I will make everyone else accept you as well.”

But despite his repeated insistence, Lady Michelle shook her head. “It’s quite impossible. It would face disapproval from man and God. I cannot accept your proposal because...”

She took off the shawl the farmer’s wife had lent her, and quickly unfastened the borrowed coat. Where her clothes had been ripped earlier, she pulled them all the way apart and enthusiastically displayed her chest.

“Because I am...a man!”

I was thunderstruck. *What!?*

His Highness, Lord Simeon, and I opened our eyes and mouths wide. All of us stared at her chest. The rip in her clothes had been torn so wide that plenty of pale skin was now visible. *Completely flat skin. Too flat.*

My own chest was not particularly prominent, but this was not the degree of flat-chested that we were dealing with in this case. It went beyond that to no bosom whatsoever. The space behind Lady Michelle’s torn clothes was completely empty. Strikingly, magnificently empty. No matter how hard I tried, I could not see this as anything other than a man’s chest.

Inside I screamed, *Whaaaaaat!?*

“A...man...?” replied His Highness in blank astonishment.

“Yes, it’s true. I am a man. I assure you, I’m not a woman with an unusual chest. If necessary, I can show you my lower portions as well.”

“Wh-Why... What, why, how can...” His Highness opened his mouth and closed it repeatedly, as if he was gasping for breath and words would not come out properly. I felt the same way. *How can Lady Michelle be a man? That can’t be true, surely!?*

“As you know, I was born out of wedlock. My mother worked at Tarentule, where she used her wiles to capture the marquess’s heart. He was head over heels in love with her. Of course, his wife was outraged, and developed a horrible jealousy toward my mother.”

I heard a tone that was, if still somewhat dejected, also clear and self-assured, as if disclosing the secret had led to a new sense of defiance.

“My mother was the kind of person to never back down from a challenge, but rather to face it head on. She would never have dreamed of showing deference to the marchioness and withdrawing herself. A man’s wife and mistress could never be expected to have an amicable relationship, but the situation went far beyond that into naked animosity.”

I could picture it. *Though messy relationships full of love and hate are a common part of storytelling, it must have been very difficult to grow up around that in real life.*

“At the time, the marchioness did not yet have any children, and my mother conceived before she did. This only intensified the harassment my mother received from the marchioness. In fact, my mother told me that she felt herself to be in mortal danger.”

His Highness listened intently.

“She managed to safely give birth, but the child was a boy. Even my mother, who was usually so fearless, knew this was dangerous. If the marchioness found out, it would have fanned her fury to an immense degree. Some wives might be rational enough to realize that an illegitimate child has no right to inherit regardless, but my mother was certain that if the marchioness found out I was a boy, she would definitely try to kill me. I don’t know if her fear was justified, but she did tell me of many incidents which went beyond the realm of mere

bullying, so it did not seem unfounded."

I recalled Marchioness Bernadette's cold and distant face. As a woman of pride, she could never have publicly expressed her jealousy of the mistress. She was hemmed in by her need to keep up appearances in society, to maintain her dignity as the marquess's lawful wife, so on the surface she had to appear as if she paid it no mind. But bottling it all up was, no doubt, precisely what led to an ever-deepening enmity toward the mistress. *And no doubt she was also rather impatient at not having conceived a child of her own yet.* All of this was just informed speculation on my part, but if any of it was true, it was not unimaginable that it could have led to the worst possible consequences.

"My mother could have disappeared with me, or even just made a commitment to leaving my father, but she had a far bolder plan in mind. She tricked my father, and everyone else, into believing she had given birth to a girl. Then she actually raised me as a girl. The only ones who knew the truth were a maid working in the house at the time, and Agatha. Their cooperation meant that the problem was solved, at least for the time being. I escaped any risk of mortal danger."

I wondered if being raised as a girl had caused any difficulties. *I suppose if it was from a young age, you would be fairly used to it.*

"One year later, my half-brother was born, and the marchioness calmed down considerably. However, it was then that my father decided to reveal my existence to society, presenting me as his legitimate daughter. He explained that they hadn't wanted to announce my birth sooner because I was of weak constitution and it wasn't clear if I would survive. Despite never showing me anything resembling parental love or concern for my well-being, he intended to use me as part of a scheme. By making me into his trueborn daughter, he could one day marry me off into an influential family. And, if luck was on his side, he even envisioned me being crown princess one day. Thus he told my mother to give me a proper upbringing befitting of a young lady."

"And even then," His Highness asked, "your mother didn't confess the truth?"

"She did not. She was the kind of person who would smile and say, 'we'll cross that bridge when we come to it.' I couldn't be married until I was an adult,

and at that point I'd be able to leave home and live on my own. She suggested that when I came of age, I could run away, pretending I'd died in an accident or from a terrible illness...only, she was the one who fell ill and died. She left me enough of a fortune that I could live without any help from my father, but I was so preoccupied with the funeral and everything else that I missed my chance to get away. Before I knew it, the day of my societal debut had been set in stone."

"B...but..." stammered His Highness, "couldn't you have said something after that?"

"You're quite right. I should have done, but I was too much of a coward. Admitting it at that stage felt too complicated, and I was scared of my father and the marchioness. Scared of what would happen if they found out I'd been deceiving them this whole time. But of course, I couldn't get married as a woman, so I knew I had to tell the truth eventually. And then, while I was busy being paralyzed with indecision, the invitation to that garden party arrived. It seemed impossible that I would be chosen, and I even tried to make myself stand out as little as possible, but..."

But that reserved and unassuming demeanor was exactly what had drawn His Highness's attention.

An indescribable silence fell. All present wore faces that suggested they were at a loss as to how on earth they should respond to this shocking revelation.

...All except Lutin. From beginning to end, he had shown no hint of surprise, and simply listened to the story as composed as ever. At this point he noticed my eyes on him and turned to me with a playful smile. From his expression, it was plain as day what he was thinking. I had an urge to criticize him, but remembering the bet between him and Lord Simeon, I held my tongue.

Lord Simeon, too, glared at Lutin with some annoyance. However, Lutin's face said he was enjoying this reaction as well. *What an odious man!*

Lady Michelle bowed her head deeply at His Highness. Or rather, *Lord Michel* bowed *his* head.

"I am so sorry! I told one lie after another, and deceived you many times over. I know I have no right to even ask your forgiveness, but...you have my deepest apologies." He was on the verge of tears and he had leaned forward so far he

was almost prostrated on the table.

His Highness looked down at Lord Michel silently and replied, in a lifeless tone, “I see. How should I, ah, put this... My attentions must have been very unpleasant for you. Sorry about that.”

Oh my goodness, he looks as though his soul is about ready to slip right out of his body! What a poor, pathetic man. He had fallen in love at first sight, and the feelings had only deepened as he got to know the person more. He was elated at finally finding the partner of his dreams, and he had put in every effort he could to make it work. And yet, for the partner, it was not even a question of being romantically interested or not. From their point of view, they were being unwillingly wooed by someone of the same gender. It was far too unfortunate.

Look, I’m not fangirling over this, all right? I’m not saying that I was enjoying His Highness’s patheticness!

“No!” replied Lord Michel at once. “I’m the one at fault! I should have been brave enough to tell my father the truth. Endlessly putting it off didn’t solve anything. It only led to this. My cowardice is simply unforgivable.”

“No, you also had a difficult upbringing. You’ve been forced to live a lie ever since you were born, so of course it made you a bit of a shrinking violet. Isn’t that right? All of the adults in your life conspired to cause you this misfortune. Your father, who took a lover and gave no heed to his wife’s feelings, your mother, who made every effort to steal the husband, and the wife, who was gripped by such jealousy that she might have tried to take your life. It must have been painful to grow up surrounded by all that.”

His Highness patted Lord Michel’s shoulder in consolation, with a look that suggested he himself found this very painful. However, rather than consoling him, this kind act made Lord Michel start to cry.

“Your Highness, I... I always hated pretending to be a woman. But, ever since I met you, I’ve thought countless times that it would have been better if I was a woman. That I should have been someone who could return your feelings. You’re such a wonderful person. I respect and appreciate you from the bottom of my heart. If I really were a woman, I’m sure I would have been in love with you, regardless of the class disparity.”

He responded to these complicated feelings with a smile. “Ah, yes, I see. Well, thank you for saying so.”

It was a proper and respectable reply, but the sight of him was still so very pitiful.

I couldn’t stay silent any longer. I leapt up enthusiastically. “It’s too soon for the two of you to give up! After numerous hardships and hindrances, you’ve finally conveyed your feelings to one another. Which means...all you have to do is stand by those feelings! True love has no place for class or gender! Even if you can’t officially get married, your love can still prevail!”

Lord Simeon stood up so violently his chair fell over. “Stop, Marielle! This is not the time to lead the conversation in that direction! The situation is complicated enough! Stop it at once!”

I glowered at him. “But things are taking such a tragic turn, especially for His Highness! Isn’t it better for them to strive for a love that transcends all barriers? If their love is so powerful that it can break out of the cage of society’s expectations and climb over the walls of gender, that’s the very noblest of emotions—a love that can conquer all! It’s a love that’s pure, that has neither selfishness nor self-interest... The very definition of true happiness!”

Cradling his head, His Highness interjected. “No, Miss Marielle... I appreciate the sentiment, but it’s quite impossible. I’m afraid there is a barrier there that I cannot overcome: My desire to be romantically involved with a woman.”

Sheepishly, Lord Michel added, “I must agree, Lady Marielle. Despite appearances, I, too, have entirely conventional romantic desires. That is to say, I would definitely prefer to be with a woman.”

“Oh,” I replied. “How disappointing.” *And I was so determined to support them with all my might no matter what!* After the great pains I’d gone to, both of them were firmly shaking their heads.

“Could you kindly refrain from looking quite so dejected?” said His Highness. “No matter how one looks at it, that would be a bridge too far.”

“I don’t see why it would be a problem,” I replied.

“Well...it would! You’re just using us as your own personal source of

entertainment, I know it!”

“What an unfair accusation! I simply wanted you to be happy, Your Highness. The one deriving entertainment from it is that villain there.” With a snap, I pointed at Lutin, who was face down on the table, quietly convulsing with laughter. “You already knew about this, didn’t you?”

He lifted his head. Tears had welled up in his eyes. He clutched his chest, apparently in great pain as he struggled to contain himself. “Of course I did. Who do you think I am? It was a very practiced disguise, one perfected over many years, but I am a master of disguise. I knew right away that he was a man.”

Lord Michel blinked in surprise, and His Highness made a very unhappy face indeed. Lord Simeon’s glare was ice cold.

But Lutin did not yield an inch. “As agreed, I’ve now seen with my own eyes how Prince Severin reacted upon learning the truth. It’s just as the two of you said. He is fair and broad-minded enough that he did not get overly angry and upset, but rather regained his composure straight away. It does him credit.”

Though these were approving words, the mirth in his voice made it hard to tell whether he was praising His Highness or mocking him. No one could really be glad to be spoken of in that manner.

His Highness’s gaze turned stone cold. It was quite different from the occasions when he had teased or chided me—his eyes held real anger. “So you knew all of this, and you simply stood by and watched, laughing all the while?”

Even still, Lutin stayed composed. I was actually rather impressed by his tenacity.

Then his tone became more serious. “The fate of a nation is hanging in the balance for us as well, you must understand. I had to get a clear picture of you. It was only prudent.”

“A clear picture!?” replied His Highness.

“When you inherit the throne, my country will be dealing with you on a continual basis. I had to know more about your character.”

“And what exactly does this incident tell you about my character?” His Highness looked away with a huff.

Lutin’s eyes grew unexpectedly kind. “At the very least, I can tell you that my impression is a favorable one. I’m sure Prince Liberto will be overjoyed to hear me report that. In the future, Lagrange’s king will be the brother-in-law of Lavia’s grand duke. And that sounds like a fine future to me.”

His Highness turned back to Lutin, momentarily stunned into silence. Lutin—the Lavian diplomat—had just proclaimed that the engagement of Princess Henriette to Prince Liberto would proceed as planned. Though he always seemed to be doing nothing but watching in amusement and mocking everyone, he had fully adhered to his agreement with Lord Simeon.

I was sure it would not be long before Princess Henriette would enter Lavia’s royal court. Though this entire sequence of events had mostly been wretched for all involved, there was one bright spark of hope to alleviate it.

No, not just one, but two.

I smiled at Lord Michel. Even he, who had become unable to follow the conversation partway through and looked quite perplexed, returned my smile as if he had regained just a smidgen of happiness. There was still plenty to think about. What would he do next, and how would he confront his father? But he no longer needed to tackle any of it alone. Naturally I would lend my aid, and so would Lord Simeon. Most importantly of all, however, His Highness knew everything now. Yes, Lord Michel had some very reassuring allies.

Now he would be able to live freely, with no need to deceive himself any longer. I was certain that Lord Michel’s future would be a bright one indeed.

After eating a simple dinner in my room—a rather different experience than the family meal from the evening before—I went to the stable carrying a bucket full of carrots I’d asked the cooks to give me. I had to fulfill the promise I had made earlier that day.

I took the roughly chopped up pieces of carrot and fed some to each horse in turn. There were some who waited obediently, and some who scratched at the ground with their forelegs, demanding I feed them right away. There was also one particularly brash horse who decided to sink its teeth into my shawl as well.

“No, you’ve already eaten. Everyone gets the same.”

I somehow pulled myself free and headed to the next horse, but this one became nervous at the presence of an unknown person and drew into the corner of the stall as if to say, don’t come near me.

“...I’ll just leave these here then.”

People are all different, and so are horses, it seemed. Each one had its own personality. Lord Simeon’s horse was so elegant and good-mannered, it seemed almost like a lord itself. The horse I’d borrowed earlier clearly took kindly to people, but I do think it was a tad overeager.

The one constant was that they were all adorable.

As I was gazing at the horses in appreciation of their differences, Lord Simeon entered. “What are you doing, Marielle?”

“I came to give them carrots. I promised my horse this afternoon.”

“You promised...your horse?”

“Yes.”

With a dubious expression, Lord Simeon came to my side. He peered into the now-empty bucket and then looked around at all the horses.

“And you gave some to all of them?”

“Of course. If I showed favoritism, it would make the other horses sad. Snacks must be distributed impartially—that’s an ironclad rule.”

He let out a very distinct chuckle. “Most ladies wouldn’t want to come to the stable at all. They’re smelly and unpleasant places.”

“I suppose. But this one is well maintained. It seems clean enough to me.”

I put down the bucket and began to sit down in some straw piled up by the wall.

“You’ll get dirty,” said Lord Simeon.

“It’s fresh straw, isn’t it?”

“It is, but now that you’ve changed into a clean dress, do you really want it to

be covered in straw?”

“Oh, I’m not worried about that. It’s not such a fine dress.”

I promptly sat down and gestured to the spot beside me. Lord Simeon sat down with a wry smile.

“How is His Highness?” I asked.

“I’d say he’s largely recovered. You needn’t worry, he’s not the sort of person to remain downhearted forever.”

He wrapped an arm around my shoulder. The distance between us shrank almost to nothing and I felt the warmth of his body on mine.

“And Marquess Montagnier isn’t barging into Lord Michel’s room to rage at him?”

“We’re keeping a close eye on the marquess to ensure that he does no such thing, but I can assure you, he is not in a good mood.”

Though there had still been various matters that needed to be settled, not least of which was the burning cabin in the woods, we had returned to the holiday home with Lord Michel. We wanted the marquess to know as soon as possible that Lord Michel was still alive, since he might have tried to start an unnecessary search and rescue otherwise.

However, Lord Michel’s gender was still a secret. If this detail became widely known in high society, it would not only damage the reputation of House Montagnier, but that of His Highness and the royal family as well. So, for the time being, he had been asked to continue living as a woman. The short hair was the only thing that might have given it away, so we explained that the drastic change in appearance was part of the escape plan.

The marquess was outraged, of course...but when he learned that His Highness knew the entire story of his attempted deception, his red face turned pale as a sheet. No matter what excuses he attempted, there was no changing the fact that he had tried to trick the royal family into letting the crown prince marry an illegitimate child. After the marquess was informed that His Majesty the King would at some point hand down an official judgment, he appeared almost on the verge of fainting.

As for Marchioness Bernadette, all color drained from her face much like her husband's, but otherwise she was far more collected. More than anything, she seemed resigned—and in fact, there was something about her expression that looked strangely relaxed. Perhaps all along, what she really wanted was not the restoration of House Montagnier's honor, but to no longer have to play along with her husband's grand designs. When His Highness spoke, she accepted it calmly.

We were to return to the city the next day, bringing Lord Michel and Agatha with us. Their plan was to briefly stay in their own home, just to get their bearings.

One day, when the time was right, he would tell his father the truth about himself.

"We'll only have stayed here two nights," I said to Lord Simeon, "but it feels like an eternity. So much happened today alone that I feel thoroughly exhausted."

He smiled cruelly. "So there is such a thing as too much excitement, even for you."

I pouted. "I was being pursued by Lavian extremists! How could that be anything but terrifying? And despite all that, when you found me, you didn't even take me in your arms."

"The situation didn't allow for it. I can't behave like that in front of His Highness or my subordinates. Besides, I wasn't in favor of you coming here to begin with. I told you what might happen."

"It was a special request from His Highness. I couldn't exactly turn it down."

"Nor did you have to agree to it quite so enthusiastically."

When he stated this so bluntly, I had little recourse to respond. *I suppose he's right. I knew something like this might happen, and I was still eager to have a front-row seat.*

So I wasn't asking for sympathy. I had been scared, but that was my own responsibility, and I didn't mean to complain about that. Honestly, I didn't. I had just wanted Lord Simeon to hold me afterwards and reassure me that

everything was all right now.

As I sat in silence, Lord Simeon let out a gentle sigh, then lifted me into his lap. Our bodies were even closer than before, and I was even deeper in his arms.

He whispered into my ear, “You’re not the only one who was scared in that moment. When I saw them chasing you, it felt as though my heart would stop beating. I longed to embrace you—I’d have done so without hesitation—if only the circumstances had allowed.”

The tickling warmth in my ear made certain impulses stir inside me. I put my arms around Lord Simeon’s body as well.

“I must say, it is very like you to be so restrained in that situation.”

“And I’m sure you were being very like you and thinking about how you could work this experience into a novel.”

As we embraced each other, we both giggled. Lord Simeon removed my glasses. When I looked up at his face, his glasses were already missing. His lips met mine in what began as a gentle kiss, but soon became a deep and intense one.



Over and over again, we lost ourselves in one another. Lord Simeon's lips found their way to my cheek, to the nape of my neck, to below my chin, and around to my other ear. I writhed in agony at the tickling sensation. I couldn't endure it quietly. I moaned ever so slightly, and he only tightened his embrace.

It was so pleasurable, so joyous, that I felt almost giddy. *I want to stay like this forever. I want to feel Lord Simeon. When I'm wrapped in his warm, strong arms, it's as though I'm surrounded by a reassurance that everything will be fine. I don't want to think about anything anymore—I want to just let my whole body be immersed in this euphoria.*

...That said, there was one issue I couldn't quite ignore.

"Lord Simeon?"

"What is it?"

His voice held a passion that was quite unlike his usual character. Each word dripped with an excessively sensual destructiveness. I was on the very edge of being swallowed whole by his fervor, and I wouldn't even mind. All reason was at risk of being washed away forever!

But I had to say it.

"The horses are watching."

He fell silent and looked at the stalls lined up in front of us, where—for some reason—every single one of the horses was staring intently at us.

It was a little embarrassing. It felt like being the subject of a sightseeing tour. Horses are intelligent, so I suspected they might even know what they were looking at.

Lord Simeon made a face that was somehow beyond description.

"Shall we continue this in my room?" I asked at last.

He paused but finally said, "No." He covered his eyes and let out a deep sigh. "I apologize for my inappropriate behavior. I quite forgot myself."

"So that can happen to you as well, Lord Simeon?"

"It can indeed. And ever since you became part of my life, it happens

constantly.”

The light from the hanging lamp cast everything in orange hues and disguised the color of Lord Simeon’s face. Still, I was quite sure it had turned bright red. My cheeks were burning too, and I could not restrain the throbbing of my heart.

I steeled my courage and ventured, “But I had no objection to it.”

Lord Simeon’s body stiffened suddenly as if he’d swallowed something unpleasant, and he pushed me down from his lap.

“We mustn’t. There are standards we have to maintain. Yes...standards of decency. Before we swear our vows to one another, there are certain lines we must not cross. Th-Things that we may not do.”

This is why he’s so often accused of taking things too seriously. Certainly, if one was talking of the *official* stance, then Lord Simeon was quite correct. However, it was not as though there weren’t plenty of couples in the world who reversed the order of events. It was common to think: well, we’re engaged, and we’ll be getting married soon enough anyway, so why hold back? If it were Lutin, I was sure he would gleefully jump at the chance.

My partner was a twenty-seven-year-old man, so it would not be unusual at all for him to simply have his way with eighteen-year-old me. Despite this, Lord Simeon acted more like a shy young boy, and wanted to do everything in order, one step at a time. There are some who would say there’s no fun in that, but this was one of the things I liked about Lord Simeon. It meant I knew I could trust him and feel at ease.

He was not black-hearted in the slightest; he was sweet and pure and earnest. I loved him more than any male lead in any story I’d ever read.

“Sorry,” he stammered. “My behavior must seem quite odd.”

“I wouldn’t say odd... Ultimately, I can see how it might not be appropriate for us to let ourselves be full of joy on the same day that His Highness had his heart broken.”

“...Yes, indeed.”

Lord Simeon returned at last to his usual composed self. The tension went out

of his shoulders. We looked at each other and both laughed again. Then we stood and brushed the straw from our clothes.

“I simply can’t wait for spring,” I said. “Soon we won’t have to hold back at all. We can be every bit as close as our hearts desire.”

He turned to me and smiled. “When we reach that point, I shall throw off all my reserve. I hope you’re prepared.” The look he gave me was dashing beyond belief. Despite how pure he was inside, at a glance he truly fulfilled all the criteria! He really did have the appearance of a brutal black-hearted military officer, even if he wasn’t aware of it. He was simply perfect—the embodiment of everything my fangirl heart desired. I loved everything about him, inside and out!

“Why are you talking to the horses,” asked Lord Simeon slowly, “and what is that you’re telling them? Let’s go back before either of us catches a cold.”

“Yes, I have to return to my room and channel all this fangirl energy. When I look at you, I get endless inspiration. The ideas just never cease. Not only you—everyone around me is making me fangirl so hard, I can hardly bear it. His Highness is so perfectly pathetic, Lutin makes such an excellent villain... That reminds me, will you lend me the riding crop later? I want to make some notes while looking closely at the genuine article.”

“What are you intending to write about it? If it will make other people have strange misunderstandings about me, I’d ask you to kindly refrain.”

“No need to worry. I’ll be sure to write it in a way that makes you seem endlessly appealing.”

“I simply don’t understand what’s so appealing about a riding crop.”

Lord Simeon shook his head as he exited the stable. I followed him in high spirits. The horses watched us walk out into the quiet and peaceful night.

Chapter Thirteen

Not long after our return to the city, another invitation to the palace arrived at my house. Unexpectedly, this invitation came from the princesses. After repeated admonitions from my mother that I must be on my best behavior, I carefully decided what to wear, then made my way to the palace with more than a touch of nerves.

I wasn't this nervous when I received the invitation from Prince Severin. What's so different this time? Perhaps it's knowing that I'll be spending time in the company of fellow women that makes me feel I must put in more effort.

But despite any fears I might have had, Princess Lucienne and Princess Henriette greeted me in a friendly and warm-hearted manner. They already knew the whole story about their brother's lost love, and they wished to hear more of the particulars from me. For the sake of His Highness's honor, I attempted to present it all as a tragic tale, but for some reason the princesses began clutching their stomachs laughing.

"Good heavens," said Princess Henriette, laughing so hard that she was in tears. "What a poor, sad creature our older brother is! After all his struggles, he falls in love, and then the object of his affections turns out to be a man! It would be one thing if he'd known about it—if he simply had a preference for men, I mean—but to fall head-over-heels thinking he was a woman... That's a tragedy! A tragedy, I tell you!" She banged her fan against the table to punctuate her words.

She really did not seem to have any sympathy for him at all. *Is it my imagination, or does the word "tragedy" sound suspiciously like "comedy" when she says it?*

"Please don't laugh at him," I insisted. "They both worked so hard at showing each other all the consideration they could, despite the pain they were each going through."

"Yes, of course. You're right, it must have been so pain...so painf...hahaha!"

Partway through agreeing with me, Princess Henriette burst into laughter

again. It seemed that she would show no mercy even to her own brother. *Well, I suppose if my brother had accidentally fallen in love with a man, I would probably make a joke or two about it as well.*

Princess Lucienne hid the twitching corners of her mouth behind her fan, but still let out a soft giggle. *Honestly, there's no need for both of you to be so cruel!* "Speaking of which," she said, "how is Miss Michelle doing? Or rather...Mister Michel, I suppose?"

"Thanks to His Highness's intervention, he's been able to cut all ties to House Montagnier and begin a brand new life. He sold the house his mother lived in and moved into a smaller one. Apparently Agatha also has no relatives, so the two of them are living together like grandmother and grandson. Lord Michel has even started working."

"Oh, what's he doing?"

"He has a position at a publishing company. Right now he's little more than an errand boy, but he's eager to work his way through the ranks and become an editor."

I had put in a good word for him with the publisher. Since Lord Michel had lived as a woman for so many years, he had a great understanding of women's perspectives. Any company would be a fool to let that experience go to waste, so I had to recommend him. I also felt it was better for his past to be nourishment for his future, not only a series of painful memories. Everyone's life has value to be found in the time spent living it.

The publisher that hired him was focusing its efforts on novels and magazines aimed at women, but its editing department was still dominated by the male staff. Honestly speaking, I don't always feel the male editors have a full grasp of women's emotions. If a capable person like Lord Michel joined the team, I was sure he'd be a valuable asset—and an excellent mediator between the male and female editors.

Although he had his mother's inheritance, Lord Michel wanted to work. He wanted to live as his real self and find acknowledgment in the world. To be needed, and to carve out a place for himself. Now that he was setting out upon his own future, and getting there with his own efforts, there was no longer any

sign of the fragile young lady he had appeared to be before. What remained was a spirited and dependable young man.

I hope I can watch him get all the way to the editing department. This was one more thing that I was eagerly looking forward to...even if Lord Simeon had worn a face of some displeasure when he saw Lord Michel and I getting so excited about the prospect together.

As I answered Princess Lucienne's question, she smiled kindly. "I see. I'm glad to hear he's doing well. As for House Montagnier...the head of the household has been changed."

"So that was the marquess's punishment in the end?" I replied.

"Yes. It wasn't such a serious offense that the house's territory would be reduced in size, or its rank lowered, but he couldn't simply be forgiven either. The title of marquess has been transferred to his son, and the family has been instructed to live in seclusion in the countryside. They've effectively been ostracized from high society in any case, since all the details have been made public—all except for the matter of Michel's gender—so the other noble houses want nothing to do with them anymore. What a foolish man the marquess was. His house may have been on the decline, but it still had plenty of honor and prestige. His own actions are what dragged their name through the mud."

He had gambled and lost it all because he was simply too greedy. It was like a fable. It felt like a just reward after the years he had spent trampling over other people's hearts.

He still had a relatively long life ahead of him, however. If he so desired, he could probably try to turn his life around and make a fresh start. Some people are capable of that, and others less so. Either way, it was up to him and his wife to choose their path together.

I was more concerned about what Lord Camille would do now. When he had learned that Lord Michel was not his older sister, but in fact his older brother, he was understandably rather shocked, but he didn't react as badly as I had feared. Thinking about it, his upbringing had also been rather oppressive due to his parents' problems. *It would be nice,* I thought, *if one day he and Lord Michel can have a brotherly relationship where they can depend on one another.* And

perhaps, if Lord Camille could live a virtuous life, House Montagnier's honor would even be restored in the end.

Princess Henriette perked up as if suddenly remembering something. "Oh yes, I have some news to share as well. My engagement to Prince Liberto has been made official." I turned to look at her, and her cheerful smile grew even deeper. "I'll most likely be in Lavia from now until next winter, but I suppose by that time, you'll already be a member of House Flaubert. I would love to come back to attend your wedding. Will you ask Simeon if I can be invited?"

"Of course, but...I can scarcely believe that you'd want to attend the wedding of someone like me."

"Why, I'd be sad to miss it. Seeing you fills me with all sorts of courage I never knew I had. I decided to write a letter to Prince Liberto and include everything that has been on my mind. After all, from his perspective I'm sure I'm simply a bride that's been foisted upon him, so my biggest worry is what he thinks of me."

"And how did he reply?"

"He said that, all concerns about international relations aside, once we become husband and wife, he wants to forge a good relationship between us. He said that he would never voluntarily choose for life to be boring, so we should work together to ensure that our life is filled with fun."

I leaned forward in excitement and took Princess Henriette's hand. "He sounds wonderful!"

Rather than chiding me for my presumptuousness, she firmly grasped my hand back. "Doesn't he just! He's so kind, and he has a good reputation in Lavia as well. Might I add, he's awfully good looking. He gives your own fiancé a run for his money."

"Are you certain? I find it hard to believe that anyone can compete against Lord Simeon, except for Prince Severin perhaps."

"Do you indeed? Then allow me to show you." With a wry smile, she called to her lady-in-waiting. "Sophie, bring in the portrait!"

Princess Lucienne whispered to me, "The truth is, she fell madly in love the

first moment she saw his portrait. She is the type to prioritize good looks, you see."

"Oh?" I replied.

"Perhaps it runs in our blood, the tendency toward love at first sight. I loved my husband from the moment I first met him as well. I only hope brother dearest finds his own special someone eventually."

Only now, after all this discussion, did she finally show some concern for her older brother. I gave her a reassuring smile. After all, I fully intended to take on the responsibility of finding someone for him. This incident had given me a full understanding of his tastes, so I would definitely find a suitable young lady and introduce him to her!

I left after promising Princess Henriette that I would write to her. I'd tell her about the goings-on in her homeland, and she'd tell me about Prince Liberto, and about her life in Lavia. I decided that one day I would have a book to send to Lavia about the relationship between a prince and princess that had begun as a political marriage, but became far more. Plots and intrigues would threaten to tear them apart, so it wouldn't be easy for their love to bloom—but in the end, the prince would come through for her and they'd be deeply happy together.

Even though I conceived of it all with Prince Liberto's portrait in mind, for some reason I imagined the prince as Lord Simeon. *I suppose because I've seen so much of his dark and passionate side recently.*

Thinking about it sent me into an endless fangirl spiral, so I stopped in the palace corridor and eagerly drew into the shadow of a pillar. I pulled out my notebook and began to write down the ideas that had occurred to me.

Just then, a voice interrupted, giving me a distinct sense of déjà vu. "Did you happen upon something interesting again? I would dearly love to see what's inside that notebook one day."

"You again."

I hurriedly put away the notebook to ensure Lutin didn't grab it. *He certainly has a habit of turning up unexpectedly.* I was so certain I'd checked thoroughly enough that there was no one nearby.

To make sure he didn't leave me with no room to escape as he had last time, I quickly moved into the open area in the middle of the corridor.

Lutin laughed as he watched me. "No need to be so cautious. I've been nothing but kind to you."

"How dare you say that. First you almost kidnapped me, then you tried to kiss me against my will! You're a dangerous individual, and there's no denying it."

"There are plenty of girls who would love a man like that."

When it came to works of fiction, he was definitely correct. Plenty of readers yearned for a lover who pursued them with a certain degree of force. But that was only permitted in a story—and in any case, Lutin was not my love interest.

"You and I have so much in common," he said. "I feel as though our mindsets are very similar. So...why do you prefer him?"

Lutin looked over his shoulder, and there in the distance, walking toward us, was a knight of the royal guard. He was so far away that his face could not yet be distinguished, but I knew immediately who that tall, slender figure belonged to. At first glance he appeared to be walking calmly, but in fact he was approaching with the force of a hurricane.

"You're total opposites," said Lutin. "In what way do you belong with someone so strait-laced and self-serious?"

"Maybe opposites attract?" I replied. "That's certainly how it is with magnets. I can't say you don't have *some* appeal, but I can't fangirl over you to the same degree as Lord Simeon."

"But you said you like black-hearted types, if I recall. And in that regard I fit the bill quite fabulously, if I do say so myself."

"I suppose. When it comes to villainy, you are the genuine article. That does lend you some charm, but for reasons I can't quite explain, you just don't set my heart racing."

"You certainly don't mince words." His shoulders slumped, but even so, he continued to smile as though he was very much enjoying this, without the slightest hint of dejectedness on his face. It was impossible to ever tell which of

his words were truth and which were lies, because he hid it all behind his jesting attitude. I realized that the reason I felt no spark after all his attempts to woo me was that he didn't show his true heart. Some men treat love as a game, but the one I loved did not try to hide his real self—which meant I could trust him and believe in him.

Honestly speaking, I didn't dislike Lutin, but he wasn't someone I could fall in love with. Finding someone interesting and being in love with them are two separate things.

"Will you at least allow me the honor of a goodbye kiss? This is the last time we'll see each other, after all."

"The last time?"

Lutin put out his hand. He didn't try to force it as he had before; he politely waited for me to offer my hand in return. "My work here is done. Now that things have settled down, I'm returning to Lavia. A real diplomat will be sent to take my place."

"Oh, I see." I considered replying with a quip about whether that meant he was admitting he was a fraud, but I stopped myself. "Then I'll congratulate you on a job well done," I continued. "You once told me that you saw noble society as a dull and restrictive world, but your own life seems to have plenty of challenges and restrictions as well. It must be hard work, so don't give up."

"I don't know what you mean. Working behind the scenes is good fun. It suits my personality, at any rate. Though of course, I'd enjoy it even more if you joined me."

"I can't help you there, I'm afraid. I do hope you find someone, though."

I placed my hand in the one he had offered and watched as he bent forward. *If it's to say goodbye, then surely even Lord Simeon won't mind.* He politely delivered a kiss to the back of my hand, and I thought that was the end of it. Then, suddenly, he gripped my hand tightly and pulled me down toward him. In an instant his shameless visage was right before my eyes. Just as I thought I was done for, Lutin was grabbed from behind.

"It seems you really do have a death wish," said Lord Simeon.

“You arrived far too quickly, Vice Captain.”

It all happened so fast, I barely even knew what was going on. By the time I realized, Lutin was lying on his back on the floor, and I was in Lord Simeon’s arms.

“Ow, that hurts... Ugh, and I was so close.” Lutin nonchalantly raised himself off the floor. Even after receiving such a murderous blow from Lord Simeon at such close range, he showed no concern at all as he brushed off his clothes and stood up. “Trust a hard-hearted man like you. It’s my last chance, and you still won’t look the other way even for a moment.”

“I’m not hard-hearted, but I don’t have any heart to spare for you. I’m well aware that if I give an inch, you’ll take a mile, last chance or otherwise.”

“What can I say? If the one I want is right there for the taking, there’s no sense in standing idly by and doing nothing. One day, when the guard dog isn’t paying enough attention, I’ll come back and steal her from you.”

“If you’re that eager to throw your life away, then please, go ahead. I’ll be waiting.”

Lord Simeon’s hand was resting on the saber at his waist. I hurried to stop him drawing it. “Lord Simeon, you mustn’t cut him down here! You’ll be raked over the coals if you stain the palace with blood! The cleaning staff will hate you!”

“That’s what you’re concerned about?” asked Lutin. “The difficulty of cleaning up my blood? Aren’t you worried about me?”

I stuck my tongue out at him. “I’m not worried. He can kill you, and you still won’t die.”

Lord Simeon kept his hand on the hilt of his saber and, without taking it out, said, “I shall spare you this time, Earl Cialdini. However, next time I see you, I’ll treat you like the common criminal you are and bring an end to your sad existence. If you come back, I’d suggest you prepare yourself.”

For the briefest moment the two of them glowered at each other, and then Lutin turned on his heel. “I see, so you’re inviting me to come back. Well then, Marielle. I’ll look forward to seeing you again.”

“You must be joking,” I replied. “I have no interest in...wait, hold on a moment! What about the valuables you’ve been stealing? You can’t leave until you’ve given them back to their rightful owners!”

“What are you talking about? I don’t recall claiming to be a burglar.”

With a mirthful voice, he walked into the distance. I watched him go, exasperated. *Not even the slightest bit of guilt or shame!*

“Although, now that I think about it,” I said to Lord Simeon after he was gone, “he never did confirm it as such. Even so, the nerve of him, trying to steal a kiss on the lips like that!”

“I can’t imagine what else you would expect from such an irredeemable villain. You shouldn’t have let your guard down.”

Now it was my turn to be the subject of Lord Simeon’s glare. I ducked my head. “I’m sorry.”

Lord Simeon let out a heavy breath. “You leave yourself vulnerable. You’re not so young that you don’t know what happens if you’re not careful around men.”

“Hmm. I could certainly understand that the risk would be there if I was particularly beautiful, but that’s a world I’ve never been part of, so...”

“This world does have people with eccentric tastes,” he interrupted. “It’s far from assured that only the most conventionally attractive will be the target of unwanted attention.”

“I suppose that is rather persuasive coming from you.”

“You say that, but I’m not sure you’re really able to accept it. Allow me to explain in more detail. It’s true that you would not typically be described as a ‘beauty,’ and that you perhaps lack the distinguishing features that would lead someone to fall for you based on looks alone. However, for those who don’t look at the outside, but the inside, you are a woman with an abundance of charms. The fact that your behavior is so far outside of society’s norms is, in fact, a positive quirk of your personality if looked at from the correct angle. Some might even find it very appealing indeed. That man feels that way, and so do I. Anyone who doesn’t simply overlook you as though you’re part of the

scenery, but rather acknowledges you as an individual, will soon see how lovely you are, and how kind. Much as bees gather even at the tiniest flowers by our feet, there are men who want your honey. Don't blithely assume otherwise. Remember that you, too, are a flower."

As he vehemently stated his case, his light blue eyes gazed at me intently. Although he was technically chiding me, my heart was throbbing passionately. *Goodness, he doesn't even realize what an ardent declaration of his attraction to me that was.* There always seemed to be another side of him to discover. The demonic black-hearted military officer, the strait-laced man with a pure heart, and now the type to spontaneously wear his heart on his sleeve. It was almost too much. *I want to write down everything he just said! I don't want to forget a single word!* But I knew it would be a waste to use a speech like that as reference material for my writing. Better to keep it to myself, and treasure it for my whole life.

"Marielle, are you listening?"

"Yes... It's true, you are the one I fangirl over most of all, Lord Simeon!"

"That's not what I was talking about!"

"No, that's exactly what it was about! You were explaining why you love me, and I understood so clearly! I love you too, Lord Simeon!"

"No, you've quite misunderstood. I was trying to tell you that—"

A voice shattered our rose-colored world. A cursed voice from a world of darkness and gloom. "If you two insist on standing around flirting with one another, kindly do it outside."

I turned to see who it was that wished to steal all light and joy from the world and make everyone unhappy forever, and there I saw His Highness scowling at us, his stance just as imposing as his voice. The royal guards who stood behind him were either looking at him with pity in their eyes or looking at us with a vague sense of nervousness. *I suppose His Highness must have heard our exchange just now. After his failed romantic venture, it must be difficult to watch a spectacle like that.*

"Your Highness?" said Lord Simeon.

“Do you have to perform such flamboyant acts of romance right here in the middle of the corridor? If you insist on doing such things at all, then I insist you go home and do them there. Behaving this way in public is...a blight on my family’s fine corridor!”

“Wh-What are you...” stammered Lord Simeon. “I-I certainly didn’t intend to...”

“Oh, do be quiet! I order you to go home this instant. You can declare your undying love to your heart’s content, just as long as you do it somewhere I don’t have to watch!”

I delivered a flustered curtsy to His Highness and dragged Lord Simeon away at high speed. He still appeared not to understand how his speech had come across. *And we have to handle His Highness with kid gloves for the time being. I couldn’t bear to pour any more salt on his wounds.*

We dashed off to a small and largely unfrequented courtyard. By now, very little snow was left on the ground. Though the wind was still cold, spring was steadily approaching. As if to prove that, the branches of the flowering trees had tiny buds just starting to show.

“Look,” I said, “even the flowerbeds are beginning to show signs of growth!” These early touches of spring amongst the remnants of snow made it hard to contain my delight. The world was whispering that the long-awaited season was finally close at hand. “Do you see?”

But when I turned around, I was met with another surprising sight. Lord Simeon’s face was bright red, and he was covering his lips with his hands.

“Have you only just realized what you were saying just now?”

But he only grew redder still and looked away.

It was so hilarious, I couldn’t help laughing. “Oh, Lord Simeon! What am I to do with you?” I ignored his bashfulness and embraced him with all my might.

He hugged me back and cast his eyes upward. “When I’m with you, I lose all presence of mind.”

“And what, I ask, is wrong with that? Tears, laughter, anger... They’re all part

of being human, and they're all a part of what makes you so precious to me. It's not only the aspects of you that are dashingly handsome and perfectly composed that I'm in love with."

"And my disgraceful jealousy?"

"I love all of you, even that. I love you no matter what. Would you say the same about me?"

He looked down at me with a kind smile. "Certainly, by this point I'm confident that whatever side of yourself you show me, I won't run away."

I stood on tiptoes and put my hands on his cheeks, and he bent down to meet me. Our glasses collided again with a *clink* . "They really are quite bothersome," I said.

"For now, I think it's only proper for them to get in our way. It would be bad to forget ourselves here."

We both adjusted our glasses and laughed. *So the glasses are serving as our reins?*

For now, we had to ensure that in all the time we spent together, we kept the proper standards of decency in mind. But when the snow disappeared entirely and the flowers bloomed... When birdsong echoed on the warm wind, and the season had arrived for the whole world to fall in love...

Then it wouldn't matter if our glasses collided or not. Eternal happiness would be ours for the taking.

A handful of white petals drifted down from the clear blue sky. It felt as though we were watching the last footprints of winter as it wandered away, leaving us to greet the coming season.

Lord Simeon offered me his hand and I took it. Together we walked through the courtyard.

Even if we did love each other no matter what, it still precluded causing harm to one another. If I took my present happiness for granted, and failed to put in the work to maintain it, fate would show no mercy and would subject me to endless ordeals. A connection between two people, no matter how strong, can

still be broken. I'd seen it happen many times before, so now I had to use it as a reference for my own life, not only for my novels.

The man walking beside me was the most important person to me in the world. For us to be able to keep living like this forever, side by side, it would probably require a lot of effort. I didn't ever again want to put him in the position where he told me he felt lonely. I would love and treasure him with every fiber of my being.

"Tell me, Lord Simeon... Is there anything that you'd like me to do for you?" *I might as well start with an attempt to bring him happiness,* I thought.

But he looked down at me with a mystified face. "What's this all of a sudden?"

"I'm always the one relying on you and causing you trouble. I was hoping I could show you my gratitude for once."

Lord Simeon tilted his head and laughed. "Have you eaten something funny?"

"My word! What on earth do you mean by that? Is it so odd that I want to show you my gratitude?"

"I'd say it's so admirable, it feels somewhat unsettling coming from you. It leaves me terrified as to what scheme you might be planning, or what trap I might fall into later."

"How rude!"

Lord Simeon laughed loudly at my sullen reaction. *And here I was trying to make him happy! Very well then, if that's his attitude, I'll abandon the whole endeavor.* I brushed off Lord Simeon's hand and turned away.

Then he put his arm around me and whispered into my ear in a low, alluring voice. "I do have one idea in mind."

The touch of his hair and breath tickled me. "...What is it?" My whole body shivered right to my very core—and precisely because it felt so good, I was worried all of a sudden. *It's surely not appropriate to start feeling this way in a place like this. And...it's rather late to be asking, but is there really no one watching?*

In a panic, I took a glance at our surroundings, but then a large hand rested on my cheek and turned my head to face its owner. His light blue eyes were right in front of me. As we gazed at one another, I felt strangely embarrassed. *My cheeks are burning.*

“Lord Simeon? What are you...”

“I made a promise to you, as I recall. Tomorrow I’ll be taking the whole day off, and I’d like us to go out together.”

“Excuse me?”

After all the possible things he could have said, I had never expected that. A deadpan expression formed on my face. “What you’d like me to do for you is...that?”

“Yes. And what is wrong with that, exactly?”

There was nothing wrong. Nothing whatsoever. Only, it seemed quite an odd thing to say while unleashing the full force of his sensuality! Besides, it wasn’t even Lord Simeon’s desire in the first place. It was a promise he’d made to me, because it was something I had wanted.

“It sounds lovely,” I said at last, “but I was asking about what *you* want, Lord Simeon.”

He returned to his usual expression and spoke in a clear tone. “And I assure you, this is precisely what I want. Is there anywhere in particular that you’d like to go? If not, perhaps we could visit a department store. I don’t know much about women’s preferences when it comes to gifts, so I’ve always been asking my mother or my cousin for advice, but I’ve realized that I might just as well ask you for your own opinion and get you exactly what you want. So whatever it might be—jewelry, or anything of the like—I’ll buy it for you.”

I was lost as to what face I should make in response. “I’m grateful for this, I truly am, but it doesn’t serve as a way for me to show you my gratitude. It’s you spoiling me, nothing more. There’s no benefit for you.”

“There most certainly is.” He held my hand again and began to walk. I walked with him, hand in hand. “It grants me the exclusive enjoyment of your smile. And personally, that is what I ‘fanboy’ over the most.”

For a moment I was left dumbfounded—and then I couldn't help but burst out laughing. *How can Lord Simeon use that word? When did he become such a jester that he would imitate my manner of speaking like that?*

"You...fanboy over it?"

"Yes. I fanboy over it."

As I continued laughing, I gripped Lord Simeon's arm tight. *He mentioned my smile, and then immediately I've granted it to him.* After all, for my part, Lord Simeon was the one I fangirled over the most.

"In that case," I said, "why don't we eat some ice cream together? It is one of the local specialties. The trend amongst lovers right now is to share it between the two of them. I imagine it can be rather embarrassing to do it in front of other people, though. Be prepared for that."

"I'll gladly take on that challenge. If you're so inclined, I'll even feed it to you."

"Yes, of course. I forget to mention, but we have to feed it to each other. That's exactly the trend."

"I see," he said at last. "That does sound somewhat embarrassing."

What I want is to be loved by the person I love, and to protect the one who protects me.

Happiness is something two people build together. It's something they protect together.

The world was overflowing with happiness. I heard the bell of a nearby church ring across the shining sky.

The Blissfulness of Simeon Flaubert When I went to deliver my report, the man who was meant to receive it was nowhere to be found.

"Where is His Highness?" I asked a chamberlain who had been left behind. I received an answer that he was in the conservatory. He had apparently taken a walk to catch his breath since he had no urgent tasks on his plate at present.

Upon hearing that he was in the conservatory, I was slightly unsure as to what course of action to take. *Should I follow him, or is it better to leave him be?*

It was, after all, the very place where the recent events had all begun. His Highness had only reluctantly attended the "garden party" that had been held in the conservatory to help him choose a bride, but nonetheless, fate had led him to meet someone. If he had set foot in there again, it must have meant he wished to be immersed in the memories of his love that was not to be.

It's not as though I have any urgent business with him. My report can wait for the time being. While he has the time to spare, I might as well let him do as he wishes.

I tried to brush aside those thoughts as quickly as they rose up. *Wait, wait, wait. Hold on a moment.*

Admittedly, it was sad that his romantic endeavors had been unsuccessful. When I thought back to his sheer joy at finding his ideal partner, I couldn't help but feel compassion at the cruel way in which reality had shattered his heart. I would go to any length at all to give His Highness whatever consolation I could.

However, keeping the partner in question in his heart as a tragic lost love could prove to be rather awkward. After all, there had been no problem with the partner's personality, but rather, a large problem with their gender. Outside of Marielle's fevered imagination, he could not have pursued that path—not without raising many uncomfortable questions that affected the entire kingdom.

I hurried to the conservatory. The knights who were on guard duty had been left by the entrance, and I found him deep inside, reading a book. I walked past

plants imported from tropical lands that spread their leaves out wide and reached the open area in the center. I stepped across the floor tiles with their geometric pattern. Where on that fated day a whole host of dazzling young ladies had been gathered, today one person sat quietly on his own.

On the table in front of His Highness was a rather large pile of books. *Philosophy books, perhaps? Or his favorite, collections of love poems?* If reading brought him more comfort than merely being lost in thought, then perhaps there was no need to worry.

I quietly walked up to him. “Your Highness.”

“Ah, is this about your report? If there’s nothing urgent, then I’d ask you to deliver it later, if you please. I’ve finally found time to take a breather.”

His voice was steady and self-assured, but the words gave me some pause. *He sounds rather world-weary.*

“What are you reading?” I asked, as gently as I could. Perhaps, I thought, we could have an enthusiastic discussion about it, and it might brighten his mood a little. When we were boys, we often read the same books and talked endlessly about them.

His Highness let out a languid sigh. “Love is good, isn’t it?”

“...Yes.”

What a thing to say so suddenly. Sadly, it seemed a topic I would struggle to discuss as enthusiastically as he might like. *I suppose he is reading a collection of love poems after all.* I glanced at the others on the table. Were they all full of love poems? It was impossible to tell, as every book was wrapped in a cloth cover that concealed its title. Based on their thickness, they certainly didn’t look like philosophy tomes. They looked much easier to read than that.

“Love is something that arrives unexpectedly... Yes, I suppose that is how it went. Destiny can strike when you least expect it. I wonder if I’ll encounter a new love again someday...”

“Of course you will.” To me his attitude seemed rather too wistful for a grown man, but I held my tongue on that front. Instead I tried to respond in kind.

“They say that people are always longing to find love. If there’s a man and a woman, the ingredients are there for love to blossom. This was far from your last chance to find happiness.”

“I suppose you’re right. Perhaps I’ll end up happening upon a princess who’s been hidden away, just waiting for me to rescue her.”

“Excuse me?”

A princess? Hidden away? *What an oddly specific scenario to suggest.*

“Or perhaps I’ll be feuding bitterly with an enemy, but we’ll end up falling in love?”

“I...don’t quite...”

Who was he referring to? Did he mean *his* enemy, that is to say the Kingdom of Lagrange’s enemy? That would be Easdale, I supposed. We weren’t at war with them—our rivalry was not exactly at that level—but they were still an opponent with whom we had continual disputes. Easdale did have a princess, but she was not of the right age to marry His Highness. If not her, then perhaps the daughter of Earl Avory, whose house guarded the border? She seemed a suitable enough marriage partner. For a political marriage, in fact, she was exactly the sort of partner one would seek out.

But a hidden princess? He must have heard about that scenario somewhere, much as I’d borrowed my romantic reassurances from Marielle. *Wait... Marielle? Could he have...*

“Perhaps,” said His Highness, “I should give her a single rose every day for her to leave by her window. I could pour all my emotion into those passionate roses and secretly watch over her from afar!”

No, I thought, *anything but that!* It was a memory locked deep inside me that was so embarrassing that recalling it made me feel as though I would die. Though I’d drawn the idea directly from one of Marielle’s books, my message had not come across properly at all. Despite her being the very person who had written it, she had misunderstood my intentions entirely. *I suppose I was the naive maiden in that scenario, vainly hoping I would set her heart racing.*

Which made that one scenario in particular...rather too personal!

“Your Highness, what exactly is that book you are reading?”

I peered over his shoulder. A full-page illustration leapt into view. *Ah yes. I remember this scene well.*

After a moment I asked, “Did Marielle bring you these?”

“No, I borrowed them from Henri. I wasn’t sure what they were, but they’ve held my interest far more than I expected. Very much written with women’s tastes in mind, but inspiring nonetheless. Such lovely dreams of romance... I wish I could fall in love just like this.”

“I’m sure you can,” I replied. There was no other reply I could give. I didn’t want to pour cold water over another person’s dreams, after all. However meager, the books were providing him some solace.

We discussed the books a while longer, then left the conservatory together. We divided up the large volume of romance novels and carried them between us as we walked through the gardens. Here and there we happened upon young noblewomen. *Now that I think about it, the concert organized by Her Majesty was held today. I believe Marielle and her friend were intending to come.*

I wondered why so many young ladies had chosen to walk outside when the wind was still so cold. Was it because they had heard His Highness might be here? He received many passionate glances from all directions, but he ignored them completely. He did not wish to be wooed; he preferred a relationship where he could be the one to do the wooing. *I fear that may be precisely why his success rate has been so low. I wish someone would tell him that.* I couldn’t tell him myself, of course. He’d surely have said, “How dare you try to give advice from your ivory tower of joy!” And I would have had nothing to respond with.

He decided to turn his back on the continual stream of young ladies trying to engage him in conversation and return to the main palace building. Just as he was walking back inside, however, he bumped into someone who was exiting at the same moment.

She let out a high-pitched cry as the books tumbled to the floor. She would have fallen with them, but His Highness caught her. “Terribly sorry,” he said. “Are you all right?”

In his arms was a petite young lady with black hair. “Yes. I’m sorry for not looking where I was— Oh goodness, Your Highness! My deepest apologies! I’m so sorry!” She jumped back in a panic upon realizing who she had bumped into. She repeatedly bowed her head in a feverish haste. “Please accept my apologies!”

“No need for all that. I should have been looking where I was going. You’re not hurt, I hope?”

“No, I’m quite all right. I’m so sorry, really I am!”

This young lady who was apologizing so profusely was not unknown to me. In fact, I had met her numerous times while in Marielle’s company.

“Miss Julianne,” I said.

Only then did she notice my presence. “Oh, Lord Simeon... H-h-how are you today?”

“Very well, thank you. And you? Has the concert finished already?”

Miss Julianne, the daughter of Baron Sorel, finally calmed down a little and raised her head in a motion that for some reason reminded me of a baby squirrel. Like Marielle, she was an unassuming girl, but had an entirely lovely face if one took the time to look at her properly. Her elegant green dress suited her well.

“Yes, a short while ago. It was such a delight. The performances were excellent.”

“Did you play as well? I’ve heard from Marielle that you’re very good at playing the violin.”

“Oh, no, the very thought of it. When it comes to the violin, Lady Aurelia is far more... That is to say, she gave a very impactful performance.”

Miss Julianne had regained her usual composure and was showing a smile. I realized that His Highness was silently watching her. I felt a premonition, as though something quite strange might be occurring. It seemed like history repeating.

“Oh, I’m sorry!” Remembering the books scattered around our feet, Miss

Julianne abruptly crouched down and rushed to pick them up. His Highness joined her down there.

“You needn’t fuss. They’re only reference material.”

I kept silent. I understood well the feeling of not wanting to admit to having read a mountain of romance novels aimed at women.

“Reference material? Then why are they all concealed in cloth jackets...with initials embroidered on them?”

Flustered, His Highness took the books out of Julianne’s hands. “Th-their owner prefers to do that! No other reason! The books belong to someone else! I borrowed them, that’s all!”

Now that I looked, I saw the initials. His Highness’s initials. *Yes, I must definitely not say a word.*

“Thank you,” he said once the books were safely stacked in his hands again. “Miss Julianne, was it? I appreciate you going to the trouble of helping.”

“Oh, it’s no trouble. It was my fault to begin with. Apologies again. Well then, I’ll be off.”

With a far calmer apology than she had managed earlier, Miss Julianne hastily took her leave. She appeared to have no thought at all of using this as an opportunity to sell herself to His Highness or get closer to him. She had a humility that seemed fitting of anyone who’d be Marielle’s friend—or perhaps she simply had no interest in such matters.

Perhaps she had also been scared off by the glares of the many other young ladies who were watching from a safe distance, but now seemed eager to approach and purposely bump into His Highness. I ordered my subordinates to be vigilant.

His Highness, meanwhile, absent-mindedly stared in the direction Miss Julianne had walked.

“Your Highness?”

But he did not turn around. “She was rather charming, wasn’t she?”

I might have known. I felt a sudden headache coming on. “Your Highness,” I

repeated.

“D-don’t get any funny ideas! I was merely sharing my opinion!”

I hadn’t even said anything, and he was already trying to deny it. His flustered behavior said it all, quite frankly. I’d been his friend for a long time, and I understood him well enough to know that he was already done for. Complicated though his preferences were, once his demands were met, he always fell madly, deeply in love. That was the norm for him.

“Her house is a barony,” I said. “Her rank is insufficient.”

“Wh-What are you talking about? I didn’t suggest anything along the lines of...”

“Also, she’s not particularly someone I feel able to recommend.”

“Hmm?” He frowned. “She’s Miss Marielle’s best friend, isn’t she? I seem to recall Miss Marielle singing her praises.”

I couldn’t disagree in that sense. There was nothing wrong with Miss Julianne’s character as such. She was a perfectly nice young lady. Furthermore, after all the difficulties that had been faced in trying to find His Highness a wife, Her Majesty the Queen and all others involved might even accept a baron’s daughter. Her gender was also entirely clear, so there was no worry on that front.

However, there was a problem that I couldn’t simply overlook. I pulled out one of the books that His Highness was carrying.

“Was that one there all along?” he asked.

Nestled amongst the pile of books dutifully hidden in cloth covers, one book alone was naked. The binding was also visibly different from that of Agnès Vivier’s novels. A book of a different genre had been mixed up with them.

I had noticed straight away that in her haste, Miss Julianne had dropped a book of her own and forgotten to reclaim it.

I opened the book and flipped through the pages. *It must be included somewhere. I’m sure it must be mentioned. Hmm, I expect that sort of thing is more likely to occur in the latter half of the book. Ah yes, here it is.*

I found the relevant page, opened the book wide, and showed His Highness.

He was dumbstruck.

There was no need to even read any of the text. The delicately drawn illustration depicted the scene perfectly. Where you'd expect to see a man and a woman, the roles were instead played by two excessively beautiful young men.

"This is what Miss Julianne enjoys reading about," I solemnly announced.

His Highness's eyes rested on the illustration, fixated...and then went completely blank.

I hurriedly tracked down Marielle and dragged—rather, *invited* her to the Royal Order of Knights' office. I carefully cleared the room of all personnel, explained the situation, and asked an important question.

She replied, "Does Julianne have a fiancé? No, there have been no developments on that front."

Her answer was a dagger in my fleeing hopes. "I see..."

"You seem awfully disappointed. Didn't His Highness already lose interest due to *this* ?" She thumbed through the book, which I had taken with me.

I shook my head. *If only life were that simple.* "It did come as a shock to him, but...His Highness has a tendency to see the positive. I should say, he can be quite determined, and is in general a rather headstrong individual."

"So what you're really saying is that he doesn't know when to give up?"

What I had carefully avoided saying, Marielle had stated outright.

She casually laughed off my concerns. "Surely there's nothing wrong with it. Falling in love again is the best way to heal a broken heart, after all."

"But Miss Julianne is..."

"It's fine. Just because she has a specific taste in reading material doesn't mean she can't separate fantasy and reality. Though I'm sure that for her, His Highness plays a role in the fantasy side of things."

"That doesn't sound 'fine' in the slightest!"

She put the book down. “It’s a hobby. All High Highness has to do is allow her to continue pursuing it. I’d say the class difference is a far greater concern. What will His Majesty and Her Majesty the Queen say? In any case, first of all Julianne has to reciprocate his interest in her. Otherwise there’s nothing to discuss.”

As she spoke, her expression was unexpectedly composed. I had thought that upon learning that her friend was being pursued by a prince, she might have grown euphoric and jubilant, but it seemed this was not something she could fangirl over. Honestly speaking, I still did not fully understand the nature of her “fangirling.”

“Are you implying that Miss Julianne doesn’t care for men like His Highness?”

“Hmm.” She cocked her head. Even if her outward appearance did not stand out, I found all her various mannerisms so lovely. His Highness always rolled his eyes when I said that, but I wasn’t looking purely through the rose-tinted glasses of love. She really was delightful. If Miss Julianne was a baby squirrel, then Marielle was a kitten. She was the very picture of boundless charm that one wishes to hold in one’s arms.

“More important than her taste in men is that she has a grim view of the world. Practical, you might call it. When it comes to marriage, she has no grand dreams whatsoever. To be specific, her ideal scenario is to be the second wife of a rich old man.”

Isn’t that somewhat excessive!? How exactly does that follow on from her appreciation of male-male romance stories!?

“Her life goal,” Marielle continued, “is to become a widow ten years after her wedding, then live the rest of her life in total freedom. If she marries into the royal family, she’ll have to work hard for the rest of her life, so I suspect she wouldn’t enjoy it.”

“In other words, she reserves her dreams for the printed page, while her real life has no place for romance at all?”

“She says that once she’s a widow, she would like to take a young lover.”

I reflexively cradled my head in my hands. Miss Julianne was free to have

whatever ideal scenario she wanted, and I had no right to complain about it...but even so, it didn't seem right for a teenage girl to have such designs.

"But in any case, aren't you against it, Lord Simeon? In which case, it seems as though you have nothing to be concerned about."

I sighed. "I've become unsure as to what exactly I should be concerned about."

She giggled in response. The sound of her laughter, so light that it reminded me of flowers waving in the breeze, set off a faint yet indescribable urge inside me. As though she had felt it too, she stood from her seat and moved close to me. I had a compelling desire to touch her, so I took her into my arms. Her body, which easily fit within my embrace, felt tremendously precious to me.

"There are all sorts of obstacles in the way," said Marielle, "so I can't say I'm entirely in favor just yet, but if His Highness intends to pursue her, then I'll lend him my support. I, of course, want Julianne to marry a wonderful man if possible."

"Do you think His Highness can win her over?"

"We'll see, I suppose. It depends on how hard he tries."

I nestled my cheek against her hair. It was pleasant to the touch. She wore no perfume, as was typical of her, but I caught the faint scent of ink. It was strangely comforting.

Given that I know the joy, the blissful satisfaction of holding someone I love in my arms, it would be unforgivable for me to do anything but support His Highness in his efforts to achieve the same. He was my friend and the one I was sworn to serve, so on both fronts, I wanted him to feel this blissfulness as well. Even if there would be many trials and tribulations.

"Oh yes," she added, "and if His Highness does win Julianne's heart... If he vows to keep her safe and happy for all his days... Then I will do something about the class difference."

Just as I had halfway given up and become somewhat amenable to the idea, Marielle made a statement like that. I made a suspicious face as I wondered what on earth she could do on that front. *Surely that's the aspect of all this*

which she is least able to influence?

But she looked at me with fiercely determined eyes. “A romantic relationship with a prince that cuts across class barriers is a consistently popular premise, you see. There is definitely demand for it. First I’ll write an exciting story that takes the country by storm, and when it becomes clear that it’s based on His Highness, the readership will be filled with excitement for him. Gaining the support of the common folk will be as easy as that. Then, for the nobles and those connected with the palace, I believe we can work some magic behind the scenes. I’ll gladly share everyone’s secrets and weak points, and exploiting those will have a splendid domino effect. I can simply tell you who to target and how. For example, did you know that the Prime Minister—”

I decided to interrupt her before anything too terrifying could come out of her mouth. For a moment Marielle’s body froze at my lips on hers, but then she immediately returned my affections. I embraced her soft body without inhibition, enjoying my lover’s company to my heart’s content.

I wondered, *How much information does Marielle actually have? If she really knows everything about everyone, that’s a terrifying prospect.*

This was my fiancée—a young lady who many would, at first glance, deem to be a plain and unremarkable girl. But appearances can be deceiving, and truly getting to know her led to one surprise after another. She was endlessly interesting, entirely lovely, and a mischievous angel.

And it’s surely just my imagination that I see a devil’s tail waving behind her...

Afterword

Hello again! Haruko Momo here. How exciting to be writing another afterword! I'm so fortunate to have had the chance to continue Marielle Clarac's story. It's all thanks to everyone who read the first book, as well as my Japanese publisher, Ichijinsha, for giving me a chance. Thank you so much.

She looks plain and docile on the surface, but she's secretly a fangirl. He looks like a black-hearted sadist on the surface, but he's secretly an earnest and upstanding knight. Despite their many differences in social rank, age, interests, personality, and relative attractiveness in society's eyes, the two of them finally realized how they felt and communicated it to each other. But what happens after that? Does it mean their relationship is totally problem-free? That's the question that leads into this story. When it comes to *those particular moments* , there's one half of the couple for whom you can't expect it to go without a hitch. And, alongside their passionate romance, she seems to get herself into all sorts of trouble again.

In addition to the central couple, I gave His Highness an active role this time. His looks that rival Simeon's, plus his skill and good character, should make him the perfect prince, but last time he mostly had quite a low profile in the story, so this time I wanted to include him more prominently. My intention was to give him a cool and dramatic role in the story...but whether I achieved that, I don't know.

A certain someone also returned in this story. His true identity and goals became a tiny bit clearer, but he still appears to have plenty of secrets left. Though it's said that he never lets the treasure he's after slip through his fingers, he's now in the sad(?) position of not being able to get the thing he wants most of all. I guess this story has a tendency for even the cool and attractive men to be sort of pathetic. Despite that, he seems to be thoroughly enjoying himself as he works from the shadows in his own particular way.

I also wanted to include the female characters, such as the Three Flowers, the villainous Lady Aurelia, the male-male romance fan Julianne, and the queen, who is in fact even more terrifying than the king. However, the page count

made it impossible to feature them much if at all. I really wanted to write a scene where Marielle and the queen meet face to face, but unfortunately I didn't have space to include any scenes that didn't relate to the main thread of the story.

On the visual side of things, I'm extremely satisfied! Maro drew perfect illustrations once again. The three dashing men are too attractive for words, but particularly worthy of note are the riding crop, and those muscles! Who'd have ever imagined illustrations of things like that? I'm generally acknowledged by myself and others as having unorthodox tastes, so for me it's like a dream come true, and I'm quite moved. I hope that anyone out there who's like me is smiling just as much as I am.

This is the story of a couple whose relationship involves some rampant fangirling, some serious moments, some arguments and crises—a lot of commotion, ultimately—but still ends with them being passionately romantic. Did you enjoy the second book? I hope it made you laugh at some point or other. I wish, from the bottom of my heart, to bring joy to all of my readers.

—Haruka Momo

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The Beloved of Marielle Clarac

by Haruka Momo

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