
Welcome to Monstrous Miss Sophie's Enchanted Salon of Healing
2
Author
Sachi Konzome
Artist
Harenochihareta

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Welcome to Monstrous Miss Sophie's Enchanted Salon of Healing Volume 2

Sachi Konzome

Translation by Dawson Chen
Illustration by Harenochihareta
Title Design by Arbash Mughal
Editing by Shana Vodhanel
Proofreading by A.M. Perrone and Charis Messier
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Salon de Sophie, Lady Monster *It's a pleasure to meet you. I can fix a piece of skin*

volume 2

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Cecili
(6)
Left on the doorstep of an orphanage when she was four, Cecili is a caring, dependable, and diligent older sister.
Mairi
(3)
A wide-eyed, innocent three-year-old, Mairi was abandoned along with her sister, whom she loves more than anything in the world.
Welcome to Monstrous Miss Sophie's Enchanted Salon of Healing 2


Kurt Ozhorn
(22)
The youngest and most gifted healer in the kingdom. After a visit to Sophie's salon, he begins to feel something stir within him.
Sophie Olzon
(17)
The only daughter of a wealthy merchant family. Born with a severe skin condition, she opens a salon where she uses her modest healing powers to mend not just the skin, but the anguish beneath.

Cecili and Mairi, the Orphans

THE letter arrived in bubbly and earnest handwriting:

Please heal our burns. Cecili, six years old, and Mairi, three years old. Children.

Despite the wobbly scrawl, the writing was clear and legible (unlike Isadora's) and had confidence to it—something so effortlessly sweet it made an adult want to clutch the letter to their chest and sigh, *Oh, bless your hearts*…

In the occupation field, Cecili and Mairi had written "children." A choice not made lightly if the evidence was anything to go by. The space was smudged and blackened as though they had written something else—perhaps something grander, weightier—only to erase it, try again, erase it once more, until at last, they settled on the truest thing they knew: children.

Everyone busied themselves preparing the salon with even more gusto than usual, not least of whom was Raymond, who baked a cake topped with loads of fluffy whipped cream and juicy strawberries. The flower basket held red, pink, and white blooms. That, with the lace decorations and ribbon ornaments, made the entire table look like one big, adorable cake.

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DI-DI-DI-DING!

Claire's bell rang, light and sprightly. The door swung open, and there they were—two little girls, small enough to make Sophie's chest ache with adoration. Six-year-old Cecili held tightly to three-year-old Mairi's tiny hand, the two frozen in place just outside the doorway. Their blondish hair was neatly trimmed into short, neat

bobs, while their spindly, pale arms jutted out from plain cotton garments.

If their hair wasn't enough to prove their sisterly relation, their crystal-clear blue eyes, like little glass marbles, surely were. One pair of marbles, the elder sister's, stared at Sophie while the other was fixed firmly on the cake. In one pair, fear and courage were in equal measure. In the other: pure, unabated hunger.

"Hello there, I'm Sophie Olzon," Sophie said with a polite dip of her head.

Cecili's face reddened. She stood up straight, forcing her small stature to go as high as it would before returning the gesture slightly too stiffly.

"I'm Cecili. From Alastora Orphanage. And this is my sister, Mairi."

She put a hand on Mairi's back, who was still studying the cake with great interest, and forced her down into a bow as well.

"Nice to meet you."

An orphanage…

Sophie should have known. Of course, any normal six-year-old would have had their guardian write instead.

She looked at the girl standing before her. Six years old. A kindergartener—or maybe a first grader, though the distinction hardly mattered. A six-year-old had seen Sophie's flyer, written that simple yet elegant letter, and arrived here on time—all on her own.

What a remarkably mature, grown-up child.

No, a child who had no choice but to be.

That thought hit Sophie hard, and for a moment, all she wanted was to pull the poor girl into a warm, loving hug. But that wouldn't be appropriate, she reminded herself. Not with a child she'd just met. So, instead, she smiled.

Today, her face was wrapped in bandages, with two veils layered over them for good measure. Not by choice but by necessity. The last thing she wanted was to scare her young visitors.

"Would you both like to sit on the sofa?" she asked. "We can all share some cake."

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MAIRI shoveled cake into her mouth like a wild animal that hadn't seen food in days.

Cecili hovered in a perfect limbo between wanting to scold her sister for her lack of manners and simply being happy to see her enjoying herself.

Noticing this and that Cecili hadn't touched so much as a crumb of her own slice, Sophie waved a dismissive hand. "It's quite all right, Ms. Cecili. This is the highest compliment our chef could ask for. Please, eat up as well."

Cecili turned to Sophie, nodded stiffly, and lifted a forkful of cake to her mouth. Her blue eyes widened. "This is delicious…"

Sophie giggled. "Isn't it?"

Cecili's eyes bounced between the cake on her plate and Sophie. "It's delicious and beautiful."

"Thank you," Sophie said with a warm smile. "Now, I must admit we brought out this cake without knowing your tastes. But now that we're here, what kind of snacks *do* you enjoy?"

She hoped the question might ease some of the nervous energy radiating from the young girl. Cecili squirmed in her seat, her cheeks crimsoning a shade deeper before she broke into a bright, genuine smile.

"I like the centers of donuts."

Sophie blinked.

The centers of donuts… How philosophical!

True enough, in this world, as in her previous one, donuts were deep-fried pastries with holes in the middle. Across worlds, it seemed, bakers had figured out that frying dough evenly without leaving the center raw (or causing the whole thing to explode) required a bit of ingenuity.

But still, Sophie marveled, when asked about her favorite snack, this precocious little six-year-old had answered the *center of*

a donut. How delightful was that? It was almost like a Zen riddle.

Sophie giggled softly. Cecili stared at her, a touch of seriousness to her expression. "Why did you write 'monster' on the flyer," she asked, "when you're so kind and beautiful?"

Sophie's laughter faded. She glanced down for a brief moment, then lifted her gaze back to meet Cecili's.

"Thank you," she said gently. "Perhaps you can't see it right now, but I look different from other people."

Cecili's eyes narrowed in focus. They were so clear and unguarded that, for a moment, Sophie felt as if they could see right through the layers of veils covering her face.

"When I think of monsters," Cecili went on, "I think of someone sneaky or mean, or someone who always puts themselves before others."

Sophie studied her for a moment. Then, "No," she replied in a soft voice. "Maybe some are like that, but not all."

She reached out, gently stroking Cecili's cheek. "You can be the most honest, the prettiest, the kindest person in the world. But if you look a little different, some will call you a monster, if for no other reason than they can. Though whether I'm honest, pretty, or kind, well… That's another matter entirely," she added with a smile.

Sophie let her gaze linger on Cecili. Half of the girl's face was plump and smooth, as soft and white as a freshly boiled egg—exactly as a six-year-old's should be. The other side, however, was dark, scarred, and burned.

She shifted to Mairi, who was busy shoving another oversized bite of cake into her mouth. Her scar was the same, but mirrored, on the opposite side of her face.

Monster. No doubt the word had been used against them in the past, perhaps to great effect.

"Monsters," Sophie said, "exist within the hearts of all, I'm sure of it. What one calls a 'monster' is determined by the heart that beholds it. I am well aware that many look upon me and give me that name, and indeed, I have taken to calling myself a 'monster' to draw attention to my salon. But I do not think of myself as one. I am

simply a person, no different from any other, save for my appearance. No matter what others may call me, I know what I am."

Tears silently streamed down Cecili's cheeks.

Sophie resisted the urge to pull Cecili into a hug again. Instead, she handed her a handkerchief.

"In your letter," Sophie said, "you mentioned wanting to heal a burn. I would very much like to hear more about it, Ms. Cecili."

"Yes," Cecili replied.

She swallowed hard.

"You see…"

"Cecili and I are princesses!" a previously unheard voice interrupted.

Slowly, Sophie turned. The cake-eating machine that was little Mairi had finally paused, cheeks full and cream smeared all around her mouth. She looked up at Sophie with sparkling eyes.

"You see, you see!" Mairi said, "Mairi's a princess. Our castle burned down. We have no home now, so we're waiting at the or-pha-nage until our re-tain-ers come get us!"

Sophie said nothing, instead turning to Cecili for clarification. But Cecili remained silent, her brow furrowed, her face pale, her gaze fixed on the floor.

"You see, you see!" the lively three-year-old went on. "Mairi has the flower mark! It proves that she's a princess!"

She rolled up her sleeve, proudly revealing her upper arm.

Despite its thinness, it was still a toddler's arm, the skin soft and supple. On it was a red birthmark that resembled a lotus flower. At Mairi's persistent urging, Cecili gingerly rolled up her sleeve to reveal an eerily similar mark at the same spot.

"Can I…ask your story?" Sophie asked, now thoroughly confused. But her voice remained gentle as she addressed Cecili, who still hadn't lifted her gaze.

Cecili and Mairi were born the first and second princesses of an unknown kingdom. They had lived in the lap of luxury—until one winter night, when Cecili was four and Mairi only one, their world burned.

Castle attendants, seeking to overthrow the monarchy, set fire to the palace. Flames roared through the grand halls, consuming everything in their path.

Realizing the danger, the queen gathered her sleeping daughters in her arms and fled toward a secret passage. But just as she reached it, a burning beam crashed down from the ceiling, trapping them beneath its weight.

Her children screamed, their tender faces scorched by the heat. The queen, desperate to soothe them, pressed her slender hands against the burning wood, searing her skin as she fought to lift it. Through sheer will, she pushed them into the entrance of the hidden passage.

"Run, Cecili!" she gasped. "Take Mairi and get out of here!"

There was no saving her now. She knew it. And so, even through the agony, through the tears streaking her soot-covered face, she gave her daughters one last, brilliant smile.

"I love you both," she whispered. "Live on, my children. Wherever I am, whenever I am—I will pray for your happiness."

Then, before they could turn back, before their tiny hands could reach for her, she swung the portal shut and locked it from the other side.

With no choice but to press on, Cecili gathered the crying baby Mairi in her arms and ran. At the exit, she ran into a castle attendant. An old butler who had served the royal family for decades. One of the good ones. The butler said even he was surprised the uprising ran this deep and that if they found out that Cecili and her sister, members of the royal bloodline, had survived, they would surely snuff them out. So, with no quick or reliable way to tell friends from foes, the only choice was to leave the country, at least temporarily, and hide somewhere safe.

"The king is alive," the butler said. "He must find his allies, gather his strength. When the time comes to reclaim the throne, we will send for you."

True to his word, the old butler tended to their wounds, hid them as they traveled, and smuggled them across borders.

Eventually, he brought them to an orphanage in a distant land where he had connections.

One day, when the time was right, someone would come for the princesses. And when they did, they would search for the lotus mark—the sign of their birthright.

Or at least, that was the story Sophie pieced together from Cecili's quiet, sometimes incoherent mumbling.

Even after recounting her tale, Cecili was just as pale as when she had begun.

Mairi, on the other hand, couldn't sit still. She wandered the room, eyes wide with wonder as she examined every little trinket and decoration, occasionally poking at them with a curious finger.

"I see," Sophie said quietly, making Cecili flinch, her thin shoulders jumping.

Sophie raised a hand toward the scar on Cecili's cheek. "Then I shall begin healing."

"Huh?" Cecili's wide blue eyes blinked up at her.

"Is something the matter?" Sophie asked.

Cecili replied in a low voice, "You believe me?"

"Yes," Sophie said, a gentle smile blooming across her face. "I believe you."

No matter how tall the tale or improbable the fable, who was she to pass judgment on it?

"Pain, pain, go away."

May the face of this resolute, capable first princess—and that of her sister, the wailing bundle in her arms as she bore them both to safety—be restored to their original, smooth, egg-like forms.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

The healing light surged, then faded, but the scar remained.

Cecili raised a trembling hand to her cheek. Her fingers brushed against the unmistakable ridges of damaged skin. Tears welled in her eyes when she felt the blemish was still there.

She looked up at Sophie, lips parting as if to say something, when *crash!* A loud noise split the air, freezing her in place.

Both Sophie and Cecili snapped their heads toward the commotion—Mairi stood in the middle of it, dazed, surrounded by a glittering explosion of broken glass.

Her arm was still raised, a single finger extended in a guilty little *poke.*

Sophie combed through her memories, trying to recall what those shards had once been. A small glass vase. Its globular shape and position had made it catch the sunlight at just the right angle, illuminating the roses inside as if they were floating. It hadn't been particularly large or important—just something she'd been using as a weight to keep the lace tablecloth in place. She'd forgotten about it entirely until now.

That was her mistake. Before welcoming two small children into her salon, she should have cleared the room of anything fragile or even remotely dangerous.

"Ah." Mairi started to move.

"Ms. Mairi! Don't move!" Sophie shouted a little too sharply.

She had only meant to stop Mairi from stepping on the glass, but her tone came out too forceful, like scolding. Which, naturally, led to…

"Waaaaaah!"

…Mairi burst into tears and bolted from the room.

"Mairi!" Cecili cried, springing to her feet and chasing after her.

Sophie took a moment to process, but soon, she, too, was up and out the door. She hurried after them. But her delayed start meant she only caught a glimpse of the girls disappearing into the kitchen when—

"Argh!"

Raymond's voice rang out from just beyond the doorway.

"I'm so sorry!" came Cecili's panicked, tear-filled voice.

Finally, Sophie stepped into the kitchen.

"I'm sorry, Ms. Sophie! I'm so very sorry!"

And there, on the floor, sat a thoroughly dejected Raymond, doused in whipping cream. Beside him, an overturned mixing bowl lay on the floor, its contents spilled.

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"YOU'RE sure?" Martha's stern voice rang out.

"I am," Sophie replied.

"You're very, *very* sure?" Martha asked again.

"Yes, I am *sure* I want to go outside," Sophie said, sounding a little exasperated now. "Now, please—may I?"

She was already dressed and ready, standing in the entryway in a coral dress, two veils, and a wide-brimmed hat for extra measure. A parasol twirled restlessly in her hands. She was determined—absolutely determined—to make it past the estate gate today.

"I'll be going with. What's the big deal?" Raymond said with a wide, toothy grin.

"It will be an honor to accompany the young lady," Claire added cheerfully.

Martha, unable to come along due to an important meeting, could do nothing but stand there, trembling, looking as though she might tear her handkerchief apart with her teeth.

As an aside, Martha and Claire weren't the only maids in the Olzon household. There were plenty of younger maids, but none of them served Sophie. Years ago, a few gossipy, mean-spirited ones had been laughing about Sophie—until Martha overheard them. What followed was a fiery, white-hot tirade to Johann, resulting in those maids being kept far away from Sophie. Though almost none of those maids still worked at the household, that policy of keeping the younger ones away from Sophie never changed.

Martha was the head maid, meaning she oversaw the younger maids and handled the hosting of guests. Claire, on the other hand, served as a personal attendant to Sophie and Sherlotte—a role with far less weight and responsibility.

"You are to never, ever, *ever* let her out of your sight!" Martha trilled. No matter how many times she repeated this refrain,

Raymond and Claire just stood there, nodding along, dutifully affirming her every word.

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AS fate would have it, Sophie's excursion didn't happen that day. Instead, two days later, after Johann returned from the high seas and granted her permission, her long-awaited trip to the orphanage finally came to pass.

Her father had been…more than understanding about it. Sophie had expected a reaction similar to Martha's—panic, resistance, endless warnings—but to her surprise, there was none of that.

At first, it caught her off guard. But when she thought about it, it made sense. The nature of her request—a seventeen-year-old girl asking for permission for a simple daylight stroll—was hardly something to fuss over.

In fact, her father and mother had likely been eagerly awaiting this day. Ever since she'd quit school at thirteen, she had barely stepped outside. Other than the one time she left home to be tested for magical ability, she had lived as a recluse. So, for her to finally ask to go out? That could only be a good thing.

Now that she thought about it, her parents *had* occasionally nudged her: *Would you like to go for a walk? Want to see a play?* But aside from those tiny, gentle proddings meant to ease her forward, they had done nothing for the better part of four years but wait.

Four entire years.

Truly, a parent's love knows no bounds.

With that thought on her mind, Sophie stepped toward the front door. But just as she was about to cross the threshold—one step away from the outside world—she stopped.

A sudden, irrational fear gripped her.

She could see it—mud flung at her from all directions the moment she stepped outside. A ridiculous thought. Baseless. And yet, it froze her in place.

Claire and Raymond said nothing. They stood beside her, quiet, steady. No questioning glances, no words of patience—just their presence, unwavering. Watching over her.

I know that won't happen, Sophie thought.

And yet her legs trembled. Her mouth tingled and dried. Her lips quivered. She was on the verge of tears.

Suddenly.

"Sorry, Ms. Sophie! I'm so very sorry!"

Cecili's voice from three days ago echoed in her mind. It was followed by another:

"…delicate yet resilient, and remarkably tenacious."

She closed her eyes.

I am going to see that child. I can't make her cry and just leave it at that.

Her eyes snapped open. Her gaze fixed forward.

I'm all right. I'm delicate yet resilient. Remarkably tenacious.

Her feet moved.

One step.

Two steps.

And when she finally stepped outside the estate door, it wasn't mud that greeted her.

It was the deep, rich scent of harvest. The crisp breath of autumn.

"I feel as if this may be the beginning of something," Sophie murmured, taking in the world around her. "Rather than the end."

"I do hope so, milady," Claire said with a brilliant smile. "There's no shortage of places to visit, people to see."

"Yes," Sophie replied absently.

She smiled then, and a single tear traced down her cheek.

She lifted her gaze to the sky.

There it was—that crisp, clear, boundless autumn sky.

Just like she remembered.

Just like she had never left.

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ALASTORA Orphanage, the place Cecili had named, was too far away for the sedentary Sophie to reach on foot. The group boarded the awaiting carriage, and as they set off, Sophie gazed out the window, watching the scenery blur past as her thoughts drifted to Cecili.

That such a small girl had traveled such a vast distance, with her little sister in tow, to see her was nothing short of remarkable. The journey alone, with a child that young, couldn't have been easy.

She could picture it. Mairi grumbling about the walk every few steps, wandering off, or trying to pull them off course. Stopping in front of a shop window, eyes wide with longing. Suddenly declaring, "I want to go pee-pee!" at the worst possible moment.

Why, after all that—after keeping a restless toddler entertained, making the long trip—would Cecili go through it just to tell a lie?

Cecili had wanted to tell her the truth that day; she was sure of it. That was why she'd mustered the courage to make the trip today—to find out what Cecili had meant to say before they were interrupted by the falling vase.

The muffled sound of hooves against cobblestone filled the carriage, steady and rhythmic. As the noise finally receded, Sophie noticed the carriage had pulled over to one side of the paved path. Their driver turned back to address them, holding down his cap.

"This is as far as I can take you, I'm afraid. Carriages aren't allowed beyond this point. You'll have to continue on foot, but I'll wait here for your return."

Sophie politely thanked the man and, at a place not so far from their final destination, alighted from the carriage.

They stepped out into a shopping district. One not as grand as those in the heart of the city, but charming in its own way. As they passed in front of a clothier's display window, Sophie slowed to a stop. A deep blue dress hung there, embroidered with delicate white flowers. It reminded her of the one Yaora had worn to the salon that day, though this version was made for someone much younger. Another pure white dress, adorned with multicolored floral stitching, was beside it. Claire, noticing that Sophie had paused, slowed her steps and silently came to stand beside her.

"I'm sure Ms. Martha would be beside herself with joy if she saw you wearing that, milady," she said.

"I wonder if floral patterns are in fashion." Sophie inclined her neck.

"I'd bet they are," Raymond said, stepping up to the group. "It's all I ever see the girls in town wear, dresses like these. They're straightforward, pretty—I like 'em," he added, to which Claire responded with a big nod.

"Really, I'm reminded of how cyclical fashion is," Claire said. "Before long, we'll see dresses with more flowers, bigger flowers, more realistic-looking ones—just as it was in my youth. Back then, talented seamstresses were more sought after than a cold drink on a hot summer's day," she added with a laugh.

The trio slipped into a desolate side alley, where the air grew cold. A cloud drifted in front of the sun, dimming the light, and that was when they saw her—a woman slumped at the end of a shadowed laneway between houses.

A foul stench hit them. Raymond instinctively stepped in front of Sophie, and she found herself staring up at his tall, broad back. She'd always known he was built sturdier than most, but this was the first time she'd *felt* it—a curious sensation.

At first glance, the woman seemed elderly, but a closer look proved otherwise. Late twenties, maybe early thirties, if Sophie had to guess. Wiry, unkempt hair poked out from the hood of a gray robe. She held a cracked bowl in her hands, which seemed to be streaked with patches of discolored, tightened skin from what must have been burns.

"Spare a coin?" she whispered, her voice quivering and hoarse.

A beggar.

No matter the country or the town, there were always people like her—those who, through circumstances unknown to Sophie, had lost their homes and work and now slept on the streets.

Perhaps she'd lost her home to a fire. Or her job after being burned herself.

Fires were common in the region. The port city, already overcrowded, was the first port of entry for immigrants seeking

refuge. They built makeshift dwellings from poor-quality wood, crammed together in tight quarters, doing whatever was necessary to survive while they went about rebuilding their lives. It made the city a tinderbox even on the best days. One stray spark and the strong ocean winds would fan the flames, setting entire slums ablaze.

Sophie took a few silver coins out of her wallet and placed them in the woman's bowl, along with a few flyers for her salon.

She recognized the hypocrisy of it, her "charity," but there was little else she could do.

The woman looked up at Sophie in disbelief, then prostrated herself.

She was sure to stay that way until Sophie was out of sight. Hoping to spare her even a second of the cold, hard cobble, Sophie hurried away, moving as fast as her weak legs would allow.

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"YOU'D think she'd choose a place with a bit more foot traffic to do her begging," Raymond muttered.

"I'm sure it's more complicated than that," Claire replied. "They must have territories or something of the sort."

Sophie let their idle chatter wash over her as the sun broke through the clouds again. They stepped back into the bustling crowd, leaving behind the gloom of the alley.

"You did a good thing, milady," Claire said.

Sophie turned to see Claire giving her a wide smile. A lump rose in her throat, and she dropped her gaze to the ground, blinking back tears, when *thump*, a reassuring hand landed on her shoulder.

"Almsgiving isn't bad, you know," Claire said. "Of course, if we can fix things for everyone by addressing the root of the problem, we should. But for now, that's a little beyond your reach."

"Back in my privateerin' days," Raymond cut in, "there was a time I ran outta water. Would've died of thirst if not for a passing ship that spared me some. I'm alive thanks to them, and that's something I remember every day."

He spoke loudly and proudly, his arms raised, hands interlocked behind his head in a casual pose. Sophie found herself staring. He was so tall that she had to crane her neck to see him. The muscular body, honed by years at sea. The long blond hair, tied back in a ponytail. And those eyes, shimmering with the full depth of the ocean. Their family cook.

"Raymond," she said.

"Yeah?" he replied.

"You're a man, aren't you?"

"I do believe I am. Unless you know something I don't, milady?"

He laughed blithely. In a manner in which Sophie had always associated with him. Buoyed by it somewhat, she affirmed him with a nod and walked on.

"When we see someone in need, we do what we can to help. If we have enough, it's good to share with those who don't."

The voice of Yaora's mother, though she'd never actually heard it before, echoed in her mind, strengthening her further. She nodded again and finally lifted her head high.

It serves no purpose to dwell on what cannot be done. Instead, one must focus on what is within one's power and act accordingly. Do not cast your eyes downward—look ahead, and with the strength you possess at that moment, give your utmost.

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A short walk later, the group arrived at their destination.

Alastora Orphanage, read the clumsy handwriting on a sign that was little more than a wooden plank. It had the unmistakable look of a child's work, and the sight of it made Sophie's heart swell with affection.

From within, the bright sounds of children playing gave her hope. Perhaps this place was more lively and welcoming than she had imagined. The warmth inside seemed to seep out, wrapping around her, so full of life that it coaxed out a quiet sigh of relief—only then did she realize she'd been holding her breath.

The building itself was old, its many repairs plain to see. A hole in the wall had been patched with what looked like an old advertising bulletin, its faded lettering half-rubbed away in an attempt to erase its past use. In the yard, freshly laundered sheets flapped in the breeze, mended with colorful patches of all shapes and sizes. Beside them, tiny socks—stitched with so many different patches and fabrics that their original form was impossible to discern—hung like colorful little berries.

The fence was crumbling, but fresh green foliage wove through its gaps, filling the empty spaces. But looking closely, one could see edible vegetables growing among the leaves.

There was nothing shameful about the poverty on display here—only a firm, unyielding practicality. Everything that could be used was. Anything edible was eaten. It stood there with an air of defiant resilience, so far past resignation that it had circled back to a kind of quiet, dignified pride.

In the garden, a young woman working alongside the children noticed Sophie and her retinue. Wiping her hands briskly on her apron, she trotted over with a welcoming smile. "Hello there, how can I help you?" As she did so, the children, too, turned to face the unexpected visitors, their immense curiosity written on their faces. When Sophie dipped her head in greeting, the kids planted their hoes and shovels into the soil and echoed back in a grand, adorable chorus: "Good afternoon!"

Most likely, the children and the young woman assumed Sophie and her retinue had come for one reason: to post a job and hire some of the orphans for work.

Indeed, orphanages like this one often arranged for their children to take on small jobs in exchange for a reasonable amount of coin. It was a system implemented by the region's lord. Young but generous in matters of welfare, he was a benevolent ruler, and his policies toward orphans reflected his ethos. Rather than simply providing funds to orphanage caretakers, he offered financial incentives to encourage their participation in the work program.

Jobs could be commissioned through a participating orphanage at sixty percent of what it would typically cost to hire an adult. That

said, these were still children. The tasks they performed were limited to simple, physical labor—cleaning, carrying goods, weeding gardens, and the like. It was enough to help sustain the orphanage but not so much as to threaten the livelihoods of adult laborers.

Sophie quite liked the idea—and the philosophy behind it. The orphans became a well-balanced addition to the workforce, and she especially appreciated that they could earn, at least in part, their own way through honest work. That said, she figured she ought to clear up any misconceptions about their visit before expectations got *too* high. The children's eyes were practically glittering with anticipation at the sight of a well-dressed young lady, clearly expecting a job offer—and the coin that would come with it.

Turning to face the smiling young woman who'd first approached them, Sophie asked tentatively, "Would there be a Ms. Cecili and a Ms. Mairi here?"

Crack. Sophie could have sworn she *heard* the woman's smile freeze. Slowly, stiffly—like a tin man in dire need of oil—her head cranked toward the building. Then, all at once, she snapped back to life, yelling, "Matron? Matron!"

She bolted at full speed toward the orphanage.

A short while later, a willowy elderly woman emerged, moving quickly. Spotting Sophie, she adjusted her course, hurried over, and bowed.

"Good afternoon," she said, a little breathless. "I am Margaret, matron of Alastora Orphanage. On behalf of my children, I offer my deepest apologies for what happened the other day."

With that, she invited them inside.

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THE matron led them to what appeared to be the orphanage's infirmary, where she stepped in first, leaving them waiting just outside.

"Excuse me," Margaret said.

"Yes?" came a female voice. "Ah, matron."

"How is she?"

"Same as yesterday. Still won't eat a thing."

"I see."

Sophie, Claire, and Raymond were then granted entry. Inside, on one of the many beds fitted with clean white sheets, lay Cecili—alone, curled up under the covers. Though Sophie had only seen her three days ago, Cecili was now so thin as to almost be unrecognizable.

Cecili looked up, clocked who it was, and immediately, big, glistening tears welled up in her baby blue eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

"Please don't arrest her," she said.

She sat up, the action seemingly taking all the strength she had.

"Please don't have Mairi arrested," she pleaded again, fumbling weakly to push the covers off.

"I won't," Sophie said decisively.

Hearing this, Cecili let out half a breath. But then her eyes rolled back, and she collapsed backward onto the bed.

"Ah," Sophie muttered in alarm, instinctively moving to steady her. But the matron stuck out a firm arm, stopping her.

They watched as the woman who appeared to be the nurse carefully held Cecili, adjusting her into a more comfortable position. She pulled the blanket over her again, tucking it in securely. Only once this was done did the matron finally speak.

"Three days ago, in the evening, Cecili returned to the orphanage carrying her sister on her back—one shoe missing, her clothes caked in mud. Since then, she has neither eaten nor slept. Every time we ask what happened, she starts trembling, and we get nowhere. We've begged and pleaded—eventually, we stopped asking, just hoping she'd eat something. But still, she refuses."

She sighed, glancing at Cecili's frail form beneath the blankets.

"We tried asking Mairi, but the child is too young. What little we could piece together was…fragmented, at best. We know something had been broken at an estate or manor somewhere. But where and what exactly, we still do not know."

The matron hesitated, then straightened, her tone turning careful.

"Had we known the circumstances, we should have come ourselves to offer our apologies. That you have taken the trouble to come instead is truly regrettable. I must ask, if it would not be too much trouble, whether you might share the details with me in my office."

"Ah, you know what? Just remembered I gotta hand cookies out to the kids," Raymond said with a smile.

"I think I'm going to go play with them," Claire added cheerfully before they both sauntered out of the room.

Resigning herself to the fact that she would have to handle this alone, Sophie followed the matron to her office. The room was, despite being the office of the most important person in the orphanage, poorly lit and cramped. Besides the office desk and a small table for entertaining guests, it was a sparse, threadbare space —its only decorations were books.

The matron gestured for Sophie to take the guest seat, an unfamiliar position for her as she was usually the one on the other side. But after a few sips of the hot tea the matron served—its flavor oddly nostalgic—her nerves settled, and she let out a slow breath.

"Goodness, I haven't introduced myself yet, have I?" she said. "I'm Sophie Olzon. I run a little salon near the port." Saying this, she produced a flyer for Sophie's Salon, handing it to the matron.

The woman adjusted her glasses, shifting them up and down until the focus was just right, then read the flyer in full. Only when she finished did Sophie continue.

"After exchanging formal correspondence to confirm their appointment, Ms. Cecili, in tandem with Ms. Mairi, visited my salon three days ago as guests. While there, Ms. Mairi touched a small glass ornament and, quite by accident, knocked it to the ground. It broke, yes, but really, it was nothing important."

At that last remark, the matron's eyes glinted sharply behind her glasses. Sophie was beginning to think she bore a certain resemblance to a wise old goat.

"From Mairi's description—saying it was, and I quote, 'about yay big, sparkly, and you can see the flowers inside!'—one can only imagine that the ornament in question was a piece of Maille glasswork. Transparent, with flowers seemingly floating inside—undoubtedly treasured. Very valuable, I've no doubt. Even the smallest among them would be worth enough to cover this institution's food expenses for three full months."

Wow! Sophie mused internally. *That is one hundred percent correct! The matron certainly has an eye for this kind of thing.*

Externally, she said, "Then allow me to put it this way. We were well aware that we would be receiving young guests, yet we placed an object so delicate that a single fall would shatter it within a child's reach. I must ask—is Ms. Mairi all right?"

"Not a scratch on her," the matron replied. "She's been running about as lively as ever today."

Sophie let out a breath of relief. "The fault lies entirely with us. We invite guests to our salon—solicit them to come, in fact—yet failed in our hospitality by such an oversight. I sincerely apologize. If anyone is to be held accountable, it should be us. Rather than demand compensation, I'd rather demand that you allow us to make amends."

"Please don't arrest Mairi." Cecili's frail voice lingered in Sophie's mind.

She hadn't been able to apologize that day—not when Mairi had bolted again, this time out of the estate. Cecili had no choice but to chase after her, fearing she'd run straight into the road, where carriages clattered past without a second glance. A girl as polite and responsible as Cecili had surely wanted, perhaps too much, to catch her sister and drag her back to apologize.

"Please don't arrest her."

But the possibility that her little sister could be taken from her was too great a risk. And if Sophie had demanded reparations, how would Cecili have paid? With what money?

Left without the option to return and apologize, she had trudged back to the orphanage, Mairi on her back, tears on her face. Guilt gnawed at her, stealing her appetite and robbing her of sleep.

How desolate, how anxious she must have felt on that long journey home.

Please heal our burns. Cecili, six years old, and Mairi, three years old. Children.

That painstaking note—erased and rewritten, erased and rewritten with such care—and the long journey on foot should have led to a happy ending. Cecili and her sister would have had their burns healed and returned to the orphanage hand in hand, skipping with relief.

Instead, because of what happened, guilt and regret encumbered their journey home, their small shoulders bearing the weight of a crime they believed they had committed. It must have felt crushingly sad, frightening, and heavy.

To hope for something, to set your heart on it, only to have it torn away at the last moment—Sophie knew that feeling well. Like a hole ripped open in your chest.

"I don't know if this will be enough to make amends," she said, "but I would like another chance to heal Ms. Cecili and Ms. Mairi. Please."

She stood, turned to the matron, and bowed deeply. Tears had surfaced at the thought of Cecili, and she wiped them away with a handkerchief.

"Please raise your head," came the matron's voice, quiet and reassuring. "And please, sit down."

She did so, and the matron lifted up the flyer, pointing to a section of it.

"It says here that for the healing spell to work properly, one must, to the best of their ability, accurately recount the details of the accident that caused the scar in the first place."

"Yes," Sophie said.

"What exactly did Cecili tell you?"

Sophie hesitated, which only made the matron frown.

"She told you they're princesses of a usurped kingdom with the mark of the lotus, didn't she?"

Sophie nodded.

The matron removed her glasses and wearily pinched the bridge of her nose.

"She really is very solemn, that girl," she muttered before beginning the story.

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IT had been a cold, wintry morning when the orphanage matron found Cecili and Mairi abandoned on her doorstep.

That wasn't an uncommon occurrence for Alastora Orphanage, whose size and aggressive approach to securing jobs for its children had made its name well known. For many parents who could no longer care for their children, whatever the reason, Alastora was often the first place that came to mind.

Sometimes, they arrived with a mother—a frail, wretched thing clutching a baby in her arms, head bowed low. Other times, it was a pair of siblings, alone, carrying nothing but a letter from their mother telling them to come here. And sometimes, there'd be only a knock at the door. By the time someone answered, all that remained was a baby left on the ground.

Regardless of how they arrived, Alastora took them in. Procedures didn't matter. Papers didn't matter. It didn't matter whose child they were or where they came from.

As long as they made it past those foliage-woven gates, they were Alastora's kids now.

"You've raised some very vigorous and well-mannered children," Sophie remarked.

"I should hope so when manners form the basis of everything," the matron replied, her tone carrying a familiar sharpness that reminded Sophie of something Martha might say.

The matron's voice took on a soft, rhythmic warmth as she continued. "We found Cecili barefoot, with her baby sister strapped to her back, standing in front of the orphanage gates. The poor girl, only four at the time, wasn't crying or making a fuss. She just stood there, patiently waiting for our staff to finish their morning duties so they could take her in.

"You'd expect a girl her age to cry, wail, and beg to be let in. But she didn't. To this day, we don't know how long she'd been standing out there. By the time we found her, the tips of her fingers and feet were turning purple, her breath coming out in long, wispy strips in the cold. She just waited. For heaven knows how long until the doors finally opened.

"I try not to resent the parents. We all come from different circumstances. If the best thing for them or their child is to let go, then so be it. But in Cecili's case…it was difficult. The cruelty of it. Just leaving her there. Why didn't they knock on the gate? Explain the situation? Leave them with us properly? Why didn't they even bother to write a letter? Why didn't they do anything *but* abandon their child barefoot in the deadly chill of winter, with her baby sister strapped to her back?"

The matron paused there, a lump forming in her throat.

"I apologize for my ignorance, but parents can just choose to… *leave* their children here?" Sophie asked.

She had assumed that an *orphan*age would only accept orphans, and the question escaped her before she could stop herself.

The matron let out a slow breath. "We're well aware that our policies aren't widely understood. That's intentional. At least, in part. If we took in every child in need, we couldn't sustain ourselves. But yes, we do accept children whose families cannot care for them due to poverty or other hardships. In such cases where the parents are still alive, they have three years to reclaim their child. After that, the child officially becomes one of ours. Their future is then entirely in our hands—whether that means placing them with a foster family or arranging for an apprenticeship."

A small smile (tinged with pride, perhaps?) flitted onto the matron's face.

"Many places take our children in for apprenticeships simply because they carry our name. With the little ones, we start with words. For the older ones, we teach manners and study. And eventually, a trade. If they're not working, they're learning. We make

sure they're fed, clothed, and sheltered. We help them grow and guide them to where they belong.

"It took decades, but at last, my vision for this place has come to fruition. Of course, the support from His Lordship played no small part in that. Our children are exposed to all kinds of work on a daily basis, which helps them think about what they want to do in the future. The adults here observe them closely, offering guidance as the children grow. Many of our children go on to become exceedingly productive members of society. But I've digressed, haven't I?"

She paused, lifting her teacup and taking a quiet sip.

"For the first year Cecili was here, she didn't speak a word. We thought she might be mute until one day, a staff member happened upon her telling Mairi a story—the story of the princess with the lotus mark."

"We are princesses, Mairi. That's why we have to work extra hard at learning. Put extra effort into every job that comes our way. So that when our retainers come for us, they'll look at us and say, 'Look! Royalty.'"

"From the way they arrived at the orphanage—gaunt, clothed in scraps, left at our gate—anyone could see the tale was a fabrication. And yet, no one here ever spoke against it. Had they used it to elevate themselves above the other children, perhaps we would have said something. But Cecili? That child would never. I have never known a girl more solemn. In her studies, chores, and even the jobs she was given, she never once cut a single corner. When it'd been her turn to polish the hallway windows, you could always tell—they shone like nothing else.

"I believe this story of hers…is much the same as those children who keep the only letter left by their parents in a keepsake box or those who still clutch the handkerchief they were left with. It was far too intricate for a child of four to invent. Surely, it must have been a tale their mother had told them at bedtime. And who, seeing that tiny girl with her sister on her back, doing everything she could just to survive, could blame her for clinging on to the last memory of her mother?"

Expelling a long breath, the matron adjusted her posture. Instinctively, Sophie straightened her own.

"If what you say is true—if you truly possess the power to heal these girls of their wounds—then I welcome it with all my heart. No matter how kind someone might be deep down, it is, regrettably, human nature to pass judgment based on appearances. They're still so young, but they've already heard adults say such cruel things that you'd want to cover your ears."

Her gaze met Sophie's. The meaning was clear without needing to be spoken: *Surely, you know this better than most.* Then, her eyes dropped to the floor.

"What I am about to say may be unbecoming for someone in my position, but I feel compelled to say it all the same: I want Cecili, more than anyone, to find her happily ever after. That child, who stood barefoot in front of our gates that day. That child, who cleans the floors and windows with more care than anyone. I believe she is more deserving of happiness than anyone I have ever known."

She bowed her head in a silent plea.

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"THE cookies were a hit," Raymond said. His cookie sack, now empty, was slung over his shoulder, and for some reason, his hair was a mess.

"I'm glad to hear that," Sophie replied.

"I played cat's cradle with the kids. They were all so adorable," Claire added, smiling like she could still taste the moment.

As the trio made their way back to where they'd left the carriage, they passed the narrow lane where the beggar woman had been. Sophie curiously glanced down it to see the woman still there, collapsed on all fours, panting hard like she was in pain.

"Excuse me! Are you quite all right?!" Sophie called out before she could stop herself.

The woman looked up, startled. When she recognized Sophie, she let out a strained grunt and dragged herself forward, not unlike

something out of a horror movie, which made Raymond and Claire step in front of Sophie, shielding her.

"I was…trying to write…" the woman rasped.

"Write?" Raymond tilted his head, peering down at her.

In one burn-scarred hand, she clutched a scrap of rough, brown paper covered in pitch-black scrawls. A large hole had been torn through the center like it had been ripped open by a rock. From her trembling other hand, a piece of charcoal slipped and fell to the ground.

Sophie quickly put it together. The woman hadn't been in pain—she had been sprawled on the ground, trying to write something with the charcoal.

"Were you…trying to write a letter? To me?" she asked.

"Yes," the woman replied. "But my fingers… The skin is pulled so tight… I can't… *I can't…*"

She clutched the scrap of paper to her chest as if ashamed of it, and her frail, emaciated frame began to shake.

"I know I should just be grateful for what you've already given me. Someone like me…would only be unwelcome in a place like yours. But I just couldn't… Couldn't give up the hope…"

She curled into herself and cried. Not loudly. Just soft, stifled sobs, as if she'd learned that even in grief, she wasn't allowed to take up space.

The tears carved thin, clean lines through the grime on her face, revealing patches of raw, scarred skin beneath. Sophie could see it clearly now: the burns marked her face just as they did her hands.

"The estate is very far," Claire said gently. "On those poor feet of yours, with your stomach half empty…the journey might take days."

"I… understand that," the woman replied. "But I'll make the journey. I'll crawl if I have to."

"If you crawl all that way, you'll wear yourself down to nothing and die," Raymond added.

"Even so…" she whispered. "I must… *I must…*"

Claire and Raymond looked at Sophie. Sophie met their gazes in turn and nodded sharply.

She stepped forward and gently took the paper scrap from the woman's hands. "Your letter is well received," she said. "However, the day is already getting late; it may be evening by the time we return to the salon."

Interpreting this as a rejection, the woman scrunched up her face in pain, and her gaze fell to the ground.

"Thus today," Sophie continued, "the salon shall come to you."

The woman looked up, stunned.

"I'll see if I can't find something for us to sit on," Raymond said.

"And I shall find a bit of food and drink," Claire said.

Sophie smiled warmly.

"My name is Sophie Olzon. May I hear your story?"

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THE woman introduced herself as Quilt, a former seamstress. The evenings were getting colder. Raymond brought over barrels for everyone to sit on while Claire returned with blankets to drape over their legs and hot tea steeped with honey and ginger.

At first, Quilt tried to refuse the kindness, but she was no match for Raymond's firm insistence as he eased her onto a seat, nor Claire's gentle determination as she pressed the blanket and tea into her hands.

Still, she hesitated. But slowly, the lure of something warm and sweet, after who knew how long, wore her down. She blew gently on the too-hot tea, trying to cool each sip just enough to drink without scalding herself.

Blow. Sip. Blow. Sip.

It wasn't until some time had passed that Quilt finally snapped out of her quiet rhythm and noticed the three pairs of eyes watching her attentively.

She blushed. "Sorry. How rude of me."

"Not at all," Sophie replied.

Next, they passed a basket of small bread rolls her way. They were simple—no meat, no filling—just warm, pillowy rolls, soft as a baby's bottom. Claire had likely chosen them carefully, mindful not to overwhelm Quilt's stomach, which was surely unaccustomed to food.

As before, Quilt protested. And as before, she lost. She began to eat slowly, savoring the warmth and the gentle, comforting flavor.

Then, when she'd had her fill of food and drink, she began her story.

Quilt was once a talented seamstress known for her intricate, delicate floral designs. Her work was so renowned that wealthy, important clients requested her by name for their finest dresses.

She had two daughters. But there was no father. He, a deliveryman, had died at the hands of monsters before the younger girl had even been weaned.

"Though I was raising them on my own, I was lucky enough to have a skill I could rely on," she said. "I worked myself to the bone, saving up dowries for the day they married, but we got by."

With her youngest bundled on her back, she took every job that came her way, working her fingers from dawn till dusk. Her elder daughter, only four at the time, was more understanding than a child her age had any right to be. She never caused trouble or complained. Just sat quietly by her side, watching Quilt's hands move with practiced grace, likely thinking, *No doubt I'll never get to wear clothes made with such fine fabric in my life.*

Pressing her cheek to that little girl's soft, round face, Quilt made a promise.

One day, she would sew wedding dresses for her beautiful baby girls from this very fabric. She would feed them until they were full, teach them their letters, and pass on her craft when their hands were steady enough.

Their life wasn't grand, but it was enough.

On warm days, they went for walks.

They played by the river.

At night, they curled up under the covers and shared stories. So many stories.

"I thought it'd be fine," Quilt whispered. "I really did."

Until that one fateful day…

By the time the strange smell woke Quilt, the fire had already spread inside the house. Her eyes watered. She squinted through the thick, choking smoke and grabbed her daughters, one in each arm, as she made for the exit, desperate to escape before the building came down around them. Suddenly, she stopped.

The silver cans—one for each daughter, their names scrawled on the lids—were still hidden in the cupboard behind the flour. Inside them were her savings, their futures.

They were meant for the day she would dress them in gowns of her own making, to send them off to their new families with full hearts and proud smiles.

Should she go back?

No. It was too dangerous. Money wasn't worth a life.

But that single moment of hesitation—that tiny pause—was enough.

Had she not stopped to think, they might've made it. The burning beam might have crashed down harmlessly behind them instead of landing squarely on top of them as they crossed the threshold.

Tsss. She would never forget that sensation—her face cooking alive.

Nor the shrill, piercing cries that came from beneath her arms.

The pain clawed at her mind and threatened to pull her under. But she couldn't lose consciousness.

Not yet.

Not while her babies were still in danger.

Quilt, gritting her teeth, shifted her daughters beneath her arms, holding them tight while freeing her hands just enough to push the burning beam off her face.

With strength she didn't know she had, she freed them and rushed outside. Out in the chaos, a few kind souls spotted them.

They doused them with water, loaded them onto a carriage, and carried them to safety.

The entire neighborhood burned. The dry winter air and strong winds made sure of it. Most of those displaced in that fragile, low-rent block were working-class families. In an act of rare kindness, an exceptionally big-hearted noble opened part of his estate to the victims. It was there that the injured were brought. It was there that Quilt awoke to find her face and hands, and a cheek on each girl had been badly burned.

"I was carrying them with one under each arm," Quilt said, her voice breaking. "So the side of their faces that wasn't pressed against me…that's where the fire touched them."

She was openly weeping now.

Sophie hadn't said a word so far.

She couldn't—not when she'd seen a familiar lotus-shaped mark peeking out from the folds of Quilt's sleeve. She was stunned, breathless by it. Petrified as stiff as a statue. But not noticing this, Quilt continued.

They stayed at the estate for a time to recover, but as it belonged to a noble to whom they had no relation, eventually, they had to leave. One by one, the wounded were discharged as their injuries healed, each given a fresh set of clean clothes to see them on their way.

After selling the necklace and ring her late husband had given her, treasures she had never once taken off, not even in sleep, Quilt was left with nothing. Nor was there any way to rebuild. Though her hands had healed, the burned skin tightened into scarred contractures, making any hope of returning to her work as a seamstress a dream far beyond reach.

They managed to find a place to stay—a ramshackle hovel, barely standing, and yet a miracle that anyone had rented it to them at all. There, they survived on thin soups, and Quilt scraped together whatever work she could: picking up litter, cleaning street gutters, or

shoveling manure. Anything customer-facing or food-related was out of the question—her face saw to that. She did it all with her youngest wrapped around her back, her eldest waiting quietly nearby.

It was degrading work. Even so, she was far from the only one willing to degrade themselves to survive.

One day, when a rare job finally came her way, her youngest fell ill with a high fever. She begged for understanding and pleaded for another chance. When that second chance eventually arrived, it was her eldest who came down with diarrhea and a fever.

The money ran dry. Rent went unpaid.

Their landlord came, demanding payment—but upon seeing Quilt's condition and the state of her family, he relented. Out of sympathy, he gave them one more month to come up with the money.

Quilt was down to her last few copper coins.

It was a bone-chilling winter day, as she remembered it. That day, they went for a walk for the first time in what felt like forever.

By then, the clothes gifted to them by the noble had worn down to scraps, and the cold bit straight through to the bone.

The first light of morning was creeping into the predawn sky. As they passed a donut stand preparing for the day ahead, a sweet smell drifted toward them, making her eldest daughter's stomach rumble. When was the last time she'd had a treat?

Quilt approached the man running the stall and showed him the handful of coins she had left. *Was there anything*, she asked, *anything at all she could buy with this?*

At first, the man looked ready to wave her off. But then he paused. He took in the burns on her face and hands, the two small children clinging to her sides.

"This isn't normally something we sell, but here," he said, handing her a paper bag.

Quilt peeked inside. Whatever it was, it was hot and steaming—but it wasn't a donut.

"What is it?" she asked.

"The center!" her eldest cried, her voice bursting with joy.

A genuine, radiant smile was on her thin, hollowed face—far too gaunt for a child.

"It's the center of the donut, isn't it, mister?"

"Aye, it is. Clever girl, aren't you?"

Three fresh, hot, steaming pieces.

Clutching their spoils, Quilt handed the man the last of her life savings. They kept walking, and before long, they reached the upstream bank of the river—the place where they used to play. But the river here wasn't the same. The whitewater surged violently, nothing like the calm, glassy waters downstream. Cold, churning torrents roared past, the sound filling the air.

"You can eat all three, my darling one," Quilt said to her eldest.

"But…" The girl glanced between her mother and her baby sister.

"Babies can't eat grown-up food. And your mother's too full. She couldn't take another bite," Quilt said.

"No!" her daughter cried, thrusting one of the donut holes toward her*. "No, Mom! You eat this one! Say 'ahh'!"*

Quilt saw the tears welling in her daughter's eyes. She didn't protest. She opened her mouth and let her daughter feed her.

The treat was warm and fragrant. Soft, buttery heaven met her when her teeth sank through the crisp, golden crust. Steam slipped from her lips as she exhaled, *"Mmm, that's very good, isn't it?"*

She crouched down to meet her daughter's eyes and smiled. Honestly, it might have been one of the best things she'd ever tasted.

Seeing her mother smile—really smile, for the first time in what felt like forever—the girl lit up, too. She grabbed her own donut hole, popped it into her mouth, and…yep. Her face went even brighter.

"The centers are yummy!" she said, beaming, and they shared a moment—eyes and smiles meeting before breaking into laughter.

The truth was, Quilt could barely taste a thing. Her tears spilled freely, her nose and throat were clogged, and she could hardly breathe.

She stepped down from the river's edge, hoisted her youngest onto her back, and, taking her eldest by the hand, began the long walk home.

On the way, she suddenly remembered the orphanage.

Once, her eldest had seen a group of children picking up litter on the streets and had asked why they were allowed to work when she wasn't. Wanting to keep her daughter from growing up with prejudice against orphans, Quilt had told her a bedtime story about a princess living in an orphanage.

She hadn't expected it to stick.

But something in that tale had resonated deeply with her daughter. Quilt wasn't sure what part, but from that night on, she'd been asked to tell it again and again.

She looked down at the small, stick-thin arm wrapped around hers. At the painful, scarred face of her daughter. So thin was this girl that she was little more than skin and bones

Yet she had a living parent.

A living parent—and she was doing worse than those with none.

That realization broke whatever remained of Quilt's composure. The tears she'd been holding back finally fell.

She had tried to die today. Even if her daughter's love had stopped her this time—even if they were going home—she knew that feeling would come back.

Because there was nothing left. Not a single copper coin to her name. And with her ruined, useless hands, there was no way she could ever earn another.

"I told her to count to ten," Quilt said quietly, "and when I was out of sight, to knock on the gates. I wanted more time with her, but her feet were almost frozen solid; her toes were turning purple."

If she were going to die, she would do it alone. She wouldn't drag her children with her like she had tried to today. No doubt that bright, kind orphanage would take them in, feed them, and keep them warm. They would be safe there.

She placed her younger daughter in her elder's arms, then cupped her hands around her cheeks and looked deep into her eyes.

"Mom?" the little girl asked.

"*Yes?"* Quilt replied.

"Can we eat donut centers together again one day?"

"*…Yes."*

Her vision blurred with tears. She rubbed them away, frustrated that she couldn't hold onto her daughter's face just a little longer.

"Goodbye, my loves."

Then she tore her eyes away and ran—ran as fast as her failing body would carry her. She didn't look back. She couldn't. Because she knew that if she did, if she saw even a single glance more of them, she'd never be able to let go. And one day, she'd try to die with them all over again.

"I loved those girls. With all my heart. But at the same time…I couldn't ignore the part of me that felt burdened by them. Like they were extra weight I had to carry. I thought that without them, I could work more, work harder. That I wouldn't be so hungry all the time…

"But I was wrong. So terribly wrong."

Her hand trembled as she raised it to cover her eyes.

"They weren't extra weight. They were crutches—the only thing holding me up. Without them, I lost the will to do anything. To wake up early. To work. To cook. Even to wash. It was only because I had them that I could manage at all. That I could still feel like a human being.

"After I let them go, even the desire to die left me. When I was finally kicked out of my home, I drifted to the streets—too hollow to seek anything: not help, not hope, not even an end. Ever since then, I've stayed here. Dead? Alive? I don't know. Just here. Because I'm just ever the tiniest bit closer to them."

She bit back a sob.

"And I'm the one who threw them away. Horrible woman, aren't I? Sorry you had to hear it."

"What are your daughters' names?" Sophie asked.

“Cecili. And Mairi. My husband named them after two of the most beautiful islands in his homeland.”

Raymond leaned all the way back as the revelation physically knocked him off balance. Claire just nodded, pleased with herself, saying she’d thought they looked alike.

Sophie didn’t say a word. She simply stood and rolled up her sleeves.

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“HOW are your fingers, Ms. Quilt? Can you move them?” Sophie asked.

Quilt’s face, now healed from the burns, really did resemble Mairi and Cecili, just as Claire had said. Caught somewhere between shock and disbelief, Quilt stared down at her hand and slowly moved her fingers.

“I can move them…” she whispered. “I can’t believe it. I can move them!”

“If the bone or tendons beneath were damaged, I wouldn’t have been able to repair that,” Sophie said. “So I need to ask again —can you move them freely? No pain at all?”

“No… None!” Quilt said. “Is this… Am I dreaming?”

“I see. That’s good to hear. It’s probably been a while since you’ve used them, so take it slow while you get used to it again.” She paused, then added, “Now, I’m sorry, Ms. Quilt. While I’d like to take a moment to enjoy this small victory, the situation requires me to clarify a few things rather immediately.”

“Oh, um. Yes?”

“First, Cecili and Mairi are doing well. They greet each day with energy and optimism, grounded by the story you told them—the tale of the Lotus Princess, which continues to give them strength and hope. Second, for Alastora Orphanage to take official custody of children in its care, they must have been there for three full years. I suppose that means you’ve got one year left. Just one—to get your life back on track. Not much time at all, is it?

"Third, at present, floral embroidery is all the rage in town. According to my trusted maid here, the trend is shifting toward increasingly elaborate patterns with greater intricacy and number. A skilled seamstress would be in high demand anywhere right now, I imagine. That said, a word of warning: the matron of Alastora Orphanage will prove to be a formidable opponent. She loves those children as fiercely as if she'd given birth to every one of them. So believe me when I say—if you mean to return for your daughters, come ready. Come committed."

Quilt's breath caught in her throat. Though her hands were healed, they started to tremble again.

"You've entrusted your daughters to a fine orphanage, Ms. Quilt. I have no doubt they'll grow up well there—healthy, happy—and eventually be taken in by kind foster parents or perhaps by a reputable establishment for work. That said…"

Sophie trailed off into silence. Quilt stared at her with wide, frightened eyes as if she were terrified of whatever might come next. But Sophie met that ocean-blue gaze and held it, steady and sure, like she was trying to anchor her.

It wasn't your fault, she wanted to say. *You had no other choice. You did what you had to do.* A hundred phrases flickered through her mind—words meant to soothe, to comfort a mother who'd made an impossible decision under impossible circumstances. But…

She bit them back.

"I like the centers of donuts."

That one line had said it all. To say it, despite the giant strawberry-laden cake right in front of her and with a smile so bright, nothing in the world seemed to bring her more joy than that single thought… It had said everything.

Sophie held Quilt's gaze firmly. "Should you ever consider, even in the faintest, the thought of reclaiming what was once cast aside, then you have no time to waste on self-reproach. You should already be focused on cleaning yourself up. Getting a hot meal. Regaining your strength. Finding work. Saving enough to rent a modest home where the three of you can live together happily."

Children can grow up well without their parents. As long as they feel loved, protected, and are surrounded by safety and people they can trust. In a place like that—in a place like Alastora—Sophie had no doubt Cecili and Mairi would thrive.

But there was something Alastora couldn't give them.

That someone.

The one Cecili was still waiting for.

The one who could pick up where the story left off.

The one who could finally finish the tale of the Lotus Princess—for her and her sister, to whom she'd passed the story on again and again, always stopping at the same broken part, always ending with the two of them waiting for someone to come for them.

"The day you left them at the orphanage, Ms. Cecili counted to ten. She waited until her mother was out of sight. But she didn't knock. Not right away. Not even after a while. She just stood there, holding Ms. Mairi in her arms, all the way until morning."

Hearing that, Quilt covered her mouth with trembling hands and wept.

"Maybe she was waiting for her mother to come back around the corner. Maybe she clung to that hope through the cold and the fear. Because if she waited, maybe she'd get to eat donut holes with her mother again. And she wanted that more than anything. Because that—" Sophie's voice softened, "—was the only time she'd ever seen her mother laugh.

"Even now, she's waiting still. Quietly, but with purpose. She scrubs the floors. Polishes the windows. Holds tight to every memory and passes them down to her little sister. Because she believes that one day, their mother will return. That she'll finish the story. That she'll give them the ending they deserve.

"And Mairi—you should see her. Bright-eyed. Pure-hearted. She believes every word her sister tells her. Looks at her like she hung the stars. So tell me, Ms. Quilt—how much longer are you going to make them wait?"

Not a second longer, it seemed; Quilt sprang to her feet. "I'm going to wash myself right now!" she declared—and bolted.

"It'd be dangerous for you to run in your current state," Claire gently called after her.

"The wells in the western square are warmest this time of year," Raymond added.

They watched her disappear into the distance. When she was finally out of sight, they turned back to Sophie.

"Let's return to the orphanage, shall we?" she said with a smile.

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Sophie gazed lovingly at the now-pristine, fluffy white faces in front of her. Round and smooth—like tiny little, delicious bread rolls.

By the time they'd returned to the orphanage, Cecili and Mairi had already slipped into the world of dreams, curled up together like kittens.

She'd hoped to cast the spell without waking them, but her magic—had it always shone that brightly? Fortunately, the sisters were so deeply exhausted that not even that could stir them. When the light finally faded, the scars were gone.

They'll be so surprised in the morning, Sophie thought, and she couldn't help but smile, again, and again, and again.

Noticing the door was slightly ajar, with a sliver of light spilling in from the hallway, she quietly stepped back from their bedside and tiptoed out into the hall.

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IN the matron's office:

"Ms. Claire has caught me up on everything," the matron said, pinching the bridge of her nose. Then her eyes flew open, blazing with fury. "The gall of that woman… If she thinks she can come back now and reclaim them—well, I'd love to see her try!"

"Will you tell Ms. Mairi and Ms. Cecili what transpired today?" Sophie asked.

"Absolutely not!" the matron snapped, eyes widening even further. "Tell them and get their hopes up? For what? For the dream that a single mother can rebuild her entire life from nothing in a year? Hogwash. Absolute hogwash! There's no guarantee of it. There's no guarantee of anything!"

"But if Ms. Quilt *were* to come back with everything in order?"

The matron fell silent for a beat, then let out a slow, simmering breath. "It would infuriate me beyond words. But if she's truly their mother, we'd have no choice but to hand them over. That said, we'll proceed with the arrangements for foster care and apprenticeships as planned. Fortunately, both children are healthy and as charming as they are beautiful. I'm sure they'll receive excellent offers."

She sat a little straighter, voice hardening.

"Their mother," she whispered through clenched teeth. "In fact, I'd love to see her return. I'll receive her personally. I'll make sure she understands *exactly* why they call me 'Dogged Old Margaret.'"

She snorted, defiant.

Sophie smiled to herself. She was glad she'd warned Quilt of the matron's…formidableness.

She was a wall that stood between the helpless and the world's cruelty. A wall that sheltered those without a roof and offered knowledge and means to survive to those with nothing.

A living wall, warm with life. Not unlike the vine-woven fence that circled the orphanage itself.

"While Ms. Quilt deeply regrets her decision to let go of her children," Sophie said, "I think she made the right choice. This orphanage—this place you've built—it was the perfect place for them."

"Of course it is," the matron replied, not missing a beat. There was a pause, and she looked up. "By the way, Ms. Sophie, does the Olzon household happen to need any new maids?"

Sophie blinked, surprised, then let a smile spread across her face. "Dogged Old Margaret, indeed," she whispered.

Good luck, Ms. Quilt.

Sophie sent up that quiet prayer for the woman who, no doubt, was feverishly scrubbing herself clean with freezing cold water at that very moment.

You're going to need it.

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IT was pouring rain that day. With no clients booked, Sophie was spending the afternoon reading in the salon, passing the time until dinner, when out of the blue, Martha called for her.

"Kurt Ozhorn here to see you, milady. Seems he ran all the way here in the rain, and he's requested to see you in the entryway."

Sophie immediately put down her book.

“My,” she said as the entryway came into view—and with it, a completely soaked, head-to-toe drenched man with black hair plastered to his face. “I didn’t take you for a man who hated umbrellas, Mr. Ozhorn. You have a wild side to you. As unpredictable as always.”

“No, I simply forgot, Ms. Sophie.”

“Ah,” Sophie replied, looking away awkwardly.

“You look well, Ms. Sophie,” Kurt said.

“I am, thank you for asking,” Sophie replied.

Then…nothing. Kurt lapsed into silence, looking her over from head to toe.

“Very good,” he eventually said. “Sorry for making a mess of your entryway. I shall be taking my leave now. Good day.” He turned to go.

Sophie blinked in confusion. “I’m sorry—can I not ask what that was all about?”

He paused and turned back. He almost hesitated before he spoke. “A body was found on the banks of the river today. The water level had swelled with the rain, revealing it.”

Sophie blinked, the weight of the news sinking in all at once.

“They said it was a young girl who took her own life after giving up the fight with a lifelong illness. So, I’m glad to see you well.”

Not a flicker of emotion crossed Kurt’s face. Just the rain—matting his hair, dripping from his bangs—giving him the look of a drenched, pitiable dog. That’s all it was, Sophie told herself. But even so, her hands reflexively curled into fists.

“You came here right after work? As soon as you were able?” she asked.

“Yes,” he replied.

“Forgetting your umbrella in the process?”

“Yes.”

“Because you thought it might’ve been me…”

“I considered the possibility. After all, I had just greatly disappointed you the other day.”

“…I wasn’t disappointed. Besides, I’m resilient, aren’t I? Of course I’d be fine.”

"You are resilient, yes, but you are also delicate. At any rate. It wasn't you. That's all that matters." He turned to go again.

"You can borrow an umbrella. And we'll get you a towel, too," Sophie called after him.

"No need," he replied, without looking back. "It wouldn't help. I'm already soaked to the bone. Now then. Good day."

With that, he vanished into the rain.

Sophie stood there for a while, listening to his footsteps fade into the downpour, her hands wringing restlessly.

Pierre, the Clown

PLEASE *remove my makeup. Pierre, sixty, Jester.*

Ding, ding, ding!

With a bright little ring, the doors swung open. Sophie rose to greet whoever was there, but no one was.

She blinked. The doorway stayed empty.

Then, circus music burst to life, bright and bouncy, and before she knew it, Sophie was gently swaying along.

Soap bubbles came next, drifting through the salon in lazy, popping loops. A cheerful slide whistle whooped. Light percussion rattled like maracas.

And then, as if summoned by the chaos, *he* appeared.

"Come one, come all! Honk your noses and wiggle your toes—because iiiiiit's showtime! Welcome, one and all, to Pierre Pierrot, Pierre the Clown's Spectacular Sillytime Extravaganza!"

In marched a rather short man, turning the crank of a candy-colored box as he went. His face was powdered white, with mismatched splashes of color around his eyes and mouth, and a shiny red clown nose perched proudly at the center of it all.

Stepping right up to Sophie, he put down his music box and retrieved from his pocket a red handkerchief.

"Gather 'round, gather 'round. Here we have a perfectly ordinary handkerchief. Nothing special about it all," he said.

"That's right, a perfectly ordinary handkerchief, nothing special about it at all!" Sophie repeated, caught up in the act.

The man draped the cloth gently over his clenched fist.

"One." He moved it to the right.

"Two." He shifted it to the left.

"Pieeeeerre!" He whipped the handkerchief away. *Bang!* The top of his hat sprang open, bursting with streamers as a beautiful white dove fluttered from his hand.

Sophie shrieked in delight, enchanted by the trick. She applauded with all the enthusiasm she could muster.

Buoyed by her reaction, the man stood straight, puffed out his chest proudly, and bent into a deep bow. "Good afternoon, young miss! Pierre the Clown—Pierre Pierrot—at your humble service."

"Hello, Mr. Pierre," Sophie replied, cheeks flushed with excitement. "Sophie Olzon. Now, *that* was a pleasure."

Still beaming, Sophie offered her guest a seat. Pierre had to hoist himself onto it. Once settled, Sophie offered him the tea and snacks before taking a seat.

"What a delightful and enthusiastic performance," she said. "You must be quite the hit with children."

"Oh, yes," Pierre replied. "I am. The biggest hit, in fact." He paused there, taking a sip from his teacup.

Up close, Sophie could see it now—beneath the white paint and lively movements, the years had left their trace.

A moment of silence; the dove still circled above them.

"Or at least, I *was,* anyway."

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PIERRE PIERROT first became a clown when he was six years old.

Raised without parents, Pierre had grown up in the care of his grandfather, a true jester in the most traditional sense of the word. His grandfather had brought laughter and joy to countless people, delighting them with his colorful clothes, painted face, and exaggerated, silent, bumbling antics. Pierre deeply admired his grandfather. He'd grown up on the road, following him from town to town, wherever the next performance called.

"Until then, I only ever watched him, helping where I could, thinking how endlessly amusing he was. So cheerful, so full of fun. I was sure that if it felt that way just watching, then doing it myself would be even more delightful."

Sophie nodded along, and Pierre set down his cup. Then, she noticed he was staring past her, and behind the drawn-on smile, his face had gone deeply somber.

"But it's no fun," he said. "No fun at all, being on that side of the stage. It's terrifying. People—their eyes—are terrifying. All at once, you realize it's just you up there. Dressed like a fool. Acting like one, too. It's your voice, your body, your routine that has to make them laugh. And the thought that they won't—that they'll just sit there in silence, watching you flail—that's the kind of fear that jolts you awake in the middle of the night. Onstage, you're so scared you don't even sweat. Your hands shake. That's when I really understood how incredible my grandfather was."

But even then, little shy Pierre didn't give up.

He and his grandfather became a duo. The Pierrot duo. The seasoned clown with his practiced, effortless moves and the younger one fumbling to keep up in the most endearing way. Audiences loved them. Wherever they went, bright, raucous laughter followed.

They traveled from town to town, trading laughter for coin. It was bright, fun, vibrant—like something out of a fairy tale. A once-in-a-lifetime journey.

"We paint our faces white so they won't show emotion," his grandfather had told him as they did their makeup.

"We draw vertical lines across our eyes because the clown is blind to evil. To the clown, everyone in the audience is a good person."

In the mirror, Pierre gradually disappeared. And the clown took his place.

"Our lips are red so we can smile bigger, brighter. The clown is a joyous character—he's always laughing. We draw tears beneath our eyes, but that sadness is not ours. It belongs to the audience. It's our job to take that sadness and leave happiness in its place."

One winter, Pierre's grandfather fell ill. What started as a cold soon left the once-vigorous man bedbound.

While bringing food and water to his steadily withering grandfather, Pierre had no choice but to keep working. They needed

food. Medicine. Money. So he kept putting on the makeup of a fool and went out, day after day, trying to make people laugh.

But it wasn't working anymore. He did all his usual tricks and ran through every gag, but no one laughed.

They could smell it. The desperation. The humanness bleeding through the mask of the carefree, idiotic clown. And because of that, they refused to be moved.

One day, when he returned to his grandfather's side, makeup streaked with tears, his grandfather scolded him.

"Fool! Clowns don't cry! They laugh—laugh with all their heart! If not even you think your act is the most amusing thing in the world, how do you expect to convince anyone else?!"

"But I was just a child then," Pierre said. "I kept at it, day after day, crying inside while forcing the act. I couldn't even earn half—no, not even a quarter—of what I made when I was with him. But I had no other choice. So I kept going."

He paused.

"We weren't traveling anymore. I was stuck in the same town, performing for the same people over and over. Even at your best, they grow tired of you. Fewer and fewer came to see me. I earned less and less. But even then—even when I was weeping inside—I put on the makeup, painted on the smile, and kept performing."

Eventually, it happened. His grandfather passed away.

Pierre stood there, staring at the empty bed, when something clicked.

"It sort of just came to me."

He was grieving, but somehow, lighter emotions began to come. He was crying, but started to laugh.

"I felt him. My grandfather was gone. But in a way, he was still there. Performing by my side."

Just imagining him there, doing those ridiculous, familiar movements—it was funny. It made him want to laugh.

He put on the costume. Painted the face. And then he ran out into the streets, smiling.

"Come one, come all!"

The words slipped from his mouth as naturally as breathing. The world that had been drained of color just yesterday now felt alive again.

"Honk your noses and wiggle your toes—because iiiiiit's showtime!"

Curious heads turned; a crowd gathered.

"Welcome, one and all, to Pierre Pierrot, Pierre the Clown's Spectacular Sillytime Extravaganza!"

Pierre became a hit.

Every town he visited, every village he passed through, he left behind laughter and smiles.

He did things his grandfather never had—juggling, magic tricks, singing. People watched with wide eyes as each new surprise came to life. The novelty thrilled them, and Pierre's fame only grew.

With his colorful music box and his grandfather's ashes in tow, Pierre toured the country, spreading joy wherever he went. He filled streets with music, made strangers laugh, and lit up faces in every town.

Wherever laughter echoed, you could be sure Pierre the Clown was at the center of it. He was beloved—always had been, always would be.

"But alas, I was wrong."

Like all forms of entertainment, tastes change with time. What undid Pierre the Clown wasn't tragedy or scandal. It was simply time, moving forward as it always does.

Once, he had been "it." Then, one day, he wasn't.

"It's all about magic these days," Pierre said, "And I'm not talking about the sleight-of-hand kind. Shattering a pane of glass with a gust of wind, making a tablecloth swim mid-air like a fish. It's flashy, new, and memorable. Of course, the young people love it."

A wistful look passed over his face.

"Don't get me wrong. I'm not bitter. I don't blame them. I made my living riding the wave of what was hot, too. No, when that happened, I just…figured it was time to retire. I don't live lavishly. What I have should last me till the end of my days."

He shifted, then smiled at her. Wry, sheepish.

"So, I figured, if it was the end, I should remove my makeup for good. Really, it's my fault. When I was younger, I was diligent about taking it off properly. But as I got older, I got lazier. Started just rinsing it with water. A little bit stayed behind every day. And that little bit built up, thicker and thicker until, well,"—he gestured to his face—"this."

"You're joking…" Sophie whispered in disbelief.

"Well, usually I would be. But not this time," Pierre said. "I've tried everything. Every cosmetic store, every remover I could get my hands on. Nothing works. The markings of a clown… They're stained into my skin. Permanently."

Whatever Sophie was going to say next evaporated into thin air. Was it even possible for something like that to happen?

"I resigned myself," Pierre said. "Figured I'd live out the rest of my days as a clown. But then I saw your flyer at a bar."

He paused, his voice quiet.

"Being a clown, it's awful, really. Wherever I go, people look at me and expect something. A joke. A trick. Something funny. And I'm sensitive—I can feel it. I know what they're thinking. So I give them what they want, even though I don't have to. I'm not obligated. Not anymore."

Suddenly, he jumped up and caught the still-fluttering dove mid-air, gently calming it before returning it to his box. Then, with a flick of his fingers, he produced a ball. One became two. Two became four.

"I want to be human again," he said softly. "A normal person, without the face of a clown. I want to cry when I'm sad, not just laugh. I just want to be…Pierre."

"I…understand," Sophie said slowly, still absorbing it. "Would you mind turning this way, please?"

He did, eyes closed. Sophie leaned in to study his face.

And sure enough, through what she'd assumed was powder, she could see pores. Skin. She'd thought he was wearing a full face of makeup, but no. This was him, au naturel. Ghostly white. Bright red. Deep blue. And beneath one eye, the teardrop mark.

Ordinarily, she would've thought it was just hyperpigmentation—natural discoloration that comes with age. But after hearing his story, everything he'd endured, Sophie couldn't shake the feeling that it was more than that.

What if Pierre Pierrot had always been crying?

When he'd been nervous. When his grandfather died. Even when he stood in the spotlight, beloved and roaring with laughter—what if he'd still been crying all along?

Maybe the colors had sunk deeper, embedding themselves in his skin to protect him. So that no matter how hard the tears came, no one would ever see them. So no one would ever have to witness that terrible, unwanted thing—the tears of a clown.

But no. That was just a fantasy.

Sophie shook the thought away, that wistful, impossible idea, and raised her hands to the man's face.

"Pain, pain, go away."

May little Pierre, who longed to cry, be allowed to do so at last—openly, honestly, without shame.

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

May he step out from behind the painted smile, become human once more, and quietly consider the life still waiting for him.

When the light faded, what sat before her was an ordinary old man.

Shorter than most. Smaller than she expected.

But unmistakably human.

She handed him a mirror. Pierre took it carefully, raised it to his face, and leaned in, fingertips grazing his cheek.

"I…" A tear slipped down his face. The mirror trembled in his hands. "I look just like him."

"Oh, Grandpa!" he said, clutching the mirror to his chest.

Were you watching me, Grandpa?

Did I do good?

I smiled big, just like you said.

I laughed and made others laugh, just like you taught me.

His small, hunched frame began to shake—softly at first, then harder. Again and again.

With each quiet sob, a new soap bubble drifted up from behind him, floating gently through the salon before vanishing in a soft burst of color.

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"I'M sorry. I lost my composure," Pierre said.

"Don't be. I thoroughly enjoyed today," Sophie replied.

"That was just the tired, cliched act of a washed-up clown, you know?" he pointed out, raising a brow.

"Not for me, it wasn't," she replied evenly, then gently touched her face. "I don't get out that often."

"Ah…" His face fell into a small frown. Then, as if a thought struck him, it lit up again. He reached toward Sophie, stopped short, wiggled his fingers theatrically—then, with a flourish, whipped out a handkerchief.

From within, a wand appeared.

He spun it between his fingers, and as it twirled, the colors shifted. With a flick, it turned into an umbrella that snapped open as a flurry of confetti burst into the air.

Sophie giggled. Pierre's face lit up instantly.

"Gather 'round, gather 'round!" he called, clapping his hands as he whisked off his hat and spun it.

He twirled the open umbrella, then tossed the hat onto it.

The hat rolled across the umbrella's surface—*doo, doo, doo, doo, doo, doo!*—like a little acrobat.

"Thank you, thank you!" he cried, dipping into an exaggerated bow to end his impromptu show.

Sophie laughed and clapped enthusiastically. "We're spinning more than usual today!" she said, referencing some other umbrella-twirling showman from a past life—one she was sure Pierre wouldn't recognize.

Throughout the whole performance, she'd noticed: the harder she laughed, the wider she smiled, the brighter his eyes became.

And why would that happen if he wasn't someone who really loved to make people smile?

"Mr. Pierre," she said.

"Yes?" he replied.

"Not all of a clown's audience walks down lively, bustling streets, do they?"

"Oh?" Pierre tilted his head.

Sophie thought for a moment. "Places like hospitals or orphanages. Or homes where the elderly live. I think there are a lot of people, tucked away from the main roads of daily life, who don't have much access to joy. Or noise. Or wonder."

Pierre didn't hate being a clown.

Someone couldn't hate something and still dedicate their entire life to it.

Since he was six years old—for fifty-four years—he had done it every day, without fail.

Every morning, he put on his makeup. So faithfully, so consistently, that it eventually stained his skin. He changed his routine and updated his tricks—but the makeup, the way his grandfather taught him, was the one thing he never altered.

Even when the crowds stopped coming. Even when the world forgot him.

That, he never changed.

"Children who see a clown for the first time—they're mesmerized," Sophie said. "And the elderly, when they see one, will remember. Fond memories of their parents taking them to see a clown for the first time. Then, beautiful memories when they took their own children to see one in turn. Clowns carry something with them. Nostalgia, maybe. A kind of lightness. They're a part of celebration itself—always smiling, always a reason to smile."

Sophie wished he would go to an orphanage. *The* orphanage.

Just picturing those two blue-eyed babes—eyes wide, mouths agape with wonder and delight—made her heart swell with warmth.

"You're no longer *the* clown. But that doesn't mean you've lost the choice to be one. You just have to put on the makeup. And if money is no longer a concern, why not perform, not as work, but for your own enjoyment? Not for money, not for fame. Just…because it

brings you joy. You can go where it matters. Make someone smile. Take their tears away. Just like you did for me."

Pierre listened to this, seemed to think on it very carefully, then, all at once, as if struck by a burst of restless energy, he slapped a hand onto his shoulder.

"Pieeeeerre!"

A flurry of white wings—out burst a dove, landing gracefully on his shoulder. He tapped his music box with his wand, and the dove he'd placed inside earlier fluttered free, landing on the other. Then, with a twirl of his wand, he spun his hat back into his hand, sweeping it onto his head and tugging the brim low with dramatic flair.

"Thank you for your intriguing words of advice! I shall give them the utmost consideration, young lady! Now then! I must bid you…adieu!"

"Thank *you*, Mr. Pierre." Sophie smiled.

Whoooop! Whoop! Whoop!

Shaka-shaka-shak!

Leaving only the echoes of his jaunty tune and a trail of bubbles behind, the man who had once been a clown left the room.

Soon after, the soap bubbles vanished. All that remained were a few white feathers and scattered confetti—like remnants of a celebration that had swept in, roared through the room, and vanished, leaving behind a strange, quiet emptiness.

Kurt Ozhorn, the Healer

IT was late at night. Sophie was reading a book, unwinding before bed, when the call came.

"Milady. Kurt Ozhorn is here to see you."

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THE early winter chill had already crept through the manor halls, and the hearths had long been put on for the night. As they spoke, their breath curled visibly in the air.

"Mr. Ozhorn," Sophie said, surprised. "What's happened for you to visit at this hour?"

"Apologies for the late call," Kurt replied. "I came to return the books I borrowed. And…to give you something."

"Give me something?" Sophie echoed, confused.

In the dim room, lit only by the soft flicker of a candle lantern, she watched as Kurt removed the metal badge from his mantle. Then—*crack!*—snapped it cleanly in two.

Her eyes widened. "Goodness. You're stronger than you look, Mr. Ozhorn."

"The metal inside is designed to break away," he said matter-of-factly. "Otherwise, it wouldn't serve its secondary function—identification in the event of death. Informally, they're known as dog tags."

"You mean the kind soldiers wear…when they go off to war?"

Dog tags. Those metal pieces identified remains when nothing else could. Sophie didn't know what was going on, but a quiet dread curled in her chest. She looked at Kurt, hoping for some sign, some

cue to help her make sense of it, but his face… It was as inscrutable as ever.

"One and the same," Kurt nodded. "The call has gone out. A dragon's been spotted near a village to the east. As the local head of the healers, I've been dispatched to assist."

Sophie didn't know what to say.

"I give you this," he continued, "because in the event of my death, whoever holds the other half of my tag will be identified as the recipient of my survivor's benefits. As a rank-three healer, I believe you'll find the sum fairly generous. Normally, I'd leave it at my parents' grave like I always do, but seeing as I'm far from the capital…I figured I'd do what everyone else does—leave it with someone else."

"Why me?" Sophie's voice was soft.

"I suppose the answer to that question is simple. You're the only person I can call an acquaintance."

"Foot, meet mouth," Sophie mumbled, as Kurt held out the tag.

Her hands trembled as she took hold of it. The metal was ice-cold—chilled from his journey—and sent a sharp, foreboding shiver up her spine.

"Will you… Will you come back?" she asked, tightening her grip on the tag.

"I'll try, of course," Kurt said. Cleanly. Coldly.

And with that, he turned to leave.

"Wait!" Sophie called out after him. She scrambled to the cabinet beside the bookshelf, yanked open a drawer, and dug through its contents. Then she ran after him, pressing something into his hand. "Here."

Kurt looked down. "This is…" A white handkerchief. And embroidered in the middle… "A turtle," he said.

"A turtle, yes," Sophie replied.

"How novel," Kurt murmured. Instead of the usual flower motif, here was this tiny green creature, its neck poking curiously from its shell.

"The turtle symbolizes longevity and strong protection. A kind of lucky charm," Sophie explained. "I'm glad I managed to give it to

you. Of course, some say the turtle also serves as a subtle reminder for people rushing through life to slow down and smell the roses—but that's not the meaning I intended. Please don't read into it too deeply."

Kurt almost looked amused. "If you say so. Thank you. I'll try my best not to lose it."

A beat.

"By the way, Ms. Sophie—do you have a type when it comes to men?"

"I like men who live for a good long while," Sophie replied immediately.

"That's…a difficult criterion to satisfy."

Kurt carefully folded the handkerchief and slipped it into his pocket.

"No book today?" Sophie asked.

"I'd rather not risk borrowing an expensive medical text if there's a chance I won't be returning with it," he said, then paused. "Though perhaps I'll borrow *Crickpick* again. Heaven knows each page of that book gives me a thousand hours of entertainment."

"Come back now, you hear me?" Sophie said softly.

"I'll try."

Another clean, cold reply.

But then, he smiled. Just barely. A hint of amusement passed over his face, and the smallest puff of air slipped out of his nose.

"That's quite the expression you're making," he said. "I didn't think I'd worried you that much. But rest easy—healers are support. We stay well behind the front lines. Unless a stray boulder flattens the camp, I should be fine."

He glanced at her. "I'll fight like one of those men who say, 'I can't wait until the war's over. I have a girl waiting for me back home.'"

"You can't say that!" Sophie yelped

"Why not? My superior said it was good luck."

"That's just asking for something awful to happen! Are you sure he's not trying to get you killed?"

"I don't know. If he is, do you think it's because I once said to him, 'Still healing that tiny little wound? Impressive. Most people are done by now?'"

"Oh, he's absolutely trying to get you killed."

"I'll come to retrieve my tag when I return. Please don't lose it. Or get any of your discharge on it."

"Why, I never!"

Sophie's cheeks puffed out in indignation, which only amused Kurt further.

"I'd forgotten how good it feels," he said.

"What does?" Sophie asked.

"To have someone worry about you. No one's told me they wanted to see me back since my parents died."

Sophie went quiet. She just looked at him—Kurt, who was looking straight into her eyes, as he always did. Calm. Steady.

"I'll do my utmost to return," he said. "I've already registered my tag-half with the authorities. If I don't make it, you'll receive a letter. Sorry to trouble you, but you'll have to keep an eye out for it."

"All right, I understand," Sophie said softly. "But more than the letter…I'll be looking out for you."

"Sounds good."

A pause.

"By the way, Ms. Sophie—"

"Still no fiancé."

"Ah. I see. Good." He gave a tiny nod. "Then, lastly…would you mind smiling for me?"

"I'm… I'm sorry?" Sophie blinked.

"You've only shown me your tears since I arrived," he said. "I'd like to remember your smile before I go."

Still, his eyes stayed locked on hers. Not teasing. Not flirtatious. Just sincere.

That made her want to cry even more. Somehow, she managed a smile. Or, more likely, it was something halfway in between.

Kurt looked at it, took it all in, then smiled back.

"Got it."

He stepped back. “Sorry for troubling you again so late. I leave before dawn.”

Sophie nodded. “All right. Be safe, Mr. Ozhorn. I’ll be waiting for your return.”

And with that, Kurt Ozhorn disappeared from Sophie’s salon.

The cold metal tag in her hand was now warmed through. It was already a little slick and damp. From the pus seeping from her skin and the tears slipping from her eyes.

Kuroro Rom Mukuro, the Gatekeeper

***I** have a bald spot that needs fixing. Kuroro Rom Mukuro, fifty-eight years old, male, gatekeeper.*

"I'm nervous…"

Sophie's poor tablecloth again found itself under the restless assault of her twiddling fingers. But this time, the motion was subdued. Listless.

A bald spot.

Sophie had never healed a bald spot before; she wasn't even sure it was possible. This was exactly the kind of thing she'd have liked to test on someone else before the actual client showed up, but unfortunately for her, the Olzon household was currently devoid of the follicly challenged. (Silver was off on a long voyage.)

She pictured the man's face—his soaring expectations, his hopeful eyes—and felt a spike of dread.

Ding, di-ding.

"Come in."

Was it just her, or was Claire's bell unusually quiet today?

Doom. The door slammed open, revealing a massive, muscular, *animalistic* figure.

"P-P-P-Panther!" Sophie shrieked.

Because truly, that was the only word for the black, glistening, fur-covered humanoid standing before her.

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"MY apologies," said the half-human, half-animal figure before her, his voice polite and steady. "I withheld the fact that I'm a demi-

human on purpose. I thought you might reject me because of it. For that deceit, I sincerely apologize."

Demi-humans, in this world, were the offspring of demons and humans. A race born with the strengths of both—intelligent enough to grasp human language, yet faster, stronger, and more resilient, like demons. Their appearances were often striking and unmistakable.

Currently, demons and humans weren't at war, nor were they at peace. An ancient covenant bound their uneasy coexistence: conflict would be avoided as long as neither side crossed into the other's domain. That same covenant included provisions for the fair treatment of demi-humans on both sides, but the reality varied wildly. In some countries, demi-humans faced simple discrimination. In others, they were bought and sold as slaves. Here, however, their equal treatment was codified into law. In the time of the previous, previous king, there had been heavy prejudice against them, but that was—supposedly—a thing of the past.

"No, no, please," Sophie said quickly. "I shouldn't have screamed like that. I apologize, Mr. Kuroro…Romumu…"

She flubbed it.

Glancing up in embarrassment, she tried to gauge his reaction, only to be met with a deep, roguish chuckle. The black panther gave her a smile, the scar across his left eye lending him a rugged air. He carefully unfolded a handkerchief and laid it over the seat before sitting.

Rugged and a gentleman, Sophie thought.

"My name is hard to pronounce, isn't it?" he rumbled. "Please, call me Kuro."

"Kuro!" Sophie repeated brightly. "I like the sound of that. Then, if I may—Mr. Kuro, would you care for some raw meat?"

"I would love some raw meat!" he boomed.

"Claire! Bring the meat! The one that was going to be served to Father for supper!"

Ding, ding, ding.

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"NOW then, Mr. Kuro. You said today you wanted to…" Fix a bald spot—Sophie knew that much. But as she looked him over, all she saw was a sleek coat of black fur, short and impossibly soft-looking. It was lustrous, velvety, and taking all of her self-control not to reach out and run her hands through it.

Then, Kuro shifted. He lifted one thick, muscled arm and pulled up his shirt.

"Kya!" Sophie shrieked, covering her eyes with her fingers. But with that little performance just for modesty's sake done, she lowered her hands and looked closely at Kuro's chest.

Just above his abdomen, below his chest, was a small, nearly perfect circle—completely bare. No fur. About three centimeters across.

"What happened?" Sophie asked.

"Well, let me tell you all about it."

Kuro used to be an adventurer.

At thirteen, he left his dead-end village with a group of his closest friends. Driven purely by youthful energy, they set out on the journey of a lifetime.

Looking back, they'd risked everything for nothing more times than he could count. It was hard to believe the reckless stunts they'd pulled—and even harder to believe they'd gotten away with it all. But somehow, whether by luck or something else, they all made it through, and over time, they became a capable, seasoned party

"My!" Sophie gasped in wonder. "And what was this party of yours called?"

Kuro looked down and mumbled something inaudible.

"I'm sorry, I didn't catch that."

"…The Blackdiamond Bloodgang."

"Ah…"

Kuro hung his head in quiet shame.

Well, at thirteen, that's only to be expected… Sophie thought.

"It's nothing to be embarrassed about," she reassured him gently. "It's a path we all must tread."

The early teens—truly an affliction of the mind. That strange age when every boy and girl believes they're destined to save the world.

"By the end of it, we just started calling ourselves the 'Rovers,'" Kuro said. "Because that's what we were, really. We didn't start with some grand purpose. We did it because we needed to eat. It was what we knew, so…we kept going."

Kuro had been thirty-five when fate found him in a quiet little town, just another stop on the road. He'd met his future wife there, who'd been thirty at the time.

"It was like I was struck by lightning," he recalled fondly.

He hit on her—she rejected him.

He confessed his love—she rejected him.

Brought her flowers? Rejected.

Fancy gems? Also rejected.

But he wasn't fazed. He pressed on, again and again, until one day, finally, she gave him the green light.

That day, Kuro was so happy that he thought he might die on the spot.

"Is love…" Sophie muttered.

"Sorry?" Kuro looked down at her.

"Is love really something so…sudden? So forceful?" she asked, gazing up at him.

When he met her eyes—that wide, curious look—his expression softened. Like a father looking at his own daughter.

"I suppose it depends," he said gently. "For me, it was. One look and my heart knew. Beyond a shadow of a doubt, she was the only girl for me."

Not long after, Kuro asked to leave his party.

That fierce frontliner—once hailed for his godlike speed—wasn't as fast as he used to be. His friends knew it. So did he.

He wasn't at that age anymore where throwing himself headlong into danger felt like fun. He'd accepted it; he was getting old. He chose peace. Chose to settle down.

His comrades—the friends he'd fought beside since their teens—saw him off with nothing but smiles.

When Kuro was thirty-eight and his wife was thirty-three, they had their first child.

She died during childbirth.

"The first one came out without a problem, a girl," Kuro said quietly. "But the second got stuck in the birth canal. The babe just… wouldn't come out. My wife suffered. Suffered terribly—all the way until the end. We found out she'd been carrying triplets afterward. It was an umbilical cord that had done it. Twisting, holding the babe in place."

There was the barest quiver in his tone. A quiver that let Sophie know that even now, twenty-odd years after the fact, Kuro loved his wife. Still carried her with him, and her heart ached at the thought.

It seemed that childbirth, no matter the world, remained a perilous, often deadly thing.

"There I was," Kuro said, "this one child—my only child—suddenly in my arms. No time to grieve. No time to process. And I didn't feel like a father. Not even a sliver of one."

Fortunately, a kind neighbor helped him get milk to feed the baby. But that was just the first of many hurdles. For years afterward, Kuro would have to raise the child on his own.

Back then, he made a living taking on physical jobs—manual labor, guild contracts, guard duty. But those gigs kept him away for days at a time. And with a newborn waiting at home, that simply wasn't an option anymore.

He reached out to everyone he knew, followed every lead he could find, and eventually landed the job he still held to this day: gatekeeper at the city gates.

"All I do is stand by my gate from dawn till dusk. It always closes in the evening, without exception, so I can be home by dinnertime. Honestly, I was lucky. I just happened to be around when there was a policy push to offer public jobs to demi-humans."

During the day, he left his daughter with a neighbor. After work, he'd stop by, thank them sincerely—with both coin and words—then take his daughter home for the evening.

"When she cried, it sounded like she was saying, 'Meee, meee,' so I named her Miina. And this right here"—he tapped the bald spot

on his chest—"was her favorite sleeping spot."

He smiled to himself.

"She loved to nurse there, even though—obviously—there wasn't any milk," he said with a soft chuckle. She'd cry in that little voice of hers—'Meee, meee'—while kneading my chest with her tiny little paws. I'd say, 'Miina, don't cry,' and gently soothe her while letting her do her thing. She was so small, so…desperate. Oh, she was the most adorable thing in the world."

Don't cry, Miina, don't cry.

Because no matter how hard you try, nothing's going to come from there.

He never stopped her from that ritual. Never pushed her away. And before he realized it, the fur on that spot had fallen out—and it never grew back.

He gently massaged that bare patch, eyes narrowing with quiet affection.

It was clear that even now, that tiny spot still carried the weight of those early days—of that helpless, precious little creature who had clung to him with everything she had.



But then his expression tightened.

"If only those days could last forever," he said, letting out a soft sigh. "When Miina turned thirteen, she gradually began drifting away from me. Started dyeing her beautiful black coat all kinds of awful colors, decking herself out in weird accessories, putting holes in those perfect ears her mother gave her. She fell in with the wrong crowd. Some nights, she wouldn't come home until morning. I'd try to talk to her, but she'd just shut me out. I can't even count how many times I almost lost it at her. But…"

He trailed off, then looked at Sophie with his golden eyes.

"Is this your first time seeing a demi-human, miss?"

"It is," Sophie replied. "I've been a bit of a shut-in. Please excuse my unworldliness."

Well, barring Annie, if she even counted. She kept that thought to herself.

"Then you should know—your kind fears us," Kuro said. "Maybe it's something buried deep in your nature to revile and fear the blood of demons. We're stronger than you in more ways than one, look different in all the ways that count, and yet—we speak your tongue, live in your towns, and walk beside you like equals. I suppose it makes sense we'd unsettle you.

"You don't see much of it these days, but when I was young, there were these signs outside shops. A claw mark with a big red cross through it. You know what that meant? 'No cats.' 'Demi-humans not welcome.' Whenever we came into a new town, we already knew how it'd go. No inns would take us. No restaurants would serve us. We slept in the streets. Because that was the only place left for us."

Through freezing winters and sweltering summers, Kuro and his Rovers endured the cold, unyielding ground, the insects that tried to eat them alive as they slept. *Filthy beasts,* passersby would mutter, but they had no choice—they bit down, swallowed the words, and endured the cold. Endured their own emotions.

"I'd be lying if I said I felt no resentment toward your kind," Kuro went on. "But I also know that just like there are good humans, there are bad demi-humans. Even so, I can't shake this vague,

burning feeling that rises up in me when I see a human. Maybe it's one of those things that won't be healed in my lifetime—something that takes generations to fade."

He massaged the bald spot again. Then, let out a long, tired breath as if he was trying to push the heat of his feelings out with it.

"If there's one thing demi-humans can't afford, it's anger. The second we give in to it, our claws are out. And in that moment, someone's dead. A human torn apart in a flash of rage. So we don't get to be angry—at least, not if we want to live among humans."

The daily life of a gatekeeper was dull beyond words. Same hours, same spot, every single day. If anything suspicious came up, he just gave a signal to the human officials nearby, and they'd take care of it—questioning, detainment, the works. That wasn't Kuro's job. He was the last resort. The muscle. The silent warning not to cause trouble. So he stood there. Every day.

"Another uneventful day, huh, partner?" Kuro would mutter to the small statue of a knight posted by the gate. He'd taken to calling it that because the elements had worn down its helmet, leaving two little nubs on top that looked vaguely like the ears of a feline demi-human.

It was one of his two companions. The other was a grand old tree, already ancient by the time Kuro arrived. He'd named her "Mrs. Rustle" for the way her heavy boughs rustled in the wind. In his mind, he and Mrs. Rustle made a perfect duet. When the boredom got especially thick, he'd imagine her rustling as a rhythm and hum along with it in his head.

"Heavens, a demi-human!" an old woman gasped as she came close, clutching her pearls before scurrying off. They never noticed until they were right in front of him—the steel armor and helmet hid everything too well. Some days, it was just a man shooting him a look of quiet disgust. Other days, it was spit.

But Kuro never got angry.

Whenever he felt the heat rise in his chest, he'd rub that one spot over his armor.

Miina, he'd whisper in his head. *Your daddy's trying his best today.*

So you have to try too, okay?

Wait for me. Be patient.

Be good. Don't cry.

"Not once on the job have I opened my mouth, let alone smiled," Kuro said. "These fangs—they're made for scaring people off. And after years of telling myself not to be angry, day after day, month after month…I think I just forgot how to be."

It happened one morning—just another morning—when his daughter came stumbling through the door.

Kuro had approached her with the same intent he'd carried many times before: to scold her. But this time, his sensitive nose noticed something.

A sweet and artificial scent wafted from her body. A sickly and wrong scent.

"Daddy? Is that you? What're you doing here?" she said.

Her words were slurred, as if her tongue was too big for her mouth. Drool slid from the corner of her lips. And every so often, she giggled—an eerie, involuntary sound. Her mouth pulled into a loose, unnatural smile as if her face no longer obeyed her.

At that moment, a single thought consumed Kuro's mind.

Who are you?

Where's Miina?

Who is this, and what have you done with my little girl? The one my wife died bringing into this world? The one who used to fall asleep nursing in my arms?

Miina giggled again, shrill and grating. Then, in a mocking voice, said, *"Don't you have a gate to keep, Mr. Gatekeeper? Should you really be here right now? The bad people are gonna get in—oooo!"*

The blood rushed to his head*. What the hell was so funny?* he thought.

In one instant, he raised a thick, muscular arm, heavy as she was. In the next, he swung it.

Her body hit the wall with a dull thud and crumpled to the floor.

He'd hit her.

His adorable little girl—the one he'd spent his life doting on. The sweet, beautiful child who was the spitting image of his late wife…

He'd hit her—for the first time in his life.

That, he knew now, would go down as the greatest mistake he'd ever make.

He squatted down next to her, pulled her head back, grabbed a jug of water, and forced it to her lips. She drank, sputtered, choked—until the whole thing was gone.

That sickening, artificial scent clung to everything now. It was in her clothes, her hair, and the walls.

"You're high, aren't you, Miina?!" he roared.

When she finally stopped coughing, a flicker of focus returned to her eyes—only for it to vanish in an instant, replaced by raw, unfiltered fear.

Her father's claws.

She had never seen them before.

"Who put you up to this?" Kuro growled. *"That no-good son of the butcher? Those freaks you hang around? Still squatting on the corner smoking, dyed all sorts of colors, and covered in holes? I'm going to have a word with them. Show them there are lines you don't cross—even if you're trash."*

His voice dropped.

"First them. Then you. Stay right here."

He turned to storm out, but something caught his leg.

Miina.

She was clinging to it with all the strength she had left.

"Get off me," Kuro said.

"I'm sorry!" Miina cried.

"I said, get off me."

"Please, don't go!"

He shook his leg. Hard. She slipped off and crashed into the nearest wall. He didn't look back. Just kept walking, every step heavier than the last.

"Daddy!"

Her voice cracked.

"Please, Daddy—don't go! I don't care what happens to me, just—don't become a killer because of me!"

Kuro froze.

"Don't leave me again. I can't take it. When you're not here, it's like I can't breathe. I hate it, I hate it—please, please, don't go!"

Then came a sound he knew too well.

Sobbing.

Miina's sobbing.

And with that pitiful, all-too-familiar sound, the fury drained out of him like a punctured lung.

Don't cry, Miina, don't cry. That familiar refrain echoed in his mind.

How could he have forgotten?

His daughter—his sweet, sensitive little girl—had always gotten lonely so easily.

Every day after work, he'd find her out front on the neighbor's steps, scribbling in that beat-up sketchpad. Always out front, just so she could spot him a little sooner. The moment he came into view, she'd light up, drop her pencil, and sprint into his arms. She'd beg for shoulder rides, spin in circles, and fill the air with stories she could barely get out fast enough. All just to be near him.

When did that stop?

When did her voice go quiet?

When did she decide it was safer not to show him how she really felt?

In his younger days, he'd burned too hot, pushed too far. Then, with age settling into his bones, the long hours in armor beneath the scorching sun had become more akin to punishment than duty. Once, seeing his daughter after a long day lit him up, but the exhaustion wore that feeling down, dulling it until it barely registered. At dinner, he spoke less and less until silence became the norm. He grew distant. Became absent. And he never stopped to think how it must have looked through her eyes.

He was her whole world.

And when he started fading from it, of course, she tried to fill the void.

She never stopped needing someone. Never stopped needing *him.*

So she dyed her fur. Fell in with other kids who felt just as alone. Started acting out—not to hurt him, but maybe, just maybe, to make him see her again. To make him look at her the way he used to.

Slowly, Kuro retracted his claws.

Closed the door.

He scooped up his daughter from the floor and into his arms. She immediately clung to him.

"Sorry. I hurt you," he said softly.

"No." She shook her head. *"I won't do it again. I won't ever, ever do it again, I swear. You got mad at me; I was waiting for you to get mad at me. Honestly, I was really scared of those guys."*

Miina kept apologizing, over and over, until her words gave way to sobs. And then she cried—loudly, openly—in her father's arms.

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"THAT day, it was like a switch flipped," Kuro said to Sophie. "Like whatever spell had possessed her finally broke. Miina turned into the most diligent girl in the world. She cut ties with her old crowd, signed up for the Guild exam, studied her butt off, and passed. Now she works as a Guild receptionist, and she's damn good at it too."

A flicker of a smile touched his lips, quiet and proud.

"What a world we live in now, where a demi-human can become a Guild receptionist."

As Kuro reflected on how much the times had changed, Sophie just sat there, unsure how to process everything she'd just heard. For all the calm in his voice, the story hadn't felt like some quaint tale about a rebellious teenager and her father patching things up in the end.

It was heavier than that. Darker. But also…hopeful.

Somehow, it felt like a door had cracked open to a world she hadn't known existed.

She'd been told that demi-humans tended to form their own communities and live among their own. These communities…weren't always given the chance to thrive. Of all the slums they'd been taught to never set foot in at the academy, she recalled that over half were said to be demi-human districts.

Windows smashed in. Trash everywhere. People stumbling through the streets, strung out or drunk as if it were normal. They'd been described as dangerous places.

Once something's been dirtied, it's hard to make it clean again.

Once purity has been lost, it's almost impossible to restore it.

Yet, a father who had done just that sat in front of her. One who had done the impossible. Reached into that dark, broken place and pulled his daughter out.

It wasn't as if she was about to claim corporal punishment was right—or moral, at all—but she also couldn't deny it: in this particular case, a little tough love had saved a soul. Maybe for good.

She sat with that thought for a moment, her face softening into contemplation. Then:

"Thank you for sharing such a personal story, Mr. Kuro, but…" *Why are you trying to erase a mark that means so much to you?*

But before she could speak the question aloud, Kuro's whiskers twitched. He puffed out his chest proudly.

"My daughter's getting married, you see."

"My!" Sophie clapped her hands, her expression brightening.

The fiancé was a demi-human adventurer.

One who had fallen hard for the beautiful Guild receptionist and, like a soul possessed, expounded his love for her again and again and again until she finally gave in.

"Like mother, like daughter," Sophie said.

"Indeed." Kuro nodded. "He's earned my respect, so I gave them my blessing. At the ceremony, I'll be wearing our traditional attire, as is custom. The thing is, it's…rather revealing."

His kind took great pride in the beauty of their coats, and their traditional attire was designed to show it off. It amounted to a loincloth—and little else.

"Miina once apologized to me, rubbing the spot, saying, 'Sorry, sorry.' So I thought, you know what? I'll surprise her on her big day. Show her she doesn't need to carry that guilt anymore."

Sophie didn't say anything.

"That's it. I've told you everything, Ms. Sophie. Now, please—if you would do your thing!"

She just stared at him, brows slightly furrowed, her expression unreadable.

Kuro took her silence for refusal. His ears drooped slightly. "I see. A demi-human like me isn't even worth the mana, is that it?"

But then…

"Mr. Blackdiamond Bloodgang!!!" Sophie roared.

She slammed both hands on the table with such force that the leftover meat juices on Kuro's empty plate leapt into the air.

He jumped. He hadn't expected an outburst like that from someone so quiet and respectful until now. His ears shot up. Even his tail twitched.

"What was that?" he asked, startled.

Sophie fixed him with a tight, trembling smile. Her voice was soft, but her fury was barely contained. "Mr. Kuro…the only surprise women appreciate from men your age is waking up to find they've passed peacefully in their sleep."

"I'm…sorry?" Kuro tilted his head, genuinely confused.

But Sophie wasn't done.

She was angry.

Fuming.

That this blockheaded father could be so blind to his daughter's feelings—whether he meant to be or not.

"I simply cannot, for the life of me, fathom why you thought it was a good idea to remove that spot without even *mentioning* it to your daughter first."

Her voice shook with emotion. "That isn't a scar, Mr. Kuro. It's a reminder. A memory. A *treasure*. It's proof that you love your daughter and have loved her through the worst of it."

She leaned forward, eyes burning.

"It's not yours to do with as you wish."

Kuro's eyes widened, as did his jaw.

What beautiful fangs, Sophie thought, just for a brief moment, before the indignation reclaimed her.

"Go home. Talk to your daughter. Then come back to me. If she agrees to erase it, I'll have nothing more to say. But doing it without her consent? That's like burning a diary. Tossing out a cherished keepsake. I'm sorry, Mr. Kuro, but I won't be an accomplice to something so callous. So cruel."

"But…I don't have any more days off," Kuro said. "I only get two a month."

"Then I shall come to you."

Saying this, Sophie reached out a hand to Kuro's belly.

She fluffed it.

Then fluffed it again.

A perk of the job, as it were.

"I understand your daughter's wedding is exciting news—truly, I do," Sophie said. "But I urge you to take a moment. Let the emotion settle before you make a decision you can't take back."

She gestured to the bald spot.

"You won't get another chance to remake it if it's gone."

Kuro didn't respond right away. He stared at the floor, clearly deep in thought. Still unconvinced.

Men! Why I never! Her frustration flared all over again.

"Mr. Kuro," she said sharply. "That is a badge of honor. A badge your daughter gave you—for raising her, for loving her since she was that tiny little girl, all the way to her wedding day. So please, I'm begging you. Let's wait a little longer."

She softened again, voice quieter.

"Talk to your daughter. Then I'll come to you. If she agrees, I'll heal it. No questions asked."

At last, Kuro seemed to relax. His shoulders eased a little.

"Thanks," he murmured.

"Which gate are you posted at? South gate? North?"

"North."

"Very well. Then, if it's all right with you, I'll come to the north gate in three days' time. At noon."

Kuro nodded, his ears flopping with the motion, making Sophie giggle.

"Your ears droop, Mr. Kuro. How adorable," she said.

He bashfully scratched the back of his head. "They used to stand tall on top of my head. But after all those years wearing a helmet…they kind of bent, I suppose."

"And they wouldn't cut out any holes for your ears?"

"Put in that much effort? For a demi-human? Not a chance."

With that, he stood and neatly folded the handkerchief he'd used to sit.

Sophie had found it charming at first—old-fashioned manners. But now, she thought maybe it wasn't that at all. Maybe it was the quiet reflex of someone who'd been made to feel unwelcome too many times.

"Three days, then," Sophie said.

"Three days. Sorry for the trouble, but I can't leave my post. You'll have to come right up to me."

"Not a problem. They don't give you a break for lunch?"

"A gatekeeper can't ever leave the gate, so no. No breaks."

His face cracked into a smile as he said this, and only then did Sophie notice it: the fur around his face was scruffier and lighter in color. It was sun-bleached, weathered by time.

Two days off a month. No breaks. No exceptions for heat, cold, wind, or snow. Just him, his "partner," and Mrs. Rustle, standing in constant vigil next to his gate.

As Sophie looked at the broad back of the man who had sealed away his anger, laughter, and freedom as an adventurer to raise his daughter, she whispered a quiet prayer for their happiness.

✶✶✶

THREE days later, Sophie and Martha made their way to the city's north gate.

Sophie had, of course, wanted to go alone, but Martha wasn't having it.

As they neared the gate, they spotted a crowd. Far too many people for a normal day. The air buzzed with chatter, people speaking in excited, hushed tones.

"I wonder what that's all about," Sophie muttered.

"I shall find out," Martha replied, already slipping into the crowd.

The old maid marched up to a young man, grabbed him by the sleeve, and began interrogating him without a preamble. After a brief, murmured exchange, she returned to Sophie to relay the story.

There had been an incident.

An ordinary-looking merchant's wagon rolled toward the city gates. Nothing seemed off. But just as the officials waved it through, seeing nothing wrong with its paperwork, the gatekeeper moved.

One moment, he was a statue. The next, he was in front of the wagon, voice like a cannon blast.

"Close the gates! I smell gunpowder! To arms!"

The driver clicked his tongue, then whistled. Men burst out from the back of the wagon. Each carried something black and round in their hands—bombs, the fuses lit.

They hurled them toward the gate.

The explosions created shockwaves. The noise was deafening. Black smoke and swirling dust instantly choked the air.

The human officials panicked, scrambling to get across the gate before it closed. The attackers, thinking the battle was already theirs, lit more bombs and raised their arms to throw…when *it* happened.

A black blur tore through the chaos.

With a metallic clatter, what fell to the ground were the gatekeeper's helmet and armor.

His figure was long gone, disappearing into the smoke.

There were screams. More smoke. The flash of movement, then stillness.

And when the dust began to settle, only one remained standing.

A demi-human, his sleek black coat glistening beneath the sun.

"You face Kuroro Rom Mukuro. Speed incarnate! The Ebon Gale! Vanguard of the Blackdiamond Bloodgang!"

His voice rolled like thunder, deep and blazing with fury.

"If any among you still has steel in your spine, come test it. But hear me now—by my fangs and by my blood, none with ill intent shall pass this gate while I still draw breath!"

Then came a roar. Wild, primal, full of strength—a feline cry that split the sky.

"My! It sounds like Mr. Kuro started enjoying himself halfway through!" Sophie said, wide-eyed.

"Apparently, the attackers were extremists—partisans with a particular distaste for our lord's policies," Martha continued. "They've all been captured. Not a lasting injury among them. This crowd seems to be made up of those especially taken with the actions of our exemplary gatekeeper. They're even saying he deserves a medal."

"Well, I do love a happy ending." Sophie let out a breath.

Curious to see the man at the center of all this adoration, Sophie and Martha wandered the area. As they neared the shadows between the gate and the guardhouse, a black blur stirred. When they stepped closer, its ears twitched, and its head turned toward them. One of its golden eyes bore a long, vertical scar.

"Mr. Kuro," Sophie greeted.

"Ms. Sophie," he replied.

"I heard all about it. It seems you've saved the city."

Kuro gave a sheepish smile. "There's no fool like an old fool, as they say. I may have gotten a little too carried away in the line of duty."

"I heard all about that, too," Sophie replied with a giggle. Kuro's coat was glistening even more than usual; he must've washed up after the fact. Then she noticed next to him the broken remains of a massive tree. Its trunk, thick and ancient, had been snapped clean in two. Though its boughs rested against the earth, the branches still rustled fiercely in the breeze.

"This tree…" she muttered.

"Ah, Mrs. Rustle," Kuro said. "She gave her life valiantly in the line of duty. Took a bomb to the trunk. If not for her, it would've been the guardhouse."

Sophie looked saddened. "I see…"

"It was her time. She has no regrets about giving her life for the city. Or at least, I'd like to think so, anyway."

She gave a little smile. "Yes, I'm sure."

"Milady." Their quiet moment was broken by Martha's voice. She hadn't joined in the conversation. Instead, she'd been staring intently at the ground beside the broken tree.

"What is it?" Sophie asked.

"There's a seedling," she replied.

Sophie and Kuro exchanged a glance, then stepped closer.

Sure enough, nestled near the shattered stump was a tiny sprout—bright green, fuzzy, fragile. A baby tree, just barely poking its head above the soil.

"Would you look at that," Sophie whispered.

"It's young master Rustle, it seems," Martha said.

Kuro chuckled softly. "Crazy old bat. Should've known she was too stubborn to die like that."

Sophie laughed with him, and the two stepped aside to talk privately. But as they walked, she noticed that Martha wasn't following.

She was still by the tree stump, still gazing down at that little seedling.

A breeze swept through, ruffling her white hair.

Rustle. Rustle.

And for just a moment, Sophie thought she saw it—that perfectly straight back, the one she'd always imagined had a metal plate strapped to it, looking ever so slightly hunched.

Something in her said not to disturb her. So she said nothing and went to speak with Kuro alone.

"I heard you're getting a medal," Sophie said.

"I'll believe it when I see it. For a demi-human? It feels unlikely."

"That's sad…"

"Not really. Besides—" Kuro touched his chest "—I have all the decoration I'll ever need. Right here. Thank you for making the trip today, Ms. Sophie, but I'm afraid it was for nothing. I'll be attending the wedding with my chest out, bald spot and all."

"I thought you might." Sophie beamed. "And how did Miina take it when you brought it up?"

"She started crying."

"I thought she might." Sophie laughed, then narrowed her eyes at him with a playful glint. "Maybe it's up to me to punish the clueless father who made his daughter cry."

"Oh?" Kuro grinned widely, flashing all his teeth as he puffed out his gleaming black chest. "And here we have a mighty human who dares challenge the great Kuroro Rom Mukuro?"

Sophie stepped up beside him and struck a pose she clearly thought was cool. "You face Kuroro Rom Mukuro. Speed incarnate! The Ebon Gale! Vanguard of the Blackdiamond Bloodgang!"

Kuro shrieked, flailing as he covered his face with both hands. His tail writhed in full-body embarrassment.

Sophie struck another *very cool* pose. "Kuroro Rom Mukuro. Speed incarnate! The Ebon Gale! Vanguard of the Blackdiamond Bloodgang!"

He shrieked again—louder this time. Longer.

Rustle, rustle, rustle.

The leaves in the wind picked up a rhythm of their own. It really did sound like the steady backing to some unsung, unspoken song.

✶✶✶

A few days later, Silver returned to town; Sophie immediately tried to heal his baldness.

It didn't work, so Sophie decided to add a little disclaimer to her flyers from now on.

Will not restore long-lost friends, it now read in fine text at the bottom.

✶✶✶

IT was nighttime.

Sophie was reading in her salon when she thought she heard a voice outside.

"Martha? Claire?" she called, but there was no response.

She set her book down and crossed the room to the door.

She pulled it open, only to reveal a perfectly dark hallway. No one was there.

She stood a moment longer. That voice—sharp, almost metallic—still rang faintly in her ears.

With a small shake of her head, she closed the door with a soft thud and returned to her chair. But now, she couldn't focus. Her eyes kept drifting, skimming the same line over and over. Finally, she sighed and closed the book.

She looked around the quiet, empty room.

Then, out of a small cloth pouch, she pulled out a piece of metal wrapped carefully in wax paper. Unfolding it, she revealed the dull glint of a badge. Her fingers traced the engraved words: *Rank Three Healer, Kurt Ozhorn.*

There was a bit of grime on it. She took out a clean rag and carefully wiped it clean.

"Ms. Sophie, I hope I'm not intruding."

But no matter how hard she wiped, that voice—that same square, grating tone—refused to solidify. It remained in her imagination.

Minute by minute, the night deepened.

Day by day, winter followed.

Bianca, the Barkeep

BIANCA. *Age: a woman's secret. Profession: proprietor of a small watering hole. Please remove my tattoo.*

Ding, ding, ding.

The soft chime rang out, delicate and clean as glass.

In stepped a woman who seemed to shimmer against the doorway. She was beautiful—undeniably so. Her long black hair fell in plush, curling waves, and her pale, luminous skin was done up just right: polished but not overworked.

"I'm Bianca. A pleasure," she said, voice smooth as velvet.

"Sophie Olzon," Sophie replied. "Ms. Bianca…you're gorgeous."

She slipped into a practiced smile at the compliment. "Why, thank you," she said, letting out a soft, throaty giggle.

Women like her didn't brush off compliments. They'd learned it was better just to take them with a smile—and maybe a little laugh for effect.

Even that giggle, low and rich for a woman, was wrapped in something sultry. And when her red lips pulled into a smile, it was almost hypnotic.

She looked thirty, maybe a touch younger—if you didn't know what to look for. But Sophie's mom senses tingled. Bianca was probably mid to late forties. Still, she wore time like silk. She had the kind of beauty that didn't fade, just ripened. Sophie had no doubt she'd left a trail of dazed, lovesick men behind her.

If Sophie's mother, Sherlotte, were a rose, then this woman was a lily. Impossibly lush, irresistibly fragrant, and utterly magnetic.

She tucked a lock of hair behind her ear, revealing just the edge of an earlobe. Even that—just the simple motion, the way her

fingers moved—was enough to enrapture.

"I run a little watering hole. Just me behind the bar," she said. "Apologies for booking so late. Mornings and I have never been on speaking terms."

"Not at all," Sophie replied. "You've come at just the right time—for a little afternoon tea."

The spread before them included a strong black tea, sweet pastries garnished with fruits and flowers, and, most notably, a platter of thin crackers dressed in savory layers—cheese, ham, and a sprinkle of nuts. They were all salty, satisfying little bites. As Raymond had said, *"Salty foods are a drinker's best friend."*

Bianca plucked a ham-topped cracker and popped it into her mouth. Her eyes went wide, and she lifted a hand to her cheek. "This is *delicious*!"

"I'm glad it suits your taste." Sophie smiled, glowing a little. In her mind, she thanked Raymond.

"The cracker, the topping, the saltiness—it's just perfect. Honestly, I might have to beg for the recipe."

"I'll pass the compliment along to our chef," Sophie said, amused. "See if he's feeling generous."

She'd definitely have to be the go-between. If Raymond tried explaining it to Bianca, he'd be smitten before the second sentence. There'd be blushing. Stammering. Possibly fainting.

"Now, the reason I'm here…"

"Yes, Ms. Bianca?"

She slipped the shoulder of her dress down.

Gulp.

A peek of soft, pale, snackable skin slipped into view.

It was enough to turn Sophie into a dirty old man.

"…is this."

Bianca turned her back, lowering the fabric to reveal a tattoo of a skeleton sprawling across her upper shoulders and spine. Sophie's breath caught.

"How magnificent!" she gasped.

It was just as impressive as the one Silver had—both in size and color.

"You see," Bianca said softly, touching a finger to her cheek, "I used to be a pirate."

There was something almost bashful in how she said it, but it clashed beautifully with the glint in her eye.

She began her story.

Bianca was born on a tropical island, far removed from the mainland.

Picture beaches of pure white sand flecked with bits of coral and seashells in every color. Waves crashing against jagged coves, the water sparkling like gemstones under the bright sun.

It was on this little slice of paradise—forgotten by time and the world itself—that Bianca first understood something true about herself:

She was beautiful.

There was never a moment she wasn't reminded of it. No matter where she went, no matter who she was with, the gazes of boys and men followed her every step.

She never liked the attention. Those stares felt more like they came from dogs than men. And worse still was how her father handled them.

"Cover up those legs. Tie up your hair tighter!" he'd scold.

It felt unfair. She worked the ocean like everyone else. Everyone had their legs out. Everyone's hair came undone in the wind and salt. So why was she the only one singled out?

"I can barely imagine being so beautiful…" Sophie whispered.

"Nor could I. There wasn't a single proper mirror on that rock," Bianca replied with a dry smile.

But she could tell in other ways. The way men obeyed her without needing to be asked twice. The way women looked at her with disdain, then sidled up anyway, as if they had no other choice.

Boring, she often thought, watching the sky catch fire with the setting sun as it melted into the sea. She daydreamed, staring at that distant, untouchable horizon, that someone might appear from it and whisk her away to something more.

"When I was sixteen, it was decided I'd marry the son of the island elder."

If the phrase "by the book" ever took human form, it would've been him. Stiff. Predictable. And he looked at Bianca with the same piercing, leering gaze as the rest.

"Boring, I thought."

What kind of life was that to look forward to? Marry this man. Have a few children. Become a mother, then a grandmother. Get buried in the same little graveyard as everyone else who'd lived and died on that godforsaken rock.

She was beautiful. *Special*. Why should her life be just like every other woman's?

A cove was on the eastern side of the island, where natural hot springs met the sea. That was her sanctuary. She often bathed there, naked, letting the water and the view wash over her.

It was on a day like any other, during one of these quiet, stolen moments, that it happened.

From the rising steam of the spring, a silhouette appeared—tall, broad-shouldered.

Men were strictly forbidden from entering this place.

Narrowing her eyes, Bianca peered through the haze, trying to make out which foolish local boy had broken one of their edicts…but the face that emerged was unfamiliar.

It was handsome. Virile.

His hair burned the same reddish-orange as the sky. His eyes, sharp and roguish, carried that same fire. Scars crossed his face, but beneath them, he looked younger than those marks suggested.

They stared at each other in silence, the setting sun casting molten light over their bodies. Then:

"I had no idea," the man said, *"that this island was home to beautiful mermaids."*

"It was love at first sight," Bianca said, her voice slipping into a wistful, sing-song lilt. Her lips curved, and her eyes glazed over with the kind of smile that only memory could summon. "He was burned into me. My eyes, my thoughts, my heart. I went blind to everything else. It was like as long as I could have him, nothing else mattered."

Love, lust—something huge and impossible to ignore—had come for young Bianca that day.

"He told me his name was William. Captain of a small pirate crew. They'd stopped for fresh water, nothing more. But I clung to him, begged him to take me with him. Off this rock, anywhere."

"I don't steal women," William said.

"That's a lie. You've already stolen my heart."

"You're a bold one."

"Not until I met you."

Then she stole a kiss—quick and sure. When she pulled back, her eyes locked with his.

The second kiss came slower, deeper. This one lingered. Tongue and breath and fire.

They stayed that way, tangled in fading light, their figures melting together beneath the glow of the dying sun.

"Eek!"

Sophie's cheeks flushed red as heat rushed through her. She squirmed in her seat.

How sweet…

How hot…

How—stimulating!

She barely restrained herself to that one meek squeak, trying her best to steady her breath. Bianca watched her with open amusement, a playful glint in her eye and a giggle curling from her lips.

"After that," she said, almost proudly, "I forced myself on William—became his woman."

Sophie made another soft noise, but Bianca continued, undeterred.

"I boarded his ship, and as we set sail, I watched the island I called home grow smaller and smaller behind us. Until it was nothing but a speck, then nothing at all. I was ecstatic. I wanted to rub it in their faces. I knew I wasn't going to die in that little graveyard like everyone else. I knew I was meant for something more."

At the time, William's crew barely numbered ten. And with Bianca as the only woman aboard, she quickly became something like a mother to the lot of them.

The ship was filthy. Crude. Smelled like sweat and sea rot. She mopped the deck, washed and patched their ragged clothes, and cooked what she could. She taught them how to read and write and shared the old songs she'd grown up with. In return, they taught her a whole new vocabulary of creative curse words—and their own rowdy sea shanties.

They'd sing together, banging out rhythms on broken, out-of-tune instruments, laughing until their sides hurt.

Bianca saw the world from that ship. Star-strewn skies. Enormous creatures she'd never imagined. She braved life-threatening adventures, took shelter from monsoons in grimy caves, and uncovered treasures that gleamed like the sun. The thrill, the sense of freedom—she would never forget it for as long as she lived.

But what she wouldn't forget, more than anything, was returning to William at the end of it all. To curl up beside him and fall asleep in his bed.

At one port they frequented, Bianca sought out a renowned artist and asked for the same tattoo William had inked across his back. It hurt—badly. She cried. But she didn't care. She wanted proof. A mark that said: *I am his, and he is mine.*

Adventure after adventure, year after year, their ragtag crew grew into something greater. Each new ship was larger than the last, more opulent, more imposing.

But with that growth, something shifted. The carefree, rough-and-tumble energy that had defined them was fading. In its place came something sharper. Heavier. Like the glint of steel. The smell of blood in the air. Metallic. Foreboding.

"William got too big for his britches," Bianca said softly. "He thought he could keep growing without consequences. He was smart, but he was also fragile in ways you wouldn't expect. The pressure got to him. And it came back to bite him—hard."

He stopped listening to the people around him. Declared no one was his equal. Threw his weight around as captain. He even

started dulling the edges with cheap, watered-down booze.

It all came to a head one unfortunate night.

They were moored at port, sleeping, when a commotion outside jolted her awake. Bianca tried to rouse William, but he was dead drunk and unresponsive.

The door flung open with a bang. Men stormed in—dozens of them. Their own crew filed into the captain's quarters like an avalanche.

"What's the meaning of this?!" Bianca shrieked, scrambling to wrap the sheets around her naked body.

This was *William's* room. No crew member entered without permission. That, at least, seemed to stir William. He groaned, sitting up, eyes glassy and unfocused from the drink.

"Ah?" he mumbled.

"William," said the man leading the charge*. "This is a mutiny. You're not fit to lead us. You're just a noble boy playing captain. We're done cleaning up after you."*

"What are you—"

He never got to finish the sentence.

Steel flashed. And in the space of a breath, his head hit the floor with a dull, final thud.

Blood erupted from his neck in violent, rhythmic bursts, painting the walls, the sheets, Bianca's hair, face, and chest. She sat there, frozen in place, staring at the limp, headless body of the love of her life.

The man who'd delivered the killing blow sheathed his cutlass and turned to her.

"Sister," he said, not unkindly. *"We owe you. For the meals, the care, everything. Pack your things and get off this ship."*

"You…"

Bianca finally recognized him as one of the first. One of William's original crew. He'd been a young, starry-eyed boy back then, always grinning with that single gap in his teeth. When had he become like this? So cold? So senseless?

With a small sack of treasure and a few changes of clothes, Bianca was left at the dock, still drenched in her lover's blood.

She collapsed onto the wooden planks, crumpling into herself. And from that spot, she watched as the ship sailed off into the horizon.

Smaller. Smaller. Then gone.

It had been thirteen years since she left the island. She was thirty now.

And suddenly, Bianca understood a new truth about herself.

She wasn't young anymore.

She wasn't particularly special, either.

"I sold the treasure for a hefty sum and used it to buy my bar. It's a dingy little spot. Barely fits a dozen people, if that, but for a single woman, it was enough. Well…just barely. I could scrape by, one way or another. Looking back, that sack of treasure must've been worth more than I realized. And hard to trace, too. That boy must've given me all the good stuff. He really did feel indebted."

At first, business was slow. But little by little, regulars started to trickle in—men living modest lives who couldn't afford the big-name places with the pretty young girls pouring their drinks and laughing at their jokes. They'd sit there nursing cheap, watered-down booze, hanging around until close, tossing out the same tired lines and cliched jokes in the hopes of wooing her.

"It was like I'd gone full circle," Bianca said. "I left that island to escape my fate…only to end up somewhere just like it."

She gave a hollow laugh.

"The irony's not lost on me. Every day, when I'm prepping the bar before opening or scrubbing it down after closing, I think of William. And every time, I catch myself looking in the bar mirror. I see a woman who's losing more and more of her beauty with each passing day. The 'womanliness' I used to hate so much…is just fading. No children. Nothing meaningful to show for it. Just another day serving drunks, watching myself disappear bit by agonizing bit."

"But just so we're clear," Sophie cut in gently, "you are still very beautiful."

Bianca looked at her for a long second. Then smiled—that same slow, bewitching smile that seemed to curl up from somewhere deeper.

"Thank you."

But it didn't last. The smile faltered, her brow tightening with something sad.

"There is one regular," she said, voice softer now. "One man who's never missed a night. Come snow, sleet, rain, or shine—it doesn't matter. Every night, without fail, he stumbles through that door at the exact same time. Hair white as snow, eyes fixed on me. And always the same line: 'Evening, Ms. Bianca. Still kicking, thank the heavens—and all the better for laying eyes on you.'"

Sophie placed a hand over her heart. She felt something warm there.

Bianca caught the gesture and smiled invitingly. For a brief second, Sophie felt like just another patron, stepping into that cozy little bar, drawn in by the glow of the woman behind the counter.

The ambiance seemed to shift just slightly. The air grew hushed; the mood dimmed like a tavern at closing time. Bianca took a slow sip from her teacup, and though Sophie knew it was tea, she couldn't help but imagine it was something stronger.

"Have a special someone in your life, Ms. Sophie?"

The question came out of nowhere. Sophie froze, which only seemed to amuse Bianca more.

"Oh, you do," she said, delighted. "No surprise there. You're young. Tell me, how does that person look at you?"

"No," Sophie said quietly. "There isn't anyone."

"Really?" Bianca's eyes sharpened for just a moment as if seeing straight through her. Then they softened again, drifting off. "This regular of mine…he looks at me like I'm the sun. Squints like he can't behold my radiance. Can you believe that? Me. Radiant. An old woman past her prime, soaked once in her lover's blood, left behind at some lonely port. Now the lowly owner of a cheap little watering hole."

She gave a quiet laugh. Not bitter. Not quite.

"Some nights, when I'm tired, I snap at him. Say all kinds of things I don't mean. And still, he just sits there. Smiling. Day after day after day."

"He sounds like a wonderful person," Sophie said after a pause.

"Oh, please." Bianca waved her off. "He's the furthest thing. Looks like an underfed rat, the scrawny little thing. Always fidgeting. Eyes darting around like he's afraid the walls are gonna cave in. He's only ever worked one job in his whole life—treasurer for some back alley shop, gods know where.

"Yes, he does look like he spends his days with his nose in the books, so I'll give him that. But he's so serious about it, so wound-up, he's nearly fifty with no wife, no kids. The only joy he's got in that dull little life of his is drinking at a dingy bar run by a woman who's long past her fairy tale ending."

Bianca's words were unkind on paper, even cruel. But to Sophie, they seemed anything but.



"There was a time—not so long ago—when I was feeling especially worn down," Bianca said. "I couldn't get out of bed. Chest pain would come and go without warning. So I closed the bar for a few days and just…lay there. Letting it pass. Or hoping it would.

"Then, one night, I heard a knock at my door. It was him. Every night at the bar, I wear a mask. Powder, lipstick, the whole thing. Without it, I'm just another old woman. I told him through the door that I wasn't opening it. And he said to me: 'Eat something warm, will you? I'll leave it here. I'd love it if you ate it—but of course, that's up to you.'

"When I could no longer hear his footsteps, I opened the door. There, on my doorstep, was a basket. Still warm. Bread and soup. I went back to bed and ate. And it was so good, so warm, so kind…I cried. I cried because I couldn't understand why someone would do something like that for a woman who wasn't young anymore. Who wasn't beautiful anymore.

"The next day, he came again. That time, I opened the door. I wore a dress that showed the tattoo on my back. I didn't put on makeup. Didn't fix my hair. Because I didn't want to lie to him anymore. I wanted him to see the real me. To be disappointed. To go away. Do you know what he said to me?"

Sophie didn't trust herself to speak. She felt a lump rising in her throat.

"'Evening, Ms. Bianca. Still kicking, thank the heavens—and all the better for laying eyes on you.'"

The tears hit before Sophie could stop them.

She clutched a handkerchief to her face, trying to stifle the sobs, but it wasn't enough. Even she was surprised by how hard it hit her.

As she cried, overwhelmed by the moment, Bianca just looked kindly at her.

"Sorry, Ms. Bianca," Sophie said between sobs. "I'm the host here. I should be the one holding it together for your sake, but I… *But I…*"

"It's all right," Bianca said, her voice calm and steady. "When love comes for us, it strips us bare. Suddenly, everything hurts a

little more. We get scared, needy, selfish; we cry over nothing. But that's not weakness. It just means your heart's awake. And if the person you love is worth it, they won't turn away from that. They'll look straight at you and accept you, just as you are."

Sophie shook her head again and again.

I don't have a special someone, she thought. *I don't.*

Not here, anyway.

"You've got a very beautiful face, Ms. Sophie," Bianca said. "To be burdened with an affliction that makes you hide it…feels like a god's idea of a cruel joke. Or, more likely, a goddess's. Heaven knows the jealousy of women runs deep."

She looked at Sophie, still gently blotting her eyes, with the kind of patience only a grandmother might have.

"That day, when I was drenched head to toe in William's blood, I made a vow. I promised myself I'd never fall in love again. Never hurt again. Never lose again, but…"

Bianca pressed a hand to her chest.

"You know, I used to think love was something that struck in the moment. That it came like lightning, lit a fire of passion that burned for the rest of your days… But I was wrong. Sometimes, love builds slowly. Quietly. Bit by bit, moment by moment, until one day you look at someone, and it feels like…they've always been there. Like they've always been yours. I was also wrong in thinking love was a privilege of the young and beautiful."

There was something radiant about her as she said it. Something stunning in its honesty.

"He proposed the other day," she added, a little breathless. "Said he'd worry if I lived the rest of my life alone. I think I'll say yes. But before that, I wanted this tattoo gone. He says he doesn't mind. But I do. If I'm going to be with him, all of me is going to be with him. I won't be William's woman. I won't be a pirate. I'll just be…me. Tell me, is that a silly thing to get hung up on?"

"Not at all," Sophie said, her voice bright and sure. "A woman's heart is nothing if not capable of starting over."

Bianca lit up, clapping her hands together. "You can say that again!"

She laughed—full and free, the sound rich with life.

"Pain, pain, go away."

Whether it was the love that struck like lightning—burning, fierce, and carved into her back…

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

Or the love that built like snowfall, soft and quiet, until one day it was simply everything—may Bianca find joy, purpose, and fulfillment in either. For both of her loves were true. Both of her loves were valid.

"Goodness…"

Just like with Silver, the moment Sophie held up the mirror to show Bianca her back, it was like her breath was stolen away.

"There's not even a trace…"

"You have a very pretty back," Sophie said gently. "Smooth as velvet."

And now, she finally understood why her father had done what he had to Silver's back. (Not that she would ever do the same—or was even considering it.)

Bianca slipped her dress straps back over her shoulders and gathered up her hair. Every motion was graceful, effortless, and still capable of stealing a gaze.

"Ahh, that feels much better," she sighed. "Teenage passion is a burden far too heavy for an old woman like me. That said…I never thought I'd end up marrying a man ten years my junior."

"Wait." Sophie blinked.

"Oops." Bianca pressed a hand to her mouth in mock surprise, stuck out her tongue, and gave a playful wink. "And what was that you just heard?"

"Nothing," Sophie replied immediately.

It seemed her mom senses needed a little calibrating.

To the woman who defied every expectation of what she knew about being sixty, Sophie reverently bowed her head.

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"THINKING back," Bianca said softly, "I was always singing in those days."

She plucked a flower petal between her fingers and raised it to her lips, gaze drifting far off to her teenage years aboard that rough and rowdy pirate ship.

"Every day felt more vivid than the last. More thrilling. Everything was new. That was all there was. But now I see…that was just the first chapter of my story."

She closed her eyes. Around them, the fine lines of age became clear at last. But they weren't harsh. If anything, they softened her like the patina of something cherished. A beauty shaped by time, steeped in memory.

"There aren't many pages left in the book of my life," she continued. "But I intend to live them slowly with my love. Every last one. One page at a time."

Her voice was soft, indulgent. She opened an imaginary book and mimed turning a page.

"The starry-eyed girl who flew off that island with more pride than sense ends up running a tiny bar in a port town. Settles down with an underfed rat of a man. And lives happily ever after. The end."

"It's a lovely tale," Sophie said.

"It's far too ordinary," Bianca replied.

Sophie shook her head. "But what is ordinary, if not the loveliest thing of all?"

Bianca laughed. "An old soul, aren't you?" She then fixed Sophie with an attentive gaze and said more quietly, "It's no use resisting love, you know?"

And once more, Sophie felt those beautiful eyes see right through her.

"If a man out there sees past the goddess's mischief and accepts you—just as you are—then he's already given you the deepest part of his heart. No…you've already stolen it. So what's next? Taking responsibility."

"…There's no such person," Sophie murmured.

But it was useless. Bianca only smiled.

"Oh, don't cry, poor girl," she said, gently stroking Sophie's head. She smelled of something sweet.

"Don't think. Just let yourself be swept up in the moment. No matter what happens, you won't regret it—not if you're following your heart. It's the things you don't do that haunt you the longest."

"Ms. Bianca."

"Yes?"

"If you were to return to that cove on the island…would you throw yourself into Mr. William's arms all over again?"

"Of course," Bianca said without hesitation. "There's no use fighting that kind of passion. Even if I knew how it would end. Even if everyone called me a fool."

She gave Sophie that same bewitching smile.

"It's my story, after all."

When she left the salon, the distinct scent of something sweet lingered, along with a warm afterglow, like the last flickers of a dying bonfire.

Kurt Ozhorn’s Return

HE reappeared that very afternoon when Bianca’s warmth still lingered in the salon.

Martha had come first, bringing news of his arrival. Sophie sat quietly, waiting. Then the door swung open.

There he was.

Anger welled up at the sight of him, sharp and sudden like it had been waiting just beneath the surface this whole time.

Why are you so late? was one thing she wanted to say.

You couldn’t have written me even once? was another.

But she said none of it. She swallowed every word, every ache, and instead offered the one bland, inoffensive line she’d decided on ahead of time.

“Mr. Ozhorn, it’s good to see you again.”

She’d meant to smile when she said it. That part didn’t happen. The tears were already slipping down her face.

“Some hot water, please. And could you remove my bandages?” Sophie had said when Martha arrived with the news.

Martha’s back straightened, then in her perfect, most head maid-esque voice, simply said: *“As you wish, my lady.”*

Now, barefaced and standing before Kurt, Sophie personally poured him a cup of tea.

“I’m glad to see you alive and well,” she said.

It was her first time seeing him in his white service uniform. Frayed at the seams, streaked with grime, it was a far cry from his usual ironed and starched appearance—but she had to admit, it suited him just the same.

"If you don't mind, I can help wipe you down," she said, offering a towel. "You came straight from the battlefield, didn't you?"

Kurt said nothing. Just stared at her, silently.

Sophie was staring right back, all the while wondering, *Has he always looked like this?*

A short, no-nonsense cut framing a well-shaped forehead. Strict brows, obsidian eyes that seemed to gleam with thought. A prominent nose—just the right height. Lips neither too full nor too thin. Even ears that looked disciplined. Then there was the Adam's apple, sticking out quietly from a neck that looked built to carry weight.

At last, he spoke.

"I'll do it myself. May I borrow your towel?"

"Then, at least let me do your back."

"No. I don't know if I'll be able to restrain myself if you touch me right now."

He said it just like that.

"Very funny, now let me—"

"You should treat me like the man I am, Ms. Sophie."

There was something rough in the way he said it—low, breathless. Then, without another word, he took the towel from her hand.

As he moved past, she caught the scent of him. Dirt, sweat… the scent of a man.

Kurt shrugged off the upper half of his uniform and let it fall to the floor. He began wiping himself down in silence, the dim lamplight casting his body in soft relief.

He was more built than Sophie had expected—not slender and bookish like she'd assumed, but toned. Muscular, even.

But then he turned, and her breath caught.

"What happened to your back?"

"An errant boulder struck me," he coolly said as if commenting on the weather. "The scar you see is nothing compared to the original wound. I was nearly split in half. Fortunately, there were other healers nearby."

"…"

“I had no idea healing was such a painful ordeal,” he added. “If I can help it, I’d rather not go through it again.”

“It was a dangerous mission, then?”

“The dragon was larger and more intelligent than we thought. We managed to trap it in a cave, but that only turned it into a lair. From there, the battle became a long, brutal siege. Our strongest went in first, only to be torn apart and spit out like ribbons. Even the liveliest adventurers started to shake after that. There’s nothing us healers can do for wounds that severe, after all.”

“But you defeated it?”

“In the end, we did.”

“It sounds like it was a hellish ordeal.”

“That’s a fair way to put it.”

Silence.

Then Kurt turned to face her fully. “Ms. Sophie.”

“Yes?”

“Would you mind?”

He affixed her with his strict, obsidian gaze. Though exhaustion dripped from his eyes, he didn’t waver.

“I would like to be healed by your hands.”

“All right,” Sophie said quietly. “I suppose you’ve earned that much.”

At that, Kurt broke into a weary smile. “I think I’ve earned a little more than that from you.”

“I have no idea what you might be implying. Now, if you could face your back to me.”

Kurt settled into a chair and turned his back to her. As Sophie moved into position, her eyes were drawn to the long gash stretching down the length of his back.

As she raised her hands over the scar, she felt a sudden urge to move a little closer. To touch it. To trace its edge gently with her fingers.

But she held back.

Her awful, bark-like, pus-ridden skin was exposed. Touching him would only sully the skin he’d just finished cleaning.

So instead, she kept her hands hovering at the right distance and began to chant.

"Pain, pain, go away."

She wondered what had gone through his mind when that boulder came tearing toward him.

In that instant, when death must have felt so near, and his life was flashing before his eyes, had she been in it? Had he seen her face in that kaleidoscopic collage, even for a moment?

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

Those must have been days of pain. Of heartbreak, discouragement. Fighting with all your strength to save someone, only to watch them die—that had to be the hardest thing for a healer to bear.

But he had made it past those days. Today, he'd come back—alive. His first stop after that harrowing ordeal had been Sophie's salon. Not even bathing or changing, just…straight here.

That alone had been enough to bring Sophie to tears.

If she could ease even a little of that burden—soften the bitter traces left by blood and fire—then it was the least she could do.

Smooth, clear, rippling white skin revealed itself as the light faded. Sophie let out a quiet sigh of relief.

She hadn't been sure she'd pictured the battlefield accurately enough. And she'd braced herself for the severe mana drain she'd felt the last time she tried to heal a wound treated by another healer—but it never came.

She had felt it, unmistakably—her mana sinking into Kurt's skin, spreading through him like the purest, cleanest water.

"That was…so incredibly pleasant," Kurt mumbled.

"I'm sorry?" Sophie blinked.

"Your healing," he said, voice still low. "It's worlds apart from that third-rate hack who closed the original wound. His felt like pure agony. Yours is like…stepping into a warm bath. Being wrapped in light. Gentle, clean. Extremely pleasant."

"…"

"So this is how you heal people, Ms. Sophie. By getting close. By stepping into their shoes. Enveloping them with your kindness."

"It's…all I can do."

"And yet most can't."

His fingers brushed the tips of hers. Sophie flinched, instinctively pulling her hand away. His hand, left briefly hanging, returned quietly to rest on his knee.

He reached for the uniform draped over the chair and pulled it back on. With a crisp click, he fastened the clasp at the collar, then turned back to face her.

Fearing the silence, Sophie undid the ribbon at her neck and took hold of the small pouch it held.

"Here," she said. "I should return this to you."

From its protective pouch, meant to shield it from her skin and her skin from the irritating metal, Sophie drew out the other half of Kurt's dog tag. It was just as spotless as the day he'd entrusted it to her.

But as she held it in her palm, she felt not the coldness of metal but the warmth it had gathered from her body.

"Welcome back, Mr. Ozhorn. I'm glad that you're safe."

"Have you been carrying that with you this whole time?" he asked.

"You were the one who told me to keep it. To hold on to it. To make sure it didn't get dirty."

"Huh. I suppose I did."

Kurt stared at the dog tag for a moment before reattaching it with a soft click.

The sound hit Sophie with a strange mix of emotions—joy, relief, sadness.

She stood there, dazed, eyes fixed on where the two halves had finally rejoined. And that was all he needed.

In that moment, Kurt reached out again—and this time, his hand found her arm.

Her eyes widened. She felt a pull. And then suddenly, she was in his arms.

In his *embrace.*

Sophie began to tremble. She tried to pull away, to resist, but it was no use. She was no match for his strength.

Then it came—his voice, low and rumbling, close against her eardrums, vibrating through her chest:

"I adore you, Ms. Sophie Olzon. Won't you be mine?"

A shiver shot up her spine. Her chest tightened with panic. Not from fear of him but from the overwhelming joy, the sheer ecstasy blooming inside her.

"Let go of me," she whispered.

"You're all I ever think about," he said. "I'll be in the middle of something, and suddenly, I'll wonder where you are, what you're doing, who you're with. I'll see a red flower by the roadside, and the first thing I'll think is, 'Would she like this?'"

"Please…"

"I think about whether some other man who's come to your salon has reached you first. Whether you're still waiting for me."

The heat of a man; the heat of his words wrapped around Sophie like a fever.

"Please, Mr. Ozhorn, I…"

"I see you in my dreams every night. We do unspeakable things together. Why do you shake so much—when all I want is your heart?"

He held her tighter. "I won't take it from you. I want you to give it to me. Willingly. Because if I ever force anything on you—if I ever hurt you—then that's the one thing I'll never forgive myself for. Not for the rest of my life."

"You should be with someone prettier," she said. Her voice shook. "Someone better suited to you."

"Prettier?" he echoed, almost scoffing. "When, to me, you're the most beautiful person in the world? Do you know this is the first time I've ever thought of someone that way?"

"…"

"I love you, Ms. Sophie. Do you love me?"

"I'll… I'll only dirty you. Besmirch your name."

Kurt reached out a finger to wipe away her tears. She saw that as it came away, it mingled with whatever oozed off her skin, making a thick, sticky substance, the sight of which only made her cry more.

"I don't want that," she choked out. "I don't want people to laugh when they see us together. I don't want to be the reason you're mocked. When we touch, I don't want your skin smeared with my blood.

"And if one day… If one day you get used to people, realize what real beauty is, and you—" Her voice broke. "And you start to see me for what I really am…"

Sophie began to sob, her whole body convulsing.

"If that ever happens," she whispered, barely holding her breath, "then I swear that's when I'll throw myself into the river!"

Tears streamed down her face. She arched her body away with all her might, desperate not to dirty his white uniform.

Sophie hated it.

The way people looked at her as if she were a monster.

If those eyes—those deep, dark obsidian eyes—ever looked at her that way, she knew it would break her completely.

"Please, Mr. Ozhorn," she whispered. "Go home. Cool your head. Think about your future… About what you're throwing away. I'm begging you."

A beat of silence. Then, slowly, the arms around her loosened.

"Sorry, Ms. Sophie. I've frightened you."

Sophie shook her head, still crying.

Kurt's arms were warmer than anything she'd ever known. That wasn't what had scared her.

When the door shut behind him with a soft, final thud, Sophie crumpled to the floor.

She tried to wipe the filthy tears from her face as best she could so they wouldn't stain the carpet.

Kurt Ozhorn in Action

IF there were ever a contest for the unluckiest man alive, Gustaf Hagg knew he'd want to be in the running.

Born the fifth son of a farming family, he was kicked out at fourteen (there simply wasn't space for him in their cramped home) and fell into the life of an adventurer. Every party he joined fell apart not long after, but somehow, he stuck with it, grinding through the years until he found himself at forty-six, still swinging steel.

Back when he was thirty, the kingdom had taken a liking to him for some reason and started requesting him by name for official quests—again and again. Now, in his advanced age, he was starting to think about retirement. Maybe find a quiet town, start a school, train the next generation, and live a quieter life for once. But the world, as always, had other plans.

Retirement? No, fate seemed to whisper. *How about you lead the charge on this quest to slay a mighty dragon terrorizing the Crack Valley instead?*

The summons had come. The kingdom needed him again.

Why me? he lamented. Sure, he still held the title of Master Adventurer, but that, by now, was little more than a courtesy, an inheritance from earlier, more capable years. His axe-swinging arms certainly weren't what they used to be—maybe seventy percent of their prime strength on a good day. These days, the paper master wasn't even sure he could win a duel against a veteran.

As for why the kingdom continued to hold him in esteem, he could offer no satisfying answer. Perhaps it was his appearance: the sort of stern, weathered look suggested capability and resolve. In truth, Gustaf Hagg was a deeply nervous man. He was the type to overthink things and lose sleep before important events. His stomach was as weak as they came.

But he did have a loud voice—and that seemed to be all that everyone ever cared about.

It was after Gustaf took a deep breath, muttered a quiet *you've got this to himself*, plastered a grim sort of confidence onto his face,

and stepped out to inspect the troops that he knew, without a doubt, he'd win that bad-luck competition. Hands down.

What kind of ragtag, unprofessional, utterly ridiculous people were these?

One party was dressed head to toe like clowns, wobbling around on unicycles while juggling bright red balls. They looped in lazy circles, occasionally honking each other's noses like it was some kind of battle tactic. Were they a support team? Or did any of them actually plan on fighting?

Another group was decked out like ninjas, tiptoeing through the grass and flinging shuriken into the dirt with exaggerated flourishes. One of them did a slow-motion cartwheel for no reason at all. *Since when was this a stealth mission?*

And…what even *was* that? A party of massive, half-naked men, their hair tied up in messy topknots, bellies heaving with every breath. Their outfits amounted to a single taut string, wedged so far up it left nothing to the imagination. They groaned like dying beasts, rolling on the ground and spewing what had to be the last three meals. Either they were deeply hungover, or the carriage ride over had turned their insides to soup. Maybe both.

Ten parties. Five people each. Fifty men in total. And these were the people he'd been given to face a dragon?

The dragon? Scaled menace of the east? King of monsters?

Versus…this circus act?

A strong gust blew through the camp, and Gustaf took the opportunity to toss his notebook into the wind. In it was his battle plan. A solid, carefully thought-out mix of tactics, positioning, and clever use of the combined forces of magical and physical combat—and now it was gone.

"Are the healers here, at least?" he muttered to his aide next to him.

Healers.

The one group that gave him any sliver of hope.

Unlike adventurers, that half-mad assortment of mercenaries who answered some vague call to action and stumbled in from who-knows-where, the healers at least came with a shred of professional

credibility. Clad in pristine white, they were recognized by the crown and operated directly under royal authority. They only appeared for official, crown-sanctioned quests, making them a rare—and coveted—sight for most adventurers.

Because of how rare they were, they were always kept safe, guarded heavily, and placed well out of harm's way.

Also, because of how rare they were, they were usually a bunch of uptight, insufferable weirdos with delicate egos.

Even still, on the battlefield, they were treated like gold. Like treasures. Because, after all, they were their literal lifelines.

"Two of them have arrived, sir," the aide replied.

"Their ranks and names?" Gustaf grumbled.

"Sir Bacchus Ehmann, fourth rank. And Sir Patrick Halin, sixth rank."

Just my luck, Gustaf thought, dragging a hand down his face. "A hack and a bronzeling. Great."

In a flare of frustration, he kicked the tree stump at his feet. Thankfully, it was so rotted it exploded into a harmless cloud of dust.

This was a fifty-man unit. These were the healers he had to work with.

Maybe one more would show up—if the gods felt like being kind.

Bacchus Ehmann. Even hearing the name made Gustaf bristle with irritation.

He'd had the privilege of working with Ehmann on a prior mission, and the man had easily earned the title of worst healer he'd ever had the misfortune of being treated by. Nobility, nearing fifty, with graying blond hair slicked back with too much oil and a mustache trimmed far too precisely, Bacchus Ehmann was a foppish mess of a man.

Gustaf would've been okay with how he looked—if he'd been a healer worth even half his salt. No. In fact, such was his incompetence that Ehmann had earned himself a nickname in the adventuring world: the "not there" healer.

If someone got mauled by a monster, a limb barely hanging on by a sinew, Bacchus would start treating their feet. *Not there.*

Someone clutching their abdomen with their guts spilling onto the ground? He'd dab a bit of magic on a forehead scrape. *Not there.*

Why? Because he couldn't stand getting dirty. Couldn't risk his outfit or muss his hair. Adventurers, to him, weren't people—they were walking bundles of mud, blood, and bodily fluids, barely worth his time.

Gustaf had no idea what criteria were used to promote healers, but he was certain it wasn't based on raw healing ability. Because if it were, someone like Bacchus wouldn't have even sniffed rank ten.

But to be fair—*charitably* fair—it was possible the man just hated fieldwork and performed better in a pristine little clinic somewhere. Not that that was any comfort here, on a battlefield where a split-second decision could mean the difference between saving a life or scraping someone off the dirt.

As for the sixth ranker, Patrick Halin—Gustaf had never heard of him. Probably a rookie who'd just earned himself a promotion.

The brooches healer wore on their chests were color-coded to indicate rank: gold for one and two, silver for three through five, and bronze for six through ten. Gustaf just hoped this "bronzeling," as he liked to call them, had something useful between his ears. Every now and then, there was the rare low-rank gem hiding in the dirt.

So there was a chance.

A very, very, very, very, very low chance.

"If only *she* were here." Gustaf let out a long, weary, and slightly lovesick sigh. "What I wouldn't give to see Lady Florence again."

He remembered her as one remembers warmth in winter. Though she belonged to that rarified class of high-ranking healers—so often self-important and remote—she had been neither. Her manner was calm, her hands precise, and her presence somehow steadying. She smiled like someone who had never seen suffering yet had quietly chosen to bear it. It had been easy to believe, in certain moments, that her smile alone could mend a wound.

But she was not here. And memory, however comforting, could not stop a man from bleeding.

"At this rate, it'd be a miracle if half of us make it out alive," he muttered. "Bad luck. What can you do?"

So he could clear his head, Gustaf went for a walk around the camp. He was mid-stroll, absentmindedly scratching his scalp, when he nearly walked past him—and then stopped dead.

"Ozhorn the Silent…" he breathed.

"Greetings," the man said. "Kurt Ozhorn, rank three healer of the Royal Fifth Healers. Apologies for the late arrival—I had a lot of ground to cover. I assume you're the leader of the combat team? I'll be leading the healing team. A pleasure to make your acquaintance."

Gustaf paused, then gave a half-smirk. "Right. Gustaf Hagg, axeman. Pleasure, I suppose—though we've worked together several times before."

He kept his tone dry, his expression unreadable. But beneath it, he was nearly giddy. The sight of this cold, clockwork bastard filled him with such joy that he almost wanted to kiss him.

Almost.

But this changed everything.

Update the prediction: only one or two men might die on this mission.

Update the tactics: a sustained attrition-like battle was now on the table.

Update the epitaph: Gustaf Hagg was no longer the unluckiest man alive.

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PERHAPS *the work of a healer was never meant for those who still had a heart.*

It had been some time since Patrick Halin, healer, sixth rank, last entertained the thought. Not coincidentally, it had also been the last time he'd seen *him.*

"Sir Ozhorn! A pleasure to be working with you again!"

To the tall, raven-haired man who had just appeared in their camp, Halin gave a neat, crisp, perfectly ninety-degree bow.

Kurt Ozhorn had once been his superior at the central infirmary and, without question, among the finest healers Halin had ever known. Then, one day, with no announcement or explanation, Ozhorn had vanished—transferred to some obscure port town far from the capital—and the institution had never quite recovered.

For all the reverence it attracted, healing remained widely misunderstood. To the layman, it was a kind of benevolent sorcery: channel mana into the wound and let the magic do the work. In truth, it was nothing of the sort.

The art demanded precision. Intention, control—every pulse of mana had to be willed into place: here to reconnect a nerve, there to seal a vessel, elsewhere to stimulate regrowth. There were no shortcuts. Only decisions, each with consequences.

To make such decisions rapidly and accurately, healers had to become walking encyclopedias of anatomy. They had to diagnose what was wrong, where exactly, and how badly—and do it in seconds. That kind of precision wasn't the gift of intuition. It was the domain of the obsessively trained, the pathologically educated—and those words were nothing if not ones that perfectly described Kurt Ozhorn.

Yes, Ozhorn was all of that. Perhaps frighteningly so.

Normally, people have emotions. Emotions affect judgment. Normally, people get exhausted. Exhaustion also affects judgment. Normally, people have nerves. Nerves also… You get the idea.

But whether it was a dying infant or a high-ranking noble, no matter how horrific the injury, Kurt Ozhorn healed without flinching. Without emotion.

When he went about his work, what was reflected in those jet-black eyes, as dark as night, was not a living person. It was something more akin to a bag of flesh and blood. A broken system that needed fixing, and he was the one to fix it.

Halin had never seen him smile or say so much as one word that wasn't strictly necessary. From his lofty perch, Ozhorn watched —without judgment, without wavering, simply healing.

So when Ozhorn responded to his greeting with nothing but a confused tilt of the head, Halin wasn't hurt—he'd expected it. Of

course, he wouldn't remember his face. Why would he? When he was just background noise?

"We worked together for three years at the central infirmary. Patrick Halin, rank six healer," he said with a bit of a sad smile.

"Ah, you," Ozhorn said simply. "Glad to have another dependable soul here."

He didn't even notice the effect his words had. As Halin gaped in disbelief, he was already focused on the task at hand, calmly slotting vials of mana potions into the belt beneath his coat.

"When did you arrive?" he asked.

"Day before yesterday, sir."

"What's the current situation?"

"We're waiting. So is it."

"How's morale?"

"Poor. But improving rapidly."

"And why's that?"

"Because Ozhorn the Silent is here, of course."

No one could quite recall who first gave him the nickname, but it had remained in circulation long enough that no one questioned its accuracy. It suited him—this man who performed healing without incantation, without even the courtesy of a murmur.

Among the kingdom's third-rank healers, he was the only one who wouldn't be considered geriatric. Advancement in the healing ranks required not just mastery but a long track record of proven accomplishments, which made Ozhorn—still in his twenties—something of an anomaly. A useful one. Whenever a distant and hazardous mission required a healer of high rank, his name invariably rose to the top. He accepted every assignment without protest and returned from each without commentary. As such, the system and the people behind it saw no reason for change.

Someone had once asked him whether he ever felt fear at the front.

"*Not really. It's all the same to me,*" he'd said, his face unreadable.

In fact, it'd been an expression similar to the one he wore now as he secured the last of his potions and turned to Halin. "I just

spoke with the leader of the combat team. The man with the large axe," he said.

"Ah," Halin nodded. "Gustaf Hagg. The Greataxe. He's had it rough. By the book sort, unusually loyal for an adventurer. The crown tends to reward that with more work."

"Is he strong?" Ozhorn asked.

"Strong's not the word. Skilled, maybe? Careful? He doesn't throw lives away. When he's in charge, people usually come back."

Ozhorn gave a small, almost imperceptible nod. "Then I'm certainly glad to have him."

"Well, well, well. If it isn't the young prodigy—Sir Kurt Ozhorn."

The voice came from behind, deep and theatrical, impossible to ignore no matter how much one might wish to.

Halin resisted the urge to sigh as he turned.

Bacchus Ehmann. Fourth-rank healer.

Halin hadn't known him before this mission. Two days had been enough. There was something about the man that simply…rubbed him the wrong way. As if he didn't belong here… No, as if he wanted to be anywhere *but* here.

For example, when an earth-affinity mage had kindly offered to shape them a temporary shelter—a full earthen structure, complete with roof and walls—Halin had watched in awe. It wasn't every day a healer got to witness that kind of magic firsthand. Ehmann, on the other hand, stood off to the side with a handkerchief pressed dramatically to his nose, coughing and sneezing as if the very idea of dirt personally offended him.

At dinner, despite being served far better fare than the adventurers, he chewed with audible disgust, grimacing, occasionally gagging, as if every bite betrayed him. The same attitude carried over to everything he did: bathing, sleeping, walking through camp. Everything was performed with the air of someone being forced to endure the unendurable. Always turning his nose up, always making a show of being too good for what was fine for everyone else. Halin found him insufferable.

At least he wasn't any louder about his disgust than that, Halin thought, counting his lucky stars. The past two days had been

miserable with only Ehmann for company, so having another healer around—even if it was Ozhorn—was a genuine relief.

"I just can't wait to get out of here," Ehmann muttered. "This place is no place for a man like me. I was just on my way to speak with the combat leader—see if we can't push for a faster, more aggressive approach."

"I've just come from coordinating strategy with him," Ozhorn replied, voice calm and even. "As you should know, I'm the assigned healing leader for this mission; I'll be handling all communication to avoid confusion on the field."

Ehmann stiffened. "And as *you* should know, I've been a healer far longer than you have."

"I fail to see how that's relevant," Ozhorn said without missing a beat. "The crown appointed me leader. Seniority has no bearing. As far as this mission is concerned, you will follow my command, fourth-rank healer—Sir Bacchus Ehmann."

It was perhaps the most direct anyone had ever spoken to Ehmann. He went silent immediately. After all, it was hard to argue with the rank etched into the brooches on their chests.

"Yes. As you command, Sir Kurt Ozhorn, third-rank healer."

He kicked up a small cloud of dust as he walked past, then sat down with what seemed like deliberate volume, just shy of a tantrum.

Ozhorn didn't even blink.

✶✶✶

IT was now two weeks into a mission that should've taken three days. Fatigue hung over the camp like a mist. There'd been casualties, yes, but so far, no deaths. Ozhorn was to thank for that. Everyone wounded was sent back to the healer's tent on the backlines—and under Ozhorn's hand, they were mended as if nothing had ever happened.

Now and then, a voice would let slip some dark sentiment—*I want to die*, or words close enough—but when uttered by adventurers, such remarks were rarely signs of true despair. They

belonged to a people of unusual constitution, not merely in body but also in spirit. Their instinct was always forward. Suffering was met not with silence but with noise—cheers, bursts of song, laughter loud enough to seem unreal. If someone fell, a hand—any hand—was there to lift them. If fortune turned their way, they rejoiced. If it didn't, they met it with sober eyes. They took measures, adjusted course, and moved on.

To Halin, whose days had long been shaped by the careful detachment and occasional tension of the healer's tent, this was unfamiliar ground. Unfamiliar—but not at all unwelcome.

The sky was a dull sheet of grey. When Halin stepped out, he found Ozhorn already there, looking upward, his expression unreadable. There was something peculiar in his stillness that moved Halin to speak.

"Maybe I shouldn't say this, with everyone pushing so hard," he began, "but I miss home. I just want to get back, even a second sooner, you know what I mean?"

The words had barely left his mouth before he regretted them. This was Silent Ozhorn. Silent Ozhorn didn't admit to fear, let alone longing.

So it only came as a surprise then when Ozhorn replied. A quiet, subdued, "I know what you mean."

Halin practically did a double-take.

"I miss it too."

For a moment, those dark eyes—so often flat and impenetrable—seemed to catch the light. And in them, something distant flickered.

✶✶✶

ONE night, Halin returned from his cold bath to find Ozhorn in the healer's tent, intently studying a white square of fabric in his hands. Without thinking, he asked, "What do you have there, sir?"

Well, not without thinking. He'd seen that serious expression on Ozhorn's face and assumed it had something to do with battle plans

or a change in tactics. Only when Ozhorn quickly tucked the item away did Halin realize he might've just committed a faux pas.

As he floundered for something to say to recover, Ozhorn looked up, calm as ever.

"Sorry," Halin said a little sheepishly.

"It's all right," Ozhorn replied. After a brief pause, he brought the square of fabric back into view.

Halin recognized it to be a handkerchief. And on that pristine white square, something round, something green.

"Is that…a turtle?" Halin asked, squinting.

Then, as if realizing something, he snapped his eyes to Ozhorn's chest. Sure enough, the identification brooch he remembered from the central infirmary—the one that had once been whole—was now clearly split in half.

"Is that…" He gestured at the handkerchief. "From your fiancée?"

"No. A female acquaintance," Ozhorn replied.

Halin blinked. "Do your 'female acquaintances' usually gift you embroidered handkerchiefs? Because mine definitely don't."

"I'm not sure. She said it was a lucky charm. One that symbolizes longevity."

"It's a very thoughtful gift."

"You think so?"

"Look at the stitching, how well it's done. And the turtle's face. Doesn't it look very kind?"

Ozhorn studied the little turtle in silence. As if he was seeing it properly for the first time. And when he was done, his expression softened—ever so slightly.

"…I suppose so."

That quiet, *I suppose so.* The distant, *I miss it too*, from the other day. The faraway look in his eyes—suddenly, it all came together for Halin.

Ah, he thought. *It's not that this man doesn't have a heart. It's just that no one ever thought to look for it.*

That look hadn't been detachment, Halin realized. It was longing. Ozhorn was carrying something with him—something of

home. Something he still hoped to return to.

The Silent. The young prodigy. The lofty eccentric.

In Halin's mind, all those sobriquets melted away. And in their place, there was only this.

A person. Just one man only slightly older than Halin himself…

Kurt Ozhorn.

The realization carried Halin away for a moment, and before he knew it, he was speaking, sharing something that even surprised himself. "You know, I have a girl waiting for me back home. We're getting married when I return."

"I've heard that's a very unlucky thing to say," Ozhorn replied. "Though…I envy you for being able to say it."

Halin gave a bashful smile and laughed. "We've known each other since we were kids. Before I became a healer, we were inseparable. I love her. Truly."

"I'm envious."

"You should tell her."

"Tell her what?"

"Your feelings. If there's one thing girls hate, it's being left guessing."

"…I see."

Ozhorn's gaze drifted back down to the little turtle in his hand.

"Your identification brooch," Halin said after a pause.

"Hm?" Ozhorn looked up.

"Is it with your fiancée?"

"If by fiancée you mean the female acquaintance I mentioned earlier, then yes."

"And she accepted it? Despite knowing what it means?"

"I…may have omitted some of its significance. She doesn't know exactly what it means."

A healer's identification badge-half usually only went to their family, wife, or fiancée. To give an unmarried woman the half, telling them to hold on to it, was as good as a proposal.

"Well," Halin said, "I'd say it's a good sign she took it. And if you come back and find her wearing it around her neck, that's all the proof you need."

"She has a skin condition. It's more likely she's tucked it away in a drawer somewhere."

"But if you *were* to find it around her neck?"

"…I'd be very happy."

He said it while looking off into the distance, his hand drifting absently to the empty space on his chest where the brooch had once been whole. His fingers brushed over it gently, almost without thinking.

Then he smiled.

Softly. Kindly.

The kind of smile that only thinking of that distant someone could bring.

✶✶✶

HALIN recalled the memory of that day as he stared down at Ozhorn's mangled, bloodied form.

The dragon had let out a terrible roar, then thrown itself against the mountainside. The stone shattered on impact, and fragments large and small hurtled through the air in all directions.

Several adventurers were caught in the blast. They staggered back toward the staging point, leaning on one another, bloodied, dazed—each one hoping, silently, that they could reach him in time.

By then, Ozhorn had become more than just a healer. He was their constant—the one fixed point in the chaos.

If you could reach him, you'd be all right.

It didn't matter how reckless you'd been, how deep the wound. If he was there, it was enough.

No one ever said it. But they all fought with that quiet belief tucked somewhere deep inside.

And now, that anchor—the one they never named—lay pinned beneath a slab of stone, his robes soaked through with blood.

All that's left, Halin thought grimly, *is this cowardly, trembling fourth-rank healer, pale as a ghost, hands shaking over our savior.*

Ehmann chanted almost feverishly, as if on the verge of madness: *"By the sacred hand that wrought heaven and earth, I*

beseech thee. Let the grace of love descend upon this fallen soul."

"Hey!" Halin barked, storming up behind him.

"By the sacred hand that wrought heaven and earth…"

"I said, hey!" Halin shoved past, eyes wide with fury. "Why the hell are you touching his shoulder? You start with the damn blood vessels, stop the bleeding, then move to the spine—this is basic triage! Any half-trained apprentice should know that!"

He grabbed Ehmann by the shoulders, rough, shaking him once. The trance shattered. Ehmann blinked up at him—tears spilling, wild-eyed.

"I can't stand the sight of blood!" he shrieked, spit flying, hair mussing as he trembled. "Do you know how I heal? I heal clean. I heal slow. I don't have to look inside! I was never meant to deal with this!"

He gestured wildly around—the blood-soaked sand, the writhing bodies, the smell of iron and bile. "You want to know what this is? This is a disgrace. I shouldn't even be here! In this filthy, brutal, godforsaken place! I'm knee-deep in blood and entrails like some butcher—and I— I'm not— I'm not—!"

"Then stay home!" Halin shouted back. "Don't come out here. Turn down the assignment!"

"And ruin my reputation?!" Ehmann snapped back. "Bacchus Ehmann has *never* refused an order! Never!"

Halin stared at him, stunned. For a second, he didn't even breathe. The roar of blood in his ears drowned out the chaos around them.

But then—*Calm*, said an icy, composed voice inside him. *This isn't the place or the time.*

The voice seemed to chill his nerves instantly. It grounded him. Centered him. It was the kind of calm only those midnight eyes could inspire.

Of course, he thought. *Three years working beside him… Of course, something would've rubbed off.*

With cold clarity running through his veins, Halin turned to the nearest adventurers and barked, "Help me get this boulder off him!"

The party of "Su'mo" wrestlers was the first to act. Despite their injuries, despite their twisted-up loincloths and bruised bodies, they slammed their open palms against the massive stone and pushed—straining with everything they had to heave it off the black-haired healer.

It moved.

And for the first time, Halin could truly see the extent of Ozhorn's injuries.

Blood. So much blood.

There was no way he could fix all of it—not with his current ability. But there were priorities. Steps. Things he could do to keep Ozhorn alive.

First—stop the bleeding. If he could do that, then…

"Bring me all the mana potions we have left in storage!" he shouted.

The ninjas responded instantly. They ran off like the wind.

Halin took a breath, steadied his hands, and raised them above Ozhorn's body.

"O waters pure, clear as life, I bid thee flow and restore what has been lost!"

The incantation rang through the air.

And he watched—carefully, *carefully*—as the bleeding stopped.

It *actually* stopped. The spell had worked—faster, cleaner, more precisely than anything he'd ever cast before.

And in that instant—that brief, glorious instant—he saw it.

The world Ozhorn lived in.

A towering pinnacle.

It was terribly dark.

Blindingly bright.

And above all, utterly alone.

"O waters pure, clear as life, I bid thee flow and restore what has been lost!"

This time, he focused on the spine. The next—and last—thing he needed to fix. He wouldn't expect this from any other person, but if he could just manage that much… If he could just pull Ozhorn back from the brink…

"O waters pure, clear as life, I bid thee flow and restore what has been lost!"

Then he would surely be able to heal the rest of his wounds himself, rise, and become once again the still, unshifting dark that brings solace to the wounded!

The ninjas returned. With their help, Halin downed potion after potion. He didn't hesitate. He didn't waver. Just kept casting, like Ozhorn always had.

Until finally…

"Thank you, Sir Patrick Halin, sixth-rank healer."

Ozhorn sat up.

"Pass me a mana potion, will you?"

His fingers moved. His lips moved. And then, without a word, he began healing himself—quietly, precisely—knitting flesh and sealing skin until the blood stopped flowing and he stood.

He drained the offered potion in one gulp and wiped his mouth on his bloodstained sleeve. Then, without missing a beat, he turned to the crowd and raised his voice.

"Form a line. In order of the severity of your wounds."

His white cloak, now streaked with red, flared in the wind. His jet-black eyes—usually so placid, so unfathomably deep—now burned with something like anger as he surveyed the battlefield.

"I'll heal every last one of you. However many times it takes. So fight. Fight hard, and end this fast—so I can finally go home!"

A heartbeat of silence. Then the tension broke—first a cheer, then a surge of wild, unrestrained battle cries.

Gustaf Hagg stepped forward, voice like a war drum. "You all hear that, lads? Ozhorn wants to go home! We'll oblige him, won't we?"

Raaa! Raaa!

The roar of the crowd echoed between the craggy mountain peaks, the valley ringing with renewed fire.

✶✶✶

THE night echoed with the drunken, raucous cries of adventurers celebrating their victory over the wicked dragon. Halin drifted away from the rowdiness, following a quieter pull, and found Ozhorn sitting in the dark, all by his lonesome.

"Not joining the celebration, sir?" he asked as he approached.

Ozhorn looked up. "It won't be any longer if I'm around. They deserve it. I don't want to ruin it for them."

"So he's self-aware…" Halin muttered.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

Halin was beside Ozhorn now. He could now see the white handkerchief in Ozhorn's hands, streaked with crimson.

"Ooh. You got blood on it," he said.

"I did. And it won't come off. This is most upsetting."

"Well, I'm sure she's not the type to get mad at you for that."

"She's not. But it's sure to make her cry. I…don't like seeing her cry."

Halin almost laughed when he heard that—mostly at himself, for ever thinking this man was heartless. But also a little at Ozhorn, who, for all his calm and unreadable airs, looked just then like a miserable, drenched mutt.

If only he showed this side of himself more often, Halin thought, not without a touch of pity, *maybe people wouldn't get the wrong idea about him so much.*

"I eagerly await your return to the central infirmary," he said. "To learn again under your stern guidance. I'll work harder than I ever have."

"Patrick Halin," Ozhorn said. "You're a talented healer. If anyone deserves to climb the ranks, it's you. You're decisive and accurate. You balance the patient's needs with your own limits. You don't cut corners. You never skip a step. It was a pleasure serving with you on this mission."

Halin took a moment to weigh the words. Then: "Thank you, sir," he said, quiet and sincere.

Ozhorn's criticism was always blunt—but so were his compliments. And Halin couldn't help the warmth that crept into his

face or the small smile that followed.

The Search

IT had been a few days since Sophie pushed herself free of Kurt's embrace.

She was in the salon, reading.

No, reading wasn't the right word.

Holding the book in her lap was more like it. She'd been staring at the same line for half an hour, eyes dragging over the letters again and again, without a single word landing.

"I want you, Miss Sophie Olzon."

That voice—so intense, so fiery—still rang in her ears every few seconds. The thought of it alone brought tears rising again, ones she had to force herself to swallow down.

She knew how hypocritical it was. She was the one who had turned him away. She was the one who'd told him no. And yet, even now, her ears strained toward the door, listening, hoping—absurdly—for that familiar square, grating voice to speak her name again.

But then, she did pick something up.

But it wasn't Ozhorn. It was a scuffle. Some sort of ruckus outside the salon.

She sat up. "Martha? Claire? What's going on out there?"

A shrill cry came in reply. "Sophie!!!"

"Ms. Isadora? Is that—?!"

And there she was—a lightly flushed Isadora. And a bewildered Martha, hanging from her hips, being dragged across the threshold. The former dancer who had once graced Sophie's salon burst in again. Little Al, notably, was nowhere to be seen.

She rushed forward and seized Sophie's hands in both of her own.

"I found him, Sophie! I found him!"

"You'll get dirty if you touch me, Ms. Isadora," Sophie gently chided on instinct. "Found who? What are you talking about?"

She half-turned, meaning to offer the woman a chair, but Isadora's next words stopped her cold.

"Him! The person who can heal you!" So she cried, so full of life and trembling, panting like she'd run a marathon, sweat glistening on her brow. "He can heal you, Sophie! You can be healed!"

Without further ado, she then launched into a quick explanation.

A rare daytime job had come her way. After her last visit to Sophie's salon, she'd started advertising herself as a "normal" dancer, pinning flyers on bulletin boards all around town. A friend who could write had helped her with the wording. The effect the flyers had was limited. Nothing but the usual night work had been trickling in. Isadora had accepted this and resigned herself to the long haul when the letter arrived. It was an invitation for a potential gig at a party scheduled sometime soon. They wanted a trial performance first, just to see if she was a good fit.

So, she went. Spoke with the organizers. Danced for them. They told her they'd get back to her in a few days. She felt she'd done well. She left the venue, a light spring in her step, when—

"Where's little Al during all this, by the way?" Sophie interrupted to ask.

"An old lady neighbor's watching him for me," Isadora said.

Sophie's face lit up. "My!"

Isadora grinned. "I did what you told me. Started greeting them every day. They ignored me at first, of course. But then, one day, Al was crying, so I screamed for help as loud as I could. And five old ladies came running. Five! Can you believe it? I would've settled for one!"

"My, my!"

Thank goodness, Sophie thought, a wave of relief washing over her. *She's not alone with that child anymore, not in that cramped little apartment.*

"Thank goodness," she said aloud this time, the tears brimming.

Isadora's eyes narrowed on her fondly. Then she jolted, suddenly remembering she was in the middle of something. "Right, right— Where was I… Ah! On the way home, I ran into this pickpocket acquaintance of mine."

"You have friends in low places, Ms. Isadora!" Sophie gasped.

"Yeah, well. She and I just get along. Anyway—"

Isadora and her friend had decided to stop for tea and catch up. As they sipped and chatted, the conversation drifted to Sophie and her salon.

When Isadora mentioned Sophie's condition, her friend tilted her head, thoughtful.

"That reminds me of something," she said and launched into a story.

It had happened about a year ago. In a quiet corner of the territory where she worked, a little beggar girl suddenly appeared.

Now, beggars weren't uncommon. But a child, so young and all on her own? That gave the woman pause. She crept a little closer to get a better look.

What she saw made her stomach turn.

The girl's skin was brown and craggy, like tree bark. Cracks ran through it, oozing some kind of strange fluid. She looked more like a creature than a human.

Her parents had definitely abandoned her because of that. She pitied the girl, but what could she really do? She was scraping by herself, living hand to mouth like everyone else in her line of work. Still, she found herself coming back to check on her. If she'd had a particularly productive day, she'd leave a bit of bread behind. It was the sort of kindness one might show a stray cat.

"She sounds decent," Sophie said.

"A decent pickpocket, maybe," Isadora replied with a snort.

Then, one day, during one of her usual check-ins, the woman spotted someone crouched beside the girl.

An old man.

At once, her guard went up. Her first thought was the worst—that maybe he meant to hurt her. She crept closer, ready to step in.

But what she overheard was this:

"Yes, yes," the old man murmured, his voice low and kind. *"It's a bit curled here, isn't it?"*

He seemed to feel something above the girl's head, though the friend could see nothing.

"You've had a rough go, haven't you? Poor thing. Poor thing. There, there. Must've been a heavy burden to carry. But I'll fix you now."

His fingers curved around empty air.

"Pa-pop!" he said.

The friend blinked. *Pa-pop? What popped? The air?*

"There we are," the old man went on. *"That should do it. Give it about a month. Your skin will shed off, and underneath, it'll be healthy, clean as can be. When that happens, don't stay here, understand? Find an orphanage. They'll take you in once they see you're better. No one will pick on you anymore."*

He paused, smiling. *"You're still young. When you turn… Oh, let's say, fifteen, you'll discover you've got a bit of magic in you. Use it well. Don't let the cruelty of the world twist you. Study hard. Use your gift for something good. That's all I ask."*

Then, as if nothing at all had happened, he hoisted his luggage onto his back, settled a worn hat on his head, picked up his cane, and shuffled off down the road, slow and steady.

At first, the friend figured she'd just witnessed the actions of a man whose wits had long since gone. But she kept an eye on the girl, just in case.

Day by day, the bark-like scabs began to peel off, flaking to the ground in thick, curling sheets. The bumps smoothed out. The ooze dried up. And by the end of the month, the girl who'd once looked more monster than human was now as bright-eyed and lovely as any girl her age could hope to be. When she started crying, saying she didn't know where to find an orphanage, the friend had dragged her there herself, grumbling the whole way, muttering curses under her breath. But she couldn't help herself. She was a compassionate soul.

"So what do you say, Sophie?!" Isadora said, nearly bouncing in place. "Let's go find that old man. I'll help!"

But when she turned to look at Sophie, her excitement drained away.

"Sophie?"

"I…" Sophie's voice was barely audible. "But we don't even know who this man is—or where he's from. We don't even know if that girl had the same sickness as me…"

"What happened to you?" Isadora's brows knit. "Usually, you'd already be up on your feet shouting, 'Let's go look for him now!' That's what I thought you'd say. That's why I ran all the way here—to tell you even one second sooner. I thought it'd make you happy. So why do you look like that? This isn't like you."

Hearing this, Sophie grimaced. A tear slipped down her cheek. "I'm sorry."

Isadora's face softened. "Sophie?"

"It's true," Sophie said quietly. "I haven't been myself lately. I don't know what's wrong with me, but…I feel so fragile. Like I'm made of glass, and even a whisper could crack me." She smiled, but it was thin and self-mocking. "And after all the condescending things I said to you back then…I'm sorry."

She dabbed at her tears with a handkerchief.

Isadora stared for a moment, then let out a sharp snort. "You've gone and fallen in love, haven't you?"

Sophie froze mid-wipe, handkerchief still pressed to her cheek. Why did hearing Isadora say it fill her with so much chagrin?

Isadora burst out laughing, cackling like a hyena as she swayed from side to side. "Oh, Sophie! You've finally turned into a girl!"

She struck a dramatic pose and adopted a falsetto. "I love you! But with my face like this, I'm too afraid to say it! Oh no! Please stop! You can't! Ahhh!" She twirled around the room like she was back on stage, mock-dancing and singing her teasing lines.

The fact that she wasn't exactly wrong made it sting all the more.

Then, mid-spin, Isadora suddenly stopped. Her expression shifted.

"Then isn't that all the more reason?" she said. "You want to be beautiful, don't you? You want him to see you that way. Sitting here sulking won't fix anything. So, let's do what we can do. Al's not here today anyway. I'll help you."

Sophie looked up, sulking. "And if it doesn't work?"

"Oh, you're such a buzzkill." Isadora rolled her eyes. "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it."

Her face—stubborn and steady—made something click in Sophie's chest.

True, she thought.

"All right," she said, rising to her feet. "Let's go."

And together, they hit the town.

✶✶✶

"AN old man, you say?" a gruff voice said.

"Yes," Isadora nodded quickly. "He's got a mustache like this, a strange hat like this, a cane with a snake coiled around it, and a big wooden crate and cloth bag slung over his back."

As she spoke, she knelt down and drew a quick sketch in the sand. Sophie blinked—Isadora was surprisingly good.

"Hm…" the demi-human murmured, studying it. His soft black ears twitched slightly, poking through custom-made holes in his helmet.

"They let you have ear-holes, did they, Mr. Kuro?" Sophie said, smiling.

Kuro scratched at his head, a little sheepish. "Aye. Said they weren't giving me a medal, but they could do ear-holes. Keeps me from steaming in the armor, and I can actually hear now."

"I'm glad," Sophie said with a giggle.

A tender moment passed between them. Then Kuro's expression shifted, sharpening.

"Yes," he said. "I know this man. He's a traveling apothecary. Comes through town once a year, stays ten days, then moves on."

"Wait, seriously?!" Isadora's eyes went wide.

"That medicinal smell of his, that strange hat and snake cane—you don't forget a fellow like that." He turned to Sophie, his gaze steady. "Ms. Sophie. He passed through these gates three days ago. That gives you seven days to find him. You should hurry."

✶✶✶

"HURRY. When we have no idea where we're going…" Isadora grumbled under her breath.

She and Sophie had come to the central plaza—a bustling crossroads right in the heart of town. To go anywhere in town, the man would've had to pass through here.

But there were way too many people.

Sophie paused, scanning for higher ground. That's when she spotted a tall, tower-like building nearby—mainly because someone was waving at her from the top. A lanky man in a brown uniform, flanked by others dressed the same. He was the only one leaning so far over the edge that it made her stomach twist.

She hurriedly trotted toward the building. A moment later, someone came barreling down the long spiral staircase, practically sliding as he went. Pale skin, a head full of wild curls, and a pair of thick, *thick* glasses.

"Ms. Sophie! It's been too long!" he called out.

"Kristoffer!" Sophie replied, beaming.

The boy who'd once come nervously into her salon skidded to a stop in front of her, breathless and dabbing sweat from his brow. He was nothing like the timid little thing she remembered. Now, he stood in a crisp brown uniform, with a healthy flush to his cheeks and a wide grin. He even looked more tanned than before. Seeing him doing so well made her heart ache a little, in the best way.

"My, you've grown," she said.

"A little," he laughed. "I'm always lugging heavy gear around, going here and there all day. I eat and eat, but I'm still starving!"

"Well," Sophie said softly. "You're doing well. I'm glad to see that."

She would've liked to ruffle his hair, the way she used to—but he didn't quite give off the vibe of a boy anymore. Her eyes drifted down, noticing something in his hands: a slim metal cylinder.

"What's that?" she asked.

"It's a tool that helps you look at the stars more closely. Oh no! I brought it with me!"

Just then, two other boys came hurrying down the stairs after him.

“Kris!” one of them called, sounding annoyed. “Where do you think you’re going with that?”

“We were still using it!” added the other.

“Sorry!” Kristoffer turned to face them. One was short, the other rather rotund. Both had curly hair—one red, one blond. Together with Kristoffer’s brown, that made three multicolored poofs. All three clutched pens, papers, and various versions of the same cylindrical device. Tiny marks covered their papers—headings, points, and connecting lines. Sophie suddenly understood.

“Are those…stars?” she asked.

“Yep,” Kristoffer replied proudly. “I got into the class I told you about. The one I always wanted?”

He was beaming. Sophie’s heart gave a quiet tug. Her eyes softened—but then, instinctively, she pulled herself back. She adjusted her veil and took a subtle step away so Kristoffer’s friends might not look at her too closely—she didn’t want to spoil this for him.

But when she glanced at them, they seemed entirely absorbed in their charts, none of them giving her a second look. Then Kristoffer met her gaze.

“We’re doing an assignment,” he said. “Observing the sky during daytime. I’ve only been in the class for three days, so I have no idea what I’m doing yet. Anyway, what are you doing here, Ms. Sophie? Out on an errand?”

“We’re looking for someone,” she replied. “Sorry to bother you all, but—have you seen this man?”

Isadora knelt and quickly sketched the old apothecary in the dirt. The boys gathered around, peering closely. A moment later, the rounder boy lit up.

“I think I saw him!”

“Huh?” Kristoffer said. “How? We were all looking upward the whole time.”

“Please,” said the tall one dryly. “He was probably looking for a pretty older lady down there.”

Rotund boy nonchalantly turned away, whistling an imaginary tune. “No idea what you’re talking about. It was a total coincidence.

I just glanced down for one second, and this guy caught my eye. His cane is hard to miss. It was yesterday evening—he was heading toward the inns' row to the south. Probably for the night."

Sophie looked at Isadora. Isadora looked at Sophie. A nod passed between them.

"Thanks!" Isadora said. "You're going to make a girl very happy one day!"

"Indeed," Sophie added. "The most popular man there ever was. Thank you!"

"Gee, really?" the rotund boy said sheepishly.

But Sophie and Isadora were already flying off.

✶✶✶

THEY ran and ran. Isadora was so quick that she left Sophie trailing behind, panting in the dust.

Sophie paused at the roadside, catching her breath, when a voice called out to her.

She turned and spotted an older man—sixty, perhaps—standing in front of a storefront brimming with colorful produce. He was waving enthusiastically.

"Ms. Yaora's…!" Her face lit up with recognition.

It was the son of Yaora, the kindly old woman who'd once come to her salon. Sophie's heart lifted at the sight. There he was, proudly tending the shop his mother had built, standing where she had stood, carrying it on.

He jogged up to her, still holding a knife in one hand.

Well, that's a little scary.

"Ms. Sophie! It's good to see you," he said, beaming. "I can't thank you enough for what you did for us. You're huffin' and puffin'! Want a slice of melon?"

"Yes, thank you—I'd love one," Sophie replied.

"Coming right up!"

Crack! The knife came down clean and quick, splitting the melon in half. For just a moment, Sophie was unhelpfully reminded

of William the pirate's rather gruesome fate. But thirst won out over imagination, and she reached for a slice.

It was fresh and wonderfully sweet, the juice dripping down her fingers. So delicious it nearly brought tears to her eyes.

Isadora munched happily on her own, spitting seeds onto the road without a care.

"Where are you two off to in such a rush?" the man asked.

"The inns' row," Sophie replied.

"That's quite a trek. Ah! I know—if you'd like…"

✶✶✶

"YOUNG ladies! I suggest you clench your teeth if you'd like to keep your tongues!" came the voice, half warning, half gleeful challenge, barely cutting through the shriek of wind and the clatter of stone.

"Aba-aba-aba-aba—!" Sophie stammered, every syllable shaken loose by the wild ride.

"Oh my, young ladies, he says! He's a flatterer, this one is!" Isadora called out, utterly delighted.

They were on a cart—a vegetable cart. The very one Yaora's family had once planned to use to carry her to Sophie's salon. Solid wheels. No suspension. No mercy. At the reins—if you could call it that—was Yaora's great-grandson, sprinting full-tilt down the cobbled road.

Sophie clung to the wooden frame, her bones rattling, trying to breathe, to focus, to keep her organs where they belonged.

Isadora, meanwhile, was leaning out over the side like a child at a fair, hair whipping behind her, shrieking with joy.

"Turning—right!" the boy hollered.

"Aba-ba-ba!" Sophie yelped.

"Woohoo!" sang Isadora.

"Turning—left!"

"Aba-ba-ba-ba-ba!"

"Weeeee!"

And so it went until they reached the inns' row.

✶✶✶

"SOPHIE? What are you doing here?"

"Hello, Lily. Sorry to disturb you while you're working—*hurk*!"

Sophie bent over with a dry heave. Her former classmate rushed over, gently guiding her into a chair and patting her back.

"And who might you be?" Lily asked, glancing at Isadora.

"I'm Isadora. A dancer. Sophie here erased my stretch marks for me."

"Ah! In that case, I'm Lily—Sophie's former classmate. My family owns this place. She helped me with the burns on my face."

In an instant, a connection sparked between them, warm and unspoken.

With Sophie still hunched and pale, Isadora stepped in to explain the situation. Lily listened, then disappeared and returned with a stack of paper. Isadora took one and quickly sketched out a likeness—a very good likeness. As soon as it was done, Lily snatched it up, laid it out so the still-wet ink wouldn't smear, and placed a weight on top before setting the next sheet in front of Isadora—a quick and efficient process.

"Can we do at least ten more? Optimally fifteen? Can you draw the same image that many times?" Lily asked briskly.

"Sure I can," Isadora replied with a grin. "You're awfully pretty, you know that?"

"Double goes for you, Ms. Isadora."

Meanwhile, the soothing tea Lily had brewed was starting to bring Sophie back to life. She sat up, eyes clearer, color returning. Noticing this, Lily turned her way. "Sophie."

"Yes?"

Without warning, Lily crisply straightened her posture. There was something so sure in the gesture that Sophie instinctively sat a little straighter herself.

"Please know that despite the situation," Lily began, "as innkeepers, we can't freely give out information about our guests.

The trust between innkeepers and our guests is sacred, and I'm afraid I won't be breaking that." Her tone was steady, but there was a fierce light in her hazel eyes.

"Instead," she continued, "my family and I will use these drawings to visit the other inns along the row. We won't ask if this man is staying with them. We'll simply say we're looking for him. That way, if he is here, he can choose to come forward himself. What do you think? Would that be acceptable?"

"Of course," Sophie said at once.

"Thank you. If there's any news, we'll bring him straight to your salon. I know that waiting can be difficult, even painful. But for now, I can only ask for your patience. And your trust."

She met Sophie's eyes directly. That light had morphed into something akin to a roaring bonfire.

"Lily," Sophie said gently, "I appreciate it. I really do. But there's no certainty he's even here. You don't have to take this on."

"Take it on?" Lily gave a soft smile. "No—if anything, it's taken hold of me. I feel as if I'm alight. Purpose is burning through me."

"Then perhaps you don't need to burn quite so…brightly."

"Oh, but I must," Lily said. "And when I tell my family, I know the flame will catch in them too." A single clear tear slid down her cheek. "We owe you a debt, Sophie. All of us. This is our chance to repay it. Please—let us do this for you. There's no family better suited for it in this entire district."

Something sharp and warm stirred in Sophie's chest. She looked at Lily, and as their eyes met, a tear of her own slipped free.

This one caught the light, glinting orange, just like that old classroom evening all those years ago.

✶✶✶

"I'M bored."

Isadora sprawled across Sophie's couch, long legs stretched out and bare, occupying nearly the entire length of it.

"Don't you feel embarrassed lying around like that?" Sophie asked. "It's improper for a woman."

"Improper?" Isadora snorted. "Honey, did you forget I dance with my clothes off for a living?"

"Ah. Right."

It was the following day. Isadora had returned to the salon to join Sophie in their ongoing efforts, hopeful for good news. She'd brought little Al along, but hardly had they stepped inside before Sherlotte appeared and spirited him off to be looked after.

When Sophie explained the situation to her mother, the only replies she received were a calm "*I see*," and a measured "*I hope you find him*."

"Sophie, tell me a story or something," Isadora moaned. "I'm so bored I could die."

Sophie stared at her.

"If you don't start talking," Isadora warned, "I'm going to start dancing."

That, apparently, was motivation enough. Sophie scrambled to think of a topic.

A story…

The *story.*

The one she'd always wanted to tell someone, but never had.

"Ms. Isadora?"

"Mm?"

"I do have one story…"

My very own.

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SOPHIE talked about her birth and the disfigurement that came with it. She talked about the bullying she'd endured at school. About her hopeless, quiet love for Dr. Adolphin. Even her suicide attempt and how, in the aftermath, memories of a previous life had come flooding back.

She spoke of how that awakening had once filled her with strength, but how lately, that strength felt as if it was fading away.

Isadora listened the entire time, quietly munching her way through a plate of baked goods but never once interrupting. Only

when Sophie finished did she speak.

"So all those wise things you said to me were…"

"Not mine. They were Mariko's. Sorry. I'm a fraud, aren't I?"

"A fraud?" Isadora drifted off into thought, staring at the crumbs on the plate before her. "I don't think you're a fraud. Not exactly. But that explains it. I knew I smelled a whole lot of old-lady energy coming off you."

"How rude."

"That said… Does it *really* matter?"

"Huh?"

Isadora tilted her head. "This *Maricoh*—she died, right? Lived her life, passed on… It's not her that's right before me—it's you."

"Um…"

Mariko, Sophie thought—clearly a little hard for the local tongue.

"Your beautiful mother gave birth to you, nursed you. Your dad raised you, doted on you like any father should. You're what, seventeen now? I don't know much about this 'previous life' business, but who's to say we're not all reincarnated souls carrying pieces of someone else? Maybe you just happened to remember.

"You grew up here. Studied your butt off. Had your manners drilled into you by that terrifying head maid. You're the one who opened this salon. You're the one who helps people. So I ask again: Does it *really* matter?"

Sophie didn't answer.

Isadora smiled gently. "It's only natural you've gone all soft—you're a girl in love. Please, if I've said anything you disagree with, you're free to call me out on it," she said with another tilt of her head.

"I…don't disagree with you," Sophie replied.

"Good! Then let's stop fussing over that and get to the *real* subject." Isadora leaned in, eyes sparkling. "This boy of yours."

"Does it really *matter?"*

Isadora's offhandedness shouldn't have helped—but it did. The lightness of it, the way she moved on without ceremony, unknotted something in Sophie. She started talking.

"He's not mine," she said first.

"What's he like? Is he handsome?" Isadora leaned in further.

"He's tall. Has pretty black hair. One of the most handsome men I've ever met."

Kurt's face came to her then, just as it had been that day. So close. So impossibly close.

"What does he do? How old is he?"

"He's a healer. Early twenties…I think?"

Only then did Sophie realize she didn't actually know his age.

"Where did you meet him? What do you talk about?"

"He came to my salon on official business. We talk about… books, I guess. And… Well, not much else."

She paused, thinking. They hadn't had many long conversations—just brief exchanges, shared magic, light banter. Small, passing moments. Nothing significant at all.

"Did you ever promise to meet again?"

"No. He just borrows books…then comes back to return them."

"Oh, that's just an excuse to see you."

"I don't think it is. He really loves reading."

"Then that makes two of you," Isadora said, grinning. "What about you? When did you start liking him?"

At that question, Sophie's voice evaporated.

When.

When *had* she started liking him?

Ever since the day he'd barged into her salon unannounced, demanding to see her without rhyme or reason, she'd found him vaguely annoying. Frustrating in a way she couldn't quite name. Always with that serious face. Always being too blunt, too careless, like her feelings were some distant afterthought. Yet somehow, everything he said struck straight to the core of her.

He pried it open—that sealed-off part of her, the quiet box where she'd hidden away all her deepest, most fragile feelings. He'd pried it open without hesitation, like it was nothing, like it was the most natural thing to do. He'd pried it open and dragged everything out into the light.

So, when did that change?

When had irritation turned into longing?

When had she started waiting—truly waiting—to hear his voice again? To see his face reappear in the doorway?

She wanted him to return safely. To be alive and well.

She wanted to run her fingers across his scarred back, to let him know it was all going to be all right.

She felt a joy that shook her when those deep, midnight-black eyes were fixed on her. When his arms were around her. When his voice, both cool and fiery at once, whispered into her ear.

Did it come like lightning?

Did it come like a slow and gentle snowfall?

Of these two options, Sophie couldn't say it was either. Nor could she say it wasn't both.

She had no idea when it happened—just that it had.

Somewhere inside her heart—right in the middle of that once empty, abandoned place—there was now a single chair.

A single chair that had Kurt's name written on it.

"Did he confess his feelings for you?"

Sophie replayed his words from that day over and over again. "*I want you, Miss Sophie Olzon*." If that wasn't a confession, what was?

Instead of an answer, she gave a deep blush. But to Isadora, that might as well have been one and the same.

"So he did! I have to give it to him. Then? What did you say back?"

"I told him I'd only dirty him."

"What?" Isadora's face became unamused.

"I said I couldn't bear it if I were the reason he was laughed at. If he were mocked."

"…What?"

"I said if he were to look at me like a monster, I'd die."

Saying it again, those words she'd left him with that day, she could taste them on her tongue. They were bitter. Sour. They clung to the back of her throat until the tears came.

She'd said those things. Those awful, nasty things.

How could she have—when he had always meant every single word he gave her?

"I drove him away from here. Told him to cool off. To think things over," she went on, only for a pillow to fly at her.

"Are you an idiot?!" Isadora shouted.

"Who are you calling an idiot!" Sophie threw the pillow back.

"I'm calling you an idiot, *idiot!*" Back it came.

"So what if I am idiot?! So what?!" Sophie raised the pillow again, but her hand froze. She hugged it to her chest instead.

I am an idiot.

I really am.

What possessed me to say those things?

Was I really so afraid?

He'd spoken the very words I longed to hear—and how did I respond to him?

With hurt and pain.

The sobs came hard. The sobs came fast.

Panicked, Isadora rushed to her side and laid a hand on her back, rubbing in slow, awkward circles.

"I was afraid. Terrified," Sophie said. "In that moment, when he said those things to me, I realized I loved him. I don't even know when it started or how it grew so deep—but it was already there, and it scared me. All I could think was…what if the day came? What if he looked at me the way everyone else always has? And I panicked. I panicked so hard I could barely breathe."

Isadora paused, just for a beat. Then her expression softened into something older, gentler. Something sisterly.

"Idiot," she murmured. Then she pulled Sophie into a hug.

Her arms were warm, grounding. She stroked Sophie's hair with slow, affectionate passes like she meant to comfort not just her but the child she used to be.

Now that Sophie thought about it, Isadora *was* older than her.

"You think you're the only one who gets scared?" Isadora said quietly. "We all are. But when you really love someone, you try anyway. You let yourself be brave. Even knowing feelings can shift in a blink…you take the risk. Because love's worth that."

She tilted her head, giving Sophie a small, prompting smile. “What did he say—about your face?”

Sophie’s voice caught a little. “He said I’m the most beautiful person in the world.”

Isadora reeled back slightly, one hand to her forehead. “Whew. That’s a real man.” She fanned herself, flushed as if she were the one being courted. “Wow…”

Then, more gently, “You’re not very confident in yourself, are you?”

Sophie almost scoffed. “How could I be? I’ve been filthy, bumpy, brown, oozing pus and blood since I was small. My peers threw mud at me. My first love looked like a dead man walking when he found out we were engaged. You! Even you shrieked the first time you saw me!”

Isadora winced, eyes softening with guilt. “Yeah. I did. I’m sorry.”

She hugged Sophie tighter.

“You’ll get my juices on you,” Sophie muttered.

“I can always wipe it off,” Isadora said without missing a beat. “But I am sorry. Back then, I was so caught up in my own mess, I didn’t stop to understand yours. But I do now, Sophie. I do.”

She pulled back just enough to look her in the eye.

“You’re a busybody. Kind to a fault. Warm enough to light up a house. And you’re all that in spite of everything. In spite of the hand you were dealt. That’s something.”

Sophie didn’t speak.

“That girl at the inns’ row—Lily, was it? She really liked you. Same for that gatekeeper, that student, the greengrocer… They all looked at you the same way. With real concern. Real care.”

Still, silence.

“You’ve helped those people. Not just in the way you think, either. You helped them in a way that made them feel it. You made them want the best for you. That’s no small thing. And I know they’re not the only ones.”

“But…”

“No buts.”

Isadora's voice had softened, but her gaze stayed firm, clear, and steady like someone teaching a young child the ways of life.

"Trust more, Sophie. Not everyone out there's some bratty kid. Not everyone's an idiot. The ones who've been hurt—they're the ones who recognize hurt the most in others. That means you know better than most how wronged he felt. He's not the one who did those cruel things to you. So maybe… Maybe you could give him a chance?"

There were tears in *her* eyes now.

"You were the one who told me to open my door. To let people in." Isadora's smile was tilted, fond, and a little wry. "Well, I did. Only old crows answered, but that's beside the point. The point is… you made me see my dreams again."

Her voice wavered. "I'm sure now. Certain. Beyond any shadow of a doubt—I'd never hit little Al again."

She blinked the tears back. "And who made me sure of that?"

Her hand squeezed Sophie's.

"You did."

Isadora's voice dropped to a whisper. "So why do I have to open my door while you sit there, too scared to open yours? He came knocking, didn't he? And you love him, don't you?"

The tears came quietly, sliding down her cheeks.

"Then let him in."

A breath passed. A long, quiet breath, like the hush after a storm.

Sophie's thoughts drifted.

They drifted to Kurt Ozhorn—and his jet-black eyes.

They'd looked at her with such seriousness. Such impossible kindness.

During their time together, had they ever strayed from her, even for a moment? Had he spoken a single word with flippancy, with anything less than unwavering sincerity?

No.

No, he hadn't.

He'd conveyed his love with the full force of his truth.

And yet…

"I drove him away…"

Her voice cracked. The tears came again—fresh, shameful. Foolish.

Isadora gave a sad little smile. "You can still go apologize. Just say what you felt. That it happened too fast, that it scared you, but that you love him too. Just as much."

She softened further. "I'm sure he'll be over the moon."

Sophie hesitated. "Are you sure he'll forgive me?"

"Pretty sure," Isadora said. "Because I think that man…might be an idiot too. Doesn't he remind you of, um, you know—*those*?"

"Those?"

"You know, one of those men—the ones who show up out of nowhere, dressed in an all-white suit, carrying a hundred roses, ready to propose on one knee?"

She didn't make it to the end of the sentence before bursting into laughter, and Sophie couldn't help but smile herself.

"Please, no. That'd turn this comedy into a full-blown tragedy."

Then she laughed, too, helplessly, and for a moment, the room was warm again.

Indeed, he was a man fit for those grand, outdated gestures of love—the kind that belonged in some dusty old romance serial, not real life. The kind that, if anyone actually tried it today, they'd look more like they were making a mockery of love than professing it.

Isadora was still laughing, wiping at her eyes. When the laughter finally ebbed, and just the faint trace of a smile remained, she stroked Sophie's hair once more.

"When this is all over—whether you're healed or not—go to him. Of course, I'd love for you to be healed. But he already said he's fine with you just as you are, didn't he? So that's enough, isn't it? It's your turn now, sweetheart. Time to muster your courage."

"Right," Sophie said after a pause.

Ozhorn mustered up his courage.

He held me in his arms and conveyed his love for me.

"You're very right," she whispered again.

Her eyes fluttered shut. She tried to imagine it—really imagine it. If she told him the truth, would he be glad? If she asked for

forgiveness, would he accept it? Would he laugh at her foolishness gently, lovingly?

Maybe.

Maybe not.

But in the end, it didn't matter.

Healed or not, forgiven or not, she would open the door. This time, it was her turn to step up.

Bang! The door to the salon flew open. "Ms. Sophie!" A voice cried out.

They both turned. In the doorway stood Lily, a young man neither of them had seen before, and, of course, Martha, being dragged along after failing to stop them.

"I've brought him!" Lily cried out. "May I present the traveling apothecary, Mr. Ganpo!"

The man beside her—likely her fiancé, Thomar—shifted to the side, revealing someone on his back:

A tiny, wizened old man not entirely unlike a wrinkly cucumber.

He looked exactly like the sketch Isadora had drawn.

✶✶✶

"I'M hooome!" Johann's voice boomed as he stepped through the front door, boots heavy from travel, his crew trailing behind him.

He was the head of the house. He had just announced his arrival. Yet, oddly, no one answered.

"I said I'm home! Daddy's home!" he called again, louder this time, with just a hint of theatrics.

"Johann!"

His wife came running out to meet him, holding a baby in her arms for some reason. But Johann didn't give it a second thought. Too enamored was he at the sight of his wife that he broke out into a broad smile.

"Oh, Sherlotte, my love—it's good to be back. Look at this fabric! A real find. Picked it up as a souvenir just for you."

He unfurled the cloth with a showman's flourish.

But she didn't even glance at it. Instead, she grabbed his arm and started pulling him along.

"What's gotten into you?" Johann laughed, letting her pull him along. "Missed me that much, have you? Don't get me wrong, I'm thrilled, but maybe not right here? Not in front of the boys?"

"Oh, hush, Johann Olzon, and listen to me."

That tone, sharp and soft at once, snapped his attention in place.

"It's Sophie."

She was still dragging him, the ignored fabric trailing behind like a forgotten flag. Some of the crew began to murmur.

Sherlotte turned, tears shimmering in her eyes.

"Sophie might be *healed*," she said breathlessly. "Come. Come quick."

The vibrant cloth slipped from Johann's hands, catching the air like a bird's wing before floating to the floor.

Then came the uproar.

A joyful roar shook the hall as the sailors charged after their captain, storming into Sophie's salon in a puzzling thunder of boots, voices, and hope.

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SOPHIE'S salon.

The shriveled, cucumber-like man sat in front of Sophie, holding his hands aloft before her—and before her big, burly audience.

"Hm…" he murmured.

"What is it, old man?" someone said.

"Shh!" came the swift rebuke.

The apothecary shifted his hands slightly. "Hm…"

"The suspense is killing me!"

"Shut it!"

He moved again. "Hm…"

"You still with us, old man?!"

"Be! Quiet!"

At last, just as the room brimmed with impatience, the traveling apothecary—Mr. Ganpo opened his mouth. "Young lady."

"Yes?" Sophie replied. She was nervous but still met his gaze head-on.

"Are you aware," Ganpo began, "that in people with magical talent, there exist, from birth, tube-like growths that protrude from your body? Small, chimney-like vessels that puff out mana from within the body to without?"

As he spoke, he raised a hand from his brow and traced a slow arc through the air, mimicking the flow of invisible vapors.

"I am not," Sophie replied. "That's the first I've heard of it."

Ganpo gave a sage little nod as if to say, *as expected.*

"At this point, I may well be the only one who can still see them," he continued. "But you *are* aware, I assume, that mages tend to have a natural resistance to magic, greater than ordinary folk? That's because of these vessels. The mana they release forms a thin, constant barrier around the body. It serves as a kind of passive armor. A safeguard. Something evolved to help mages survive in combat, just a little bit better."

He paused, eyes narrowing.

"But on rare occasions—and for reasons quite unknown—those vessels twist. Curl inward. Like an ingrown hair."

The room fell utterly silent.

"And when that happens," he said softly, folding his hands behind his back, "they pierce the mage's own flesh. Something meant to protect…turns inward and begins to hurt instead."

A strange hush moved through the room as if even the air were listening.

"I call it 'mana's ingrown eyelash.'"

Sophie blinked. "That's… surprisingly intuitive and helpful imagery! And what happens when one has one of these?"

"It depends on one's constitution."

"Right."

"But in your case…" He reached out and, very gently, touched her cheek. "You got off lucky."

Lucky? Sophie nearly laughed. Her mouth twitched with the ghost of a sardonic grin, but she held it back. Instead, she met his eyes, waiting.

Ganpo went on.

"When mana expelled from the body is reabsorbed in its raw, undiluted form, the body eventually exceeds its holding capacity. And when that happens, the mana bursts from its banks and starts to course through the body with grave consequences. Wherever it goes, it wreaks havoc. It tears, it rips, it floods—destroying the mage from within.

"More than a few juvenile deaths are owed to this very thing. But you, young Sophie… Your skin's been protecting you. It refuses—stubbornly, fiercely—to let the mana back in. Turns to stone if it has to. And when it can't take any more, it flakes off… Only for the new skin beneath to harden again. An endless rotation. An endless war."

Ganpo lifted a bony finger and traced something in the air, an unseen pattern.

"This ingrown lash of yours… It's one of the thickest, most stubborn I've ever seen. You've lived with it for years, and yet, somehow, your body isn't any worse for wear. Your skin alone has been holding the line, fighting day after day. One force trying to get in, the other keeping it out. A futile, painful, *beautiful* battle. Both sides only trying to protect their host. Both just doing what they were born to do."

His finger hovered, then lowered slightly as if petting something invisible.

"You, the 'ingrown lash.' Yes, I'm talking to you. You didn't ask for this, did you? You never meant to hurt your beloved Sophie. You just wanted to be like the others, shooting straight up into the sky like you were meant to. Oh, how sad. How sad that you're the only one twisted this way."

He then looked at Sophie.

"Please, young lady. I beg of you—don't begrudge it. I imagine it more than anyone wished to be normal. Wished for no pain, no

guilt, no sorrow. It didn't choose this. It didn't choose to be born this way."

A single tear traced down Sophie's cheek.

"Can you… Can you fix it?" she asked, her voice catching.

"I can," Ganpo said. "It's simple, really. I just bend it back into place. You'll feel a slight pinch."

"That's… That's it?"

"That's it. Though, for you to have stumbled across perhaps the only person in the world who can do 'it'—well. Be it coincidence or fate, it's remarkable either way." He gave her a little nod. "Give it a month, and your old skin should shed. In its place, normal skin will return."

"It's a good thing…" Sophie said, her lips trembling. "It's a good thing I can heal the skin—and only the skin—then."

"A great thing. Now, if I may."

He lifted his hand toward her chin and then, quite suddenly, bellowed:

"Pa-pop!"

A Mockery of Love

HE appeared. In the aftermath of that touching scene.

"Ms. Sophie, I hope I'm not intruding!" came the voice—grating, squarish, more so than ever. The man himself was the same: tall, angular, all sharp corners and certainty. His long legs carried him across the salon in swift, purposeful strides right up to Sophie, where he promptly dropped to one knee.

The noise, the crowd, the cramped room—all of it seemed invisible to him. His jet-black eyes were fixed on Sophie and Sophie alone.

He extended the enormous bouquet of roses in his hand. "I, Kurt Ozhorn, entreat your hand in marriage, Sophie Olzon. To you, the woman who has stolen my heart, I wish to leave my identification tag for all eternity. I do not mind the discharge oozing from your skin. In fact, I might even prefer it on me. Ms. Sophie—will you marry me?"



The silence that followed was vast. Oceanic.

The room was packed, yet not a soul stirred. They were waiting… Waiting for just one person to do the honors.

"Sir Kurt Ozhorn," said that gentle, mellow voice.

"Here," replied that grating, squarish tone.

"Before I give you my answer, I'd like to ask you two questions. Is that all right?"

"Of course. Ask anything."

His dark, obsidian-like eyes didn't so much as twitch.

"First question."

"Yes."

"Did you come all the way from your home to here dressed like that?"

"I did."

Not a flicker of doubt. He answered as if wearing that pristine, dated, conspicuously all-white suit was the most natural thing in the world. As if he hadn't just stepped out of a century-old picture book.

And yet, in that moment, Sophie could admit it: he looked both impossibly good and completely out of place.

"Second question."

"Yes."

"Look at me closely. Do you notice anything different?"

Kurt squinted his eyes, studying.

Really, *really* studying. Then:

"Did you cut your hair?"

Sophie almost smiled. "No."

She crouched down to meet him at eye level, then took his hands and gently pressed them to her face.

At first, he was simply pleased to be touching her.

Then his brow creased. His eyes widened.

"Your skin…it's all better!"

"Yes. I had it fixed just now, actually."

She could feel his large, calloused hands on her now baby-soft skin. She could see her reflection in the glossy surface of his impossibly dark eyes. And in it, the trail of a single tear slipped down her cheek, slipping past Kurt's fingers. Instinctively, she reached to

wipe it away but stopped—there was nothing disgusting about it anymore.

It was a clear, glistening drop of water, like a pearl or a gem, catching the light as it fell past his hand and landed on the floor.

"Ms. Sophie…"

His voice had softened. His gaze, too. Just slightly as he looked at the woman he loved.

For a moment, the two stayed there, suspended in silence. It felt as though nothing, and no one, could pull them from the quiet world they shared.

"What the heck is he wearin'?! That's lame as all hell!"

Well, aside from *Duncer*, that is.

While the other sailors had been keeping him back, blocking his view, Duncer had somehow managed to rise up on his tiptoes and catch a glimpse of the scene. And what followed had been pure instinct: his immediate, unfiltered opinion shouted at full volume, like a happy-go-lucky boy calling out from the back of a crowd.

If a dunce was someone who spoke without thinking, then yes—Duncer was living up to his name.

The response was swift and decisive.

"Read the room!" someone barked.

"You're not wrong… You're not wrong, but now's not the time!" said another.

"Go to hell, Duncer!" yelled a third.

Clonk, clonk, clonk! Three solid thuds rang out, and then the room fell silent as if nothing had ever disturbed it.

Kurt furrowed his brow in thought.

"May I take a moment to summarize my actions thus far?"

"Be my guest," Sophie replied.

"It seems I—dressed in an outfit described as 'lame as all hell'…"

Sophie nodded.

"—barged into your salon without reading the room, knelt before you, and proposed by declaring my fondness for your discharge. Not realizing you no longer have any. Would that be accurate?"

"It would."

"Yikes…" came the sailors again.

"Why would you say it like that… Why would you summarize it…"

"Someone kill me… Kill me!!!"

The big, burly men clutched their chests in unison, collapsing under the weight of second-hand embarrassment, but Kurt paid them no mind.

He stared off into the distance for a beat. Then, with a slow, steady breath, he collected himself, lifted the bouquet again, and held it out to Sophie.

"Even so, my will remains unchanged. Ms. Sophie, will you marry me?"

"Damn! He just trucks on like nothing even happened!"

The voice captured what the entire room was feeling: awe and disbelief in equal measure.

"When I come home," he continued, "it's your face I hope to see first. Your smile, your voice saying 'welcome back'—I ache for that more than anything. I want to be the one who stands closest to your joys and your sorrows. The one who shares the longest days and the quietest nights with you. For all the years ahead, Sophie, I want that life with you."

A proud and poignant confession. Earnest, even after everything.

A collective gulp passed through the room; everyone held their breath.

Sophie opened her mouth.

"Mr. Ozhorn, of course, I—"

"Now, hold on just a hot-buttered second!"

The voice boomed like thunder.

One moment, there was nothing between them. The next, there stood a man.

Johann Olzon. The head of the household.

Sophie's esteemed father.

"I'm Sophie's father, Johann Olzon."

"A pleasure to meet you, Father."

"*Don't* you call me that. Not yet. No, no, no—we'll see about that."

Johann glared at Kurt at point-blank distance.

"All right, 'Kurt.' You're already on thin ice after barging in and spoiling what was meant to be a quiet moment celebrating my daughter's recovery. So watch yourself. As her father, I have some questions for you. I'll be the judge of whether you have the right to propose to her."

"Of course."

"First—this isn't some twisted prank, is it? You're not mocking her?"

"Mock her? How would I, dressed in an outfit that mocks me more than anything?"

"Damn it, that's a good answer!" The words seemed to knock the wind out of Johann, but he caught himself and forged on. "Moving on. What do you do for a living?"

"I'm a third-rank healer with the Royal Fifth Healers."

"Mm. So you're successful. Not bad, but don't let that swell your head—plenty of successful men out there. Age?"

"Twenty-two."

"Young. Successful. Good age for Sophie." Johann squinted. "Parents? Siblings?"

"No siblings. Both my parents passed. I'm alone."

"Ah… I see. That's—well, I'm sorry to hear that. You're far too young to be without family. But…" He scratched at the side of his face. "No in-laws to clash with, no ailing parents to care for later… Not the worst situation."

He cleared his throat.

"Do you own property?"

"A detached house in the capital. The crown gave it to me. Does that count?"

"He owns a house in one of the best areas in the country and doesn't even have to worry about a mortgage?! Damn it, damn it, damn it!"

Johann—company president, sailor, father—started stomping on the floor like a child throwing a tantrum.

"The boss has lost it…"

"Shh."

The sailors all looked on, pitying their big boss like he was the sorriest creature in the world.

"Okay, Kurt," Johann said, recovering from his tantrum. "You win this round. But now, it's time for round two!"

"And what does round two entail?" Kurt asked, brow lifting.

"If you *really* love Sophie, name one hundred things you love about her! Your time starts…now! Tick, tock, tick, tock!"

"Father?!" Sophie yelped, aghast.

Johann swayed side to side with the smuggest grin imaginable, looming over Kurt as if he'd already won. Kurt merely stroked his chin in thought.

"Tick, tock, tick, tock… Hm? Aha! Just as I thought! You can't name a single thing, can you? Know why? Because you've only just met her! You don't know the first thing about her! Now, go ahead and admit it! Admit your defeat!"

Admit defeat to what, everyone's face seemed to ask, amused —except Kurt's, of course. He looked deadly serious.

"All right," he said. "I'm ready to begin."

He took a deep breath.

"Her quick thinking in a pinch. Her courage. The gentle, thoughtful way she chooses her words. Her soft, mellow voice. The way her fingertips move—always in smooth, deliberate unison. Her upright posture, the grace in her bow, clearly honed through training. Her sharp mind. Her hunger for knowledge. Her diligence. Her little streak of stubbornness. The way she teases people—lightly, never unkind. Her smile when she laughs, that sweetness in it. And the way she looks at people—so warm, so kind."

Ah, Sophie thought*. That pause earlier… He was remembering. Everything—from the moment we met until now.*

"The way she speaks without ever hurting another. The way she treasures the lessons her teachers have given her. The compassion she shows her patients. The humility to recognize her faults, to feel frustration, but also the strength to never be defined

by them. Her sense of responsibility. Her dignity. Her resilience. Her —"

"All right, all right! That's enough—that's enough!!!" Johann flailed his arms, cutting Kurt off.

"That's only twenty-three," Kurt said, unfazed.

"Yeah, well, the way you were rattling them off, it might as well have been two hundred and three! Can't you be more succinct?!"

You're the one who told him not to be succinct, everyone's expression silently pointed out.

"Succinct…" Kurt stroked his chin again. "Then I suppose: everything."

"Everything?" Johann squinted.

"I love everything about Sophie. She is perfect in my eyes."

Johann opened his mouth—then promptly lost his words.

"I love the things she was born with and the things she poured hundreds of hours into to attain. I love her strengths and her flaws. When I look at her, I see…the perfect woman. She's so radiant, I can barely believe I have the right to even look at her. So yes—I love her. Everything about her."

Martha quietly sobbed into her hands. Lily and Isadora were holding each other, tear-streaked and sniffling.

To the impossibly serious, painfully earnest young man who said all that without the faintest trace of embarrassment—and in that outfit, no less—Johann had only one thing left to say. And one thing left to do.

"Fine!"

Admit defeat.

"He passes. With flying colors. The rest…is up to you, Sophie."

"Thanks…" Sophie gave her father a sidelong glance as he stepped aside. Then she moved forward, closing the space between her and Kurt.

With reverence, she reached out and took hold of the heavy bouquet of roses.

Now that she saw it up close, she noticed something: there must've been exactly a hundred roses here. And while every rose

was red, they were clearly different varietals. Which meant he must have gone to more than one florist—*dressed like that.*

He'd asked them for every red rose they had—*dressed like that.*

Again and again until he had exactly one hundred, *dressed like that*.

Who would do that? Who *could* do that? No one except this strange, utterly sincere man—so serious, so absurdly earnest, it almost hurt to look at him.

Sophie wondered, for just a second, if she told him to take a little more time to think things through, to come back in something more…conventional—would he?

Of course he would. He'd take the super-bouquet back home with him. He'd take "a little more time" as a precise, self-imposed deadline. Then he'd return—wearing something more normal—and propose again. Just like he had today.

No matter how many people laughed, no matter how many sneered, he would keep doing it. If she asked, he'd try again. And again. And again.

Suddenly, a voice stirred in her chest: *I just couldn't leave him alone.*

Sophie smiled. Now she understood.

Out from the bouquet, she plucked a single rose that had been crushed beneath his thumb for who knows how long, its stem bent and broken. Carefully, she drew it free and leaned in, slipping it into the pocket over the chest she hoped to fall against someday.

"Yes, of course, I'll marry you. I adore you, Kurt Ozhorn."

Silence. Then, a sharp whistle from who knows where. A guttural roar engulfed the room.

Sophie looked around, warmly acknowledging the celebratory mood when she was swept off her feet. She blinked, looked around, and found herself squarely in Kurt's arms. In what was colloquially known as a "princess carry."

Kurt tightened his grip, brought her close, and whispered in her ear: "Got you."

"Yes, you have," she replied sweetly.

“Ms. Sophie.” Kurt stared deeply into her eyes. “Do you have a fiancé?”

Sophie laughed. “I do. And he’s right in front of me.”

With a bare fingertip, she gently traced the outer corners of his eyes, softer than she’d ever seen them. Then:

“I never thought I’d live to hear you say that.”

His eyes crinkled further, folding into lines even softer, even kinder.

“Now, which way to the bedroom, *honey*?”

“Let’s save that for after the wedding, shall we, *dear*?”

Sophie said it as she nuzzled into his chest, settling there with a quiet contentment. In return, the arms around her tightened, reassuring, certain.

She looked up. And what she saw was something she’d never seen before:

Exposed white teeth. A smile—broad and unguarded—on that face, usually carved from stone.

“I’m glad I asked my superior about the way to propose,” he said.

“That confirms it. He really does want to see you crash and burn,” Sophie replied.

“It’s fine. It worked, didn’t it?”

Such a tender voice.

Such a careful, reverent hold—like she was the most delicate treasure in the world.

The tears came again.

“I did something so stupid. Said such stupid things to you. I’m so glad you didn’t come to hate me for it.”

“Nothing you could ever do would make me hate you. I love you, Sophie.”

One crystal-clear tear.

After the other.

They slipped their way down Sophie’s soft, cherubic cheeks.

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IT was nighttime.

Sophie was in her bedroom, gazing at her mirror, when there was a knock at the door.

"Who is it?" she called.

"It's Martha, milady," came the answer.

"Oh, please, come in."

The door swung open with a click. Martha stepped into the room, along with a woman in a maid's uniform Sophie didn't quite recognize. Not quite a surprise—Sophie had long since grown used to the younger maids being kept out of her orbit.

"And who might this be, Martha?" Sophie asked.

It was the woman who replied. "My name is Emma, milady. I'm a maid here. I'm pleased to have made your acquaintance."

She gave a soft, picture-perfect bow—textbook Martha's tutelage. She was in her early thirties if Sophie had to guess. Her eyes, a steady, earthy brown, rested on Sophie with quiet awe as though she were looking at something full of light.

"The pleasure's all mine," Sophie replied. "Sophie Olzon." She turned to Martha. "Um, so what is this…?"

"Yes," Martha began. "As you are well aware, milady, once Sir Ozhorn completes his term of service here, he will be returning to the capital. When that time comes, you shall be accompanying him."

"Right." Sophie flushed faintly.

Kurt's term was due to end in two months. And once the household had been informed of that fact, it had set off quite the frenzy: the trousseau had to be prepared, packed, and ready to depart in the same carriage that would bear them both to the capital.

"Regardless of the precise timing," Martha continued, "it is, of course, our responsibility to assign a maid to accompany you."

"Yes." Sophie nodded.

"That is why Emma is here." Martha inclined her head toward the young woman. "She is diligent, discreet, patient, and possesses a welcome tenacity. I believe you shall find her most suitable."

"But… Martha…" Sophie's voice cracked slightly. "You're not coming with me?"

It was not uncommon for a bride of a wealthy household to be sent off with a maid or several. But if only one were to accompany her, Sophie had always assumed it would be Martha. And Martha surely had held the same expectations.

But whatever stirred beneath, Martha gave no sign. She drew herself a touch straighter and replied in a voice as even and polished as Sophie had ever heard it:

"Milady."

"Yes?"

"I am getting older."

Sophie's breath caught.

"My eyes tire quickly now. Threading a needle, reading fine print—small tasks are becoming large ones."

"But surely that doesn't mean—"

"A young lady," Martha cut in gently, "deserves to be accompanied by someone who will grow with her. Who can walk beside her into the future, not be carried into it."

There was steel in her voice. Fire in her eyes. And both left no room for protest.

Sophie remembered the scene at the city gates. Martha, left behind as she walked away with Kuro, just slightly hunched, watching that green seedling push up through the soil.

She understood it now, that strange tug she'd felt then.

In that seedling, Martha had glimpsed the shape of what lay ahead. Both for Sophie and for herself.

"Ms. Emma," Sophie said quietly.

"Yes, milady."

"It's been a pleasure to meet you. I'm sorry, but may I have a word alone with Martha?"

"As you wish."

Emma bowed with quiet grace and slipped from the room, leaving Sophie and Martha free to face one another. Sophie could see the wrinkles on her face, the slight stoop of her frame. When had the strict head maid become so small, so frail?

"Milady," Martha said gently, "may I have a closer look at your face?"

Sophie nodded.

It was in this room. On this very bed, nearly a year ago to the day, the two of them had wept together while changing bandages.

"You truly are Mr. Johann and Ms. Sherlotte's daughter," Martha said softly. "You carry the best of them both. Unwavering integrity, and a beauty as fine and flawless as porcelain."

"Martha…" Sophie whispered.

An old maid's worn, time-creased fingers rested gently against her cheek.

"Remember what I once told you?" Martha said, her voice low and resonant. "That I despised this cruel affliction for what it had stolen from you—your wisdom, hard-earned and rightfully yours. The beauty passed down from your parents. The compassion they instilled in you. All of it, hidden beneath the grip of that vile disease. Well, I no longer have to carry that grievance. Because now, someone else has seen it. Seen all of that in you. And chosen to love you for it."

"I remember," Sophie smiled softly.

"Though would it truly have been too much to ask for someone with a shred of aesthetic sense?"

"He is who he is, Martha."

"Dressed like a clown, if there ever was one."

"He's surprisingly gullible." Sophie gave a warm and bright laugh.

"Milady, after what happened today, I've found myself wondering…"

"Yes, Martha?"

"This wretched affliction, the one I've despised for so long—loathed with every fiber of my being—could it actually have been protecting you? Until this very moment?"

Sophie's mouth parted, caught off guard. And in that moment, Martha's gaze softened—a rare break in its usual sharpness, drifting toward something far off.

"Would you mind if I told you a story, milady?" she said, her voice quiet but steady. "It's about a girl. A girl from a distant land. As lovely as a rose in full bloom and born to a noble house of some

distinction. Her mother passed when she was still young, and it was a stepmother who mainly raised her. A cruel stepmother, calculating, and in her every act, something less than human."

"Martha…" Sophie's eyes widened.

"She tormented her for years upon years. And at the end of it, the girl was to be wed—sold, rather—to a lecherous man more than forty years her senior. She was to be a pawn in some political arrangement, nothing more. But. Just as this fate was to be sealed, a young sailor, no one of note, just a man utterly devoted to her, spirited her away. He took her and her loyal lady's maid far from that place. It was no act they could speak of.

"Back in her homeland, it was said the noble daughter had fallen into the sea and vanished. Drowned, they said. They came to this land and made a quiet life together. Though they were close, deeply so, for years, they were not blessed with a child. When, at last, a daughter was born to them, the mother wept. Oh, how she wept."

Sophie's brow furrowed. "Because the child was born with abnormal skin?"

"No." Martha shook her head, slow and sure. "Because the child was so breathtakingly beautiful."

"What?" Sophie breathed.

"So beautiful… And so fragile-looking, so precious, the mother could hardly bear it. She wept as she held her, nursed her through tears, whispering: 'Can the world truly contain a thing so dear as this?'"

Martha reached out and gently brushed the tears tracing down Sophie's cheek.

"If that child's beauty had shone from the start," she said softly, "if the radiance she'd inherited from her parents had been plain to all, her name might have spread far and wide—even beyond this land. Her lineage could've been uncovered. And those foul people who once tormented her mother—who might lay claim to her blood, her beauty, her very life—might have reached out their claws to take her."

Sophie brought a hand to her chest.

"But now that she's to be married," Martha continued, "with a husband ranked among the royal healers…they would not dare."

She paused, then spoke again—slowly now, with care.

"It was a terrible affliction, yes. You've suffered greatly because of it. But what if… What if it was also a kind of protection? A kind of *husk*—a smoke screen—that encased you, shielded you until the time was right. It made the world look away—so you could find the man who would love you truly, without the noise or schemes of others."

Her gaze turned distant again.

"A husk that repulsed, that isolated…because it had to. Because it was the only way it could protect you—utterly, absolutely, without condition or flaw. And now that it's done its work… Now that you've found him, the one who's chosen you for everything you are, it chose to destroy itself. It drew the apothecary to this town. It bid its own end just so it could save you—one final time."

She gave a quiet breath, almost a sigh.

"Perhaps this is just the rambling of an old woman who's seen more than her mind can neatly make sense of today. But even so, I must say it: Don't resent that shell. Because milady…I think it was only ever trying to protect you."

"Oh, Martha…" Sophie whispered again.

Gently, Martha turned her toward the mirror.

What stared back was a vision—a facsimile of both father and mother, beautifully combined.

"Please look, milady," Martha said softly. "Look at that skin—smooth, radiant, like a newborn. And those eyes—emerald and gleaming, full of quiet wisdom. Those cheeks just touched with rose. Lips as plump and perfect as the ripest fruit. A woman like you only comes along every hundred years… No, every thousand. That healer of yours—he's spent all his luck for this life and the next."

In the reflection, Sophie could see the tears gliding down Martha's weathered cheeks.

"It has been," Martha said, her voice catching ever so slightly, "the pinnacle of my life to have helped raise you, milady. Take care of yourself in the capital. And never overextend yourself. Because if

you do, I'll know. And if I know, I'll come find you. If you don't want an old woman abandoning her post and crossing half the kingdom just to set you straight, then I suggest you remember that."

A smile broke across Sophie's face. She turned and pulled Martha into her arms.

There was no steel plate after all. Only a small, thin, aging woman. Sophie hugged her tighter, feeling every frail inch of her.

"This is highly improper," Martha said at once.

"Yes. Just like that," Sophie murmured.

"It does not befit a woman of your station."

"Scold me just like that," Sophie said, laughing softly through tears.

"What a handful you are, milady," Martha said—and broke. Her arms came up around Sophie, returning the embrace.

There they stood, mistress and maid, locked in a final embrace. Tears mingling, breaths caught between laughter and grief. Both knew, without saying so, that their time together was rapidly drawing to a close.

✶✶✶

"OH, I love this color on you," Sherlotte said, holding up a garment against Sophie, angling it toward the mirror.

They were in Sophie's salon. Sunlight streamed through the windows, gilding the room in a warm glow. A shimmering sea of fabrics and colors spilled across the room—an eclectic wardrobe amassed over years of Johann's travels. He'd bought each piece for his daughter, souvenirs of distant ports and past adventures, though most had remained tucked away since the day they arrived.

Now, at last, they were seeing the light of day. Mother and daughter sifted through the collection, deciding what would accompany Sophie to the capital and what would be left behind.

"Now this," Sherlotte said, lifting another garment, "is something special. Timeless. It'll serve you well to have a piece like this." She reached for another and gave it a glance. "This one,

though…a bit bold for a married woman. Best to leave it." She sighed. "A shame. I just know it would look stunning on you."

But only Sherlotte spoke, smiling, enjoying the moment. Sophie, by contrast, said nothing—only watched her mother, brow drawn slightly, her gaze distant.

"Um, mother," she said at last.

"If it's about Martha, she's already told me," Sherlotte replied, her eyes still on the fabric in her hands. "She told you as well, didn't she? The story of a certain noble's daughter?"

Sophie hesitated, uncertain.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not going to scold her for it. That story belongs as much to the maid as to the girl. Throwing everything away to follow your lady across the sea… I'd say she's earned the right to tell it, don't you think?"

With that, Sherlotte finally turned Sophie's way. She gave her a graceful smile, folded up the clothing with practiced grace, and set it down. Her gentle eyes, framed by long lashes, quietly swept across the salon.

"You've heard so many stories in this salon of yours, haven't you, Sophie?" she said quietly.

"Yes," Sophie replied.

So, *so* many stories. Stories of joy, sorrow, and lives well lived—each one lingering in the air like motes of fine dust, caught and held, suspended in a sunbeam.

Sherlotte turned to face her fully. "But I'm afraid you won't be hearing mine, Sophie. That noble's daughter from some far-off country died that night in the storm, her body lost to the sea. Nothing left of her at this point but sea foam and story now. The woman standing before you is Sherlotte Olzon—your mother and your father's wife."

Sophie gazed up at her, then let her eyes fall. "…Right."

"The past, when spoken aloud," Sherlotte said gently, "has a way of coming back to haunt you. Like a ghost, it's best left where it lies. I'm told the noble family in question has their heir situation sorted, so I doubt they'll come knocking—but regardless, there's nothing in that story that concerns you. Nothing you need to carry."

Sophie gave a quiet nod. “All right. I understand.”

Everyone carries a story. Some tell it freely; others take it to their grave. Either choice is its own kind of courage.

Sherlotte sat down on the nearby sofa and patted the cushion beside her.

“Anxious, Sophie?” she asked as her daughter joined her.

“A little,” Sophie replied. “But more than that, I’m also…” Her cheeks turned a deep crimson. “Excited.”

“That’s what I like to hear.” Sherlotte giggled, light and musical. “You like Kurt?”

“I do.” She could feel the blush deepen. So she answered while looking up and away.

“Have you kissed?”

Beautiful decision to have looked away.

“We have not.”

“Goodness. Are you trying to make poor Kurt explode?”

Then, Sophie felt her mother’s finger under her chin, lifting it gently.

“Sophie.”

“Yes?”

“It seems you’ve chosen well. He’s upright. Sincere. If he loves you, and you love him, then I’ll not meddle in your affairs. But,” she added, seemingly with a caveat, “that also means what happens from here on out is your responsibility and your responsibility alone. Yours and his, together. You’re getting married, Sophie. I can hardly believe it. Please accept my congratulations.”

The fingers now brushed gently across Sophie’s cheek, once so rough, now soft to the touch.

“And please.” Her voice broke. “Accept my apologies. For the first seventeen years of your life. For all the pain.”

Tears slipped quietly from her eyes.

“Oh, how you must’ve hated me… For birthing you like this, for not being able to give you what the other children had. And yet, you never once blamed me. Never raised your voice. When I think of that, Sophie, of your kindness, I’m filled with shame. And regret,

and sadness. I'm sorry, Sophie. Your life should never have been so hard. Can you ever, *ever* forgive me, I wonder?"

"Are you kidding me, Mother? I never hated you. Not once," Sophie said firmly, despite the tears in her own eyes now. "Because I knew it wasn't easy for you either. To look at your child and see none of the beauty you or Father had. To love someone who only ever reminded you of what might have been.

"So thank you. For not turning away when I came home bruised and bleeding and caked in dirt. For holding me, even when I didn't ask to be held. For choosing me, again and again, when it would've been easier not to."

Her voice trembled.

"For standing beside me when I was small and strange and hard to love. I know it cost you more than you ever let on."

She reached for her mother's hand.

"So thank you, Mother. Truly. Thank you for loving me."

And pulled her into an embrace.

Sherlotte returned it, trembling, weeping openly now.

The sunbeam filtering through the tall windows bathed them both in light.

✶✶✶

"MILADY, Sir Kurt Ozhorn is here to see you."

"Thank you, Emma. Please, let him in."

It was just around the time they'd finished crying, had a laugh about it, and finished choosing the last of the garments when Kurt showed up.

"Ms. Sophie, I hope I'm not intruding," came that familiar, squarish voice, though today, it seemed slightly rounded at the edges—just Sophie's imagination? As he stepped through the door, he came to a sudden halt. A rare show of surprise from the man at seeing Sophie's mother in the room with her.

"Hello," Sherlotte said warmly, standing to greet him. "I'm Sophie's mother. Sherlotte Olzon."

"Hello." Kurt nodded with polite formality. "My apologies for not introducing myself the other day. Kurt Ozhorn."

The other day—the proposal day—had ended in chaos, in the best way. Moments after it all, the men hoisted Kurt out the door, congratulating him with backslaps and cheers, parading him around town like some returning war hero. A bit of old-fashioned hooliganism followed, then a bar, and they hadn't returned until sunrise. Johann, ringleader of it all, was still in bed, groaning through what sounded like a catastrophic hangover.

The women, meanwhile, had held a quieter sort of banquet in Sophie's salon. So, in their own way, they'd done much the same.

"We were just sorting through Sophie's wardrobe," Sherlotte said. "Choosing what she'll take to her new home. Do you have any favorites? Anything you particularly like on her?"

"On Ms. Sophie? As in an outfit?"

"That's right."

Kurt paused, then grew suddenly earnest. "I'm afraid not. I was always too busy looking at her to notice what she was wearing."

Sherlotte laughed softly, slipping into a smile at his deadly seriousness.

"Ah, youth. So very wasted on the young," she said with a sigh of theatrical resignation.

Then, with a graceful turn, she began to gather her things. "Well then. We're just about finished here. I'll make myself scarce. I'll ask someone to bring you tea—and then see to it no one disturbs you for a good, *long* while."

She moved toward the door, and with one last glance over her shoulder—half amusement, half affection—she slipped out.

The door swung shut behind her, leaving only a soft current of suggestion in the air.

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THE quiet, secluded space of Sophie's salon.

Now, theirs alone.

The kind of space shared by lovers, though, for now, they simply sat side by side, sipping tea. The only sound was the soft clink of porcelain, echoing louder than it had any right to in the stillness of the room. On Sophie's right, Kurt sat close—closer than necessary, pressed tightly to her side.

"Are you comfortable there, Mr. Ozhorn?" Sophie asked.

"I'm your fiancé," he replied. "Why shouldn't I be? And soon, you'll be Mrs. Ozhorn, so perhaps you could stop calling me that?"

"Right. You're very right." A moment of gritted teeth. "…Mr. Kurt."

She glanced at him from the corner of her eye, trying to gauge his reaction.

What met her gaze were his dark eyes—steady, unreadable, and yet…deeply focused. Closer than she had ever imagined being allowed to see them.

"Again," he said.

"Kurt." Sophie obliged.

This time, he wordlessly turned toward her and leaned in until the elegant curve of his ear hovered just before her lips.

"Kurt," she whispered once more, this time with care, her voice delicate in its enunciation.

"Ngh—!" Kurt recoiled suddenly, clutching his head with one hand as if struck.

He stayed like that for a while, hunched over, unmoving.

Then, at last, in a voice low and strained:

"Ms. Sophie."

"Yes?"

"You know how the farther you draw a bowstring, the more force it unleashes?"

"I suppose I do."

"Well." His voice dropped, tight with effort. "I'm drawn to my very edge. You might do well to consider what that means."

"My, how frightening."

"We still can't, then?"

"Not until the wedding."

Kurt's head dropped in defeat.

She laughed under her breath. The sort of laugh one tried to smother but couldn't quite help. He made it too easy, teasing a man wound so tight.

She reached out slowly, fingers threading gently through his dark hair.

"What about a kiss?" she asked, voice hushed.

His head snapped up.

There was something alight in his eyes now. Something raw and bright, tempered only by the discipline that held him still.

"A kiss," he repeated. "Yes. I would very much like a kiss. Perhaps a hundred more than you'd think sensible. Tell me, Ms. Sophie. We are engaged, are we not?"

"We are."

"And a kiss, well…it's customary."

"So they say."

He took her hand. Drew nearer still.

"Well then. I love you, Ms. Sophie."

"And I love you."

"Then surely, there's no harm in what I'm about to do."

"If it's just the lips, no."

They were so close now. Just a breath and their noses would meet.

"Only the lips, Mr. Kurt," she whispered. "Not a hair more. Not until I take your name."

He made a sound like a man being tested beyond reason.

"You can manage that much longer, can't you?"

She watched his gaze darken, felt it fill her vision. Her eyelids fluttered shut, and a soft sigh caught in her throat. Today would be the day. The day she finally tasted the lips of a—

"Ah—damn it!"

The voice came not from beside her but…halfway across the salon?

"As if I'd stop at just the lips!" Kurt shouted—though it sounded nothing like the Kurt she knew.

Sophie blinked.

Then smiled.

How fun, she thought.

Though surely he knew she might've let him go just a little farther than that.

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"ME? Your superior wants to meet *me*?" Sophie asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes. He won't stop pestering me about it—'Bring her, bring her, bring her,' every day, like it's the only thing that matters anymore."

It was some time after their earlier episode—long enough for hearts to settle and mischief to mellow. They sat side by side on the salon sofa, Kurt's hand clasped warmly over Sophie's. Now and then, he idly traced his fingers along hers, tickling terribly.

"Won't he be present at the ceremony anyway?" Sophie asked.

"By all rights, yes. But his presence is…immensely disagreeable. I was thinking of not inviting him."

"Ooh…"

The all-important wedding ceremony. In this country, ceremonies took many forms, shaped by the faith and background of the couple. What Sophie and Kurt were planning was known as a "wedding feast."

This would be held here, in town, separate from the official rites that would take place later in the capital. The formal ceremony, as performed according to the tradition of the royal healers, was, according to Kurt, "a more solemn affair than the average funeral wake." There was no feast, no music, no revelry. Just a quiet room, a few witnesses, and a solemn exchange of vows.

Since that would also be the day they received their marriage certificate, the "wedding night" would also fall on that day. That event, which Kurt had been anticipating with mounting, barely restrained impatience.

That part, of course, would also just be shared between the two of them.

So, it had been decided they would celebrate beforehand, here in town. It would be a grand send-off: a proper public gathering in

one of the city squares. They'd rent out the space, set up pavilions, and open the celebration to all—anyone passing by could join in. It was a long-standing custom among wealthier families: food, drink, and music—all freely offered in a grand display of generosity. And not incidentally, a show of status.

Johann was particularly thrilled. Naturally. He'd leapt at the opportunity to parade his beloved daughter before the entire town at her most triumphant.

"He wants to meet you before the feast," Kurt continued, circling back to his superior. "Why, I've no idea. But would you mind coming along? Just to spare me the trouble of hearing him go on about it?"

"I don't mind," Sophie said. "But won't I just be in the way?"

"He's more in the way than you could ever be." Kurt sighed. "I know I'm asking a lot."

"Not at all. I'd be happy to come."

The thought of meeting Kurt's colleagues—of being introduced as his fiancée—made her cheeks warm. It was silly, really. And yet there it was: a quiet thrill, a sort of fluttering she hadn't expected. Her lips curled before she could help it.

Suddenly, she felt a tug on her hand. She looked up. Kurt brought her hand to his lips and pressed the faintest kiss against her knuckles. When he looked back at her, something soft flickered in those dark, midnight eyes.

"What is it?" she asked.

"That smile. It was too lovely to ignore." His voice was quiet. "That I only kissed you on the hand is exemplary, should I say so myself. You should commend my restraint."

"Oh, from you? The man who once said we're all just tubes of flesh and bone? I thought beauty didn't register."

"It still doesn't," he said. "Except when it comes to you."

"You're an odd, odd man, Kurt Ozhorn."

She smiled again. And so, naturally, he kissed her hand once more.

"I'll stop smiling," she warned.

"Don't," he said at once. "That would be…disastrous." A beat. "The wedding night is still—?"

"Still the day we agreed. Steady on."

He exhaled. "You do like to test a man."

"I do try," she said, pleased with herself.

With some reluctance, Kurt pulled out his identification tag, breaking it cleanly in two once more. "I want you to have this. For good, this time. Show it at the infirmary gates—they'll recognize you as either my spouse or fiancée, and you'll be allowed through without question."

"I'll gladly accept it."

Sophie took hold of the tag. This time, she didn't rush to minimize her contact with it. Instead, her fingers moved slowly over the metal—tracing its surface with care, with reverence—if only because she now could.

As she gazed at it, a warmth stirred in her chest. "I think I'll put it on a chain. Wear it against my skin. I won't have to worry about it getting dirty anymore. What do you think?" She glanced up. Her cheeks were softly flushed, eyes faintly gleaming.

"To have half my tag resting there," Kurt said, "warmed by your skin every hour of every day… Nothing would make me happier." He stared back at her. But something in his expression gave her pause. She narrowed her eyes.

"Have you always been like this?" she asked. "Or did your entire personality change the moment we got engaged?"

Kurt didn't blink. He delivered his next line with absolute gravity. "Men," he said, "are flesh, bone, and hormones. Not just me, but the rest of them as well. You'd do well to keep that in mind."

Sophie gave a gracious nod. "Duly noted. Then, as my fiancé wishes, I shall keep his tag warmed…upon my breast."

"I wish I were that tag."

"Oh, hush, you."

She shot him a look—one part scolding, two parts amused. He, in turn, smiled.

And she couldn't help it. She smiled, too.

The moment stretched, soft and still. Then, something occurred to her. "Mr. Kurt. If it wouldn't discompose you…"

"Yes."

"I haven't even asked yet. Would you—"

"Yes."

"Would you tell me about your parents? And yourself as well. I want to know more about you."

"Of course."

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KURT had grown up with two parents who were far too deeply in love with one another.

They were always laughing, always touching in some way, and every sentence between them seemed to end with a great, big heart mark.

He could remember watching his mother spoon food into his father's mouth, thinking, even as he was just old enough to gum his first mushy baby meal, that it'd be quicker if the man just fed himself.

"They were a bit much for me as a child," he said.

"I think they sound like a lovely couple," came Sophie's reply.

In most households, the child brought warmth to the family.

But at the Ozhorn's, warmth was always in surplus, leaving Kurt with no such job to do. He always stood quietly apart, watching his parents and their happiness, cool, inert, and distant.

This was the shape of his life until the age of fifteen, when it was discovered that he held an exceptional affinity for light magic. Not the common sort, either—his aptitude was rare, refined enough to secure him a place among the royal healers.

He had imagined that life would change then. That being in such a place, reserved for the most brilliant, would finally lift the boredom that had followed him like a shadow, but that was not to be.

The healer's camp was much the same. The same kinds of people. Ordinary, slow-moving, unexceptional. They struggled with

things he grasped in minutes. Concepts that required no more than a glance for him seemed to take them days. He tried, at first, to help them understand. To speak, to clarify. But his words were often met with wounded looks, confusion, or quiet disdain. And over time, they stopped listening. And he, in turn, stopped speaking.

He was, by all accounts, human. Yet, somehow, he failed to get along with them. He didn't understand what it meant to be human in the way others seemed to. The word "heart" was often used, but he could never quite pin down what was meant by it. Quickly, he learned it was easier not to draw attention to his quirks. Better to keep his head down, perform the tasks assigned to him, and avoid unnecessary entanglements.

He followed the rules meticulously. He liked rules. They were clear, consistent, and rarely misleading. By following them, he rose through the ranks without incident. And as he climbed, the noise at the lower rungs faded, and for a while, it seemed—perhaps—things might finally be turning in his favor.

He was eighteen when the news came. The death of his parents—just the next thing to arrive by post, right after he'd received a letter written in their usual breathless scrawl, tumbling across the page in excitement. They were headed north, they said, to see the aurora for their twentieth wedding anniversary.

"According to eyewitness reports—"

"Eyewitnesses?" Sophie blinked.

"Yes." Kurt nodded. "According to eyewitness reports, my parents were walking hand in hand across a frozen lake…"

"Mm-hm."

"They looked up at the northern lights dancing in the sky, holding each other…"

"Mm-hm."

"When the 'manta of love,' an incredibly rare ichthyoid monster said to only appear once every hundred years, burst up from beneath the ice right under them, swallowing them whole."

"Huh?"

"The love manta doesn't eat people. It's more of a folk legend said to grant true love to those who witness it. I don't think it

intended to eat them. It probably just leapt out of the water the way it always does—once every hundred years—and my parents just happened to be standing in the wrong place at the wrong time."

Sophie just stared.

"I didn't believe it either," Kurt said. "Frankly, I still don't. The odds are…absurd. But when I think of them. Of how they went… I can't imagine they weren't smiling. They were likely remarking on how beautiful the lights were. Thinking that they ought to have brought me along. Of course, we'll never know for sure. The manta vanished into the depths, so their bodies were never recovered, but… I'd like to think they're still there, in that creature's belly, still smiling, still laughing like they always do."

He paused. His tone hadn't shifted, but there was something about the way his voice settled into silence that made Sophie glance up.

No change in expression. Still that even, unreadable calm. And yet…

"I think…it's their fault I could never quite give up on people. No matter how bitter I got, how much I hated being misunderstood…I'd think about them. About how much they seemed to enjoy life. About how much they loved their son. And I'd think—maybe there's something to this whole business of being human. Maybe if I just tried a little harder and found whatever it was that made people make sense, then maybe I could be happy like them.

"I suppose I admired them, in a way. A pinnacle I could never quite reach. Perhaps that's why I'd been able to stick with being a healer for so long. Because I was helping people. Perhaps I didn't understand the type of creature a human was, but at the very least, I could say I didn't hate them."

To ascend to the third rank and beyond, prospective healers were required to pass a rigorous examination. Kurt had completed both the written and practical components and, for once, felt assured of his standing—until he was summoned by his superiors.

"Kurt Ozhorn."

"Yes," he answered, straightening.

"You possess both power and knowledge in admirable measure. Especially at your age. But…healing is not a craft of power alone. It is a calling of compassion."

Kurt gave a small grunt in reply. *"Understood."*

"You lack something essential. Not in mind, nor in magic—but in spirit. Thus, I am recommending, formally, that you leave the capital for a time. Travel. Observe. Learn what it is to live among those you would heal. What it is to be human."

"Understood," he said again, though this time quieter.

"Yes."

"This isn't merely for your own growth. It is for the good of the order—and the kingdom."

"I see."

"You will receive the official decree soon. Go forth, young man—do the order proud."

"Yes."

"That will be all. You are dismissed."

"…Yes."

And so, Kurt was dispatched to a rather far-flung port town… "Where I met you," he said, his gaze softening just a touch as it settled on Sophie.

It had started with a flyer tumbling across the street, catching on his foot. Suspicious at once, he followed its trail, half-certain he'd uncover some shady operation—a place peddling false hope in the name of miracles, but…

That wasn't what he found.

"I found you. This dainty little girl, who stood in my way just to protect her patients' dignity. I was hostile. Cold. But you welcomed me. Lent me books. Told jokes. Laughed. And when I got home that evening, when I lay in bed, when I went to work, I couldn't stop hearing your voice. I couldn't stop seeing your face."

His obsidian eyes held hers. And there she was, whole, reflected in them.

"The next time I came by, I found you collapsed on the floor. I'd read about mana depletion. I knew the symptoms, the risks. But that was the first time I'd ever seen it. I've felt it before—that fear

when your magic runs low. It's visceral. Primal. All instinct screams at you to run. I've never once been able to push through it. And yet…you did."

He looked down at his hand as if trying to recall something that had once rested there.

"When I picked you up, you were so light. So thin. Your arms, your shoulders—half the size of mine. I couldn't understand how something so fragile had done what you'd done. And when you came to, the first thing you did was apologize. You were ashamed. You cried. Not from pain, but from regret."

He let the silence linger.

"I'd spent most of my life surrounded by arrogant, joyless men who called themselves healers. That…was the first time I'd seen tears that were pure. That were noble. Then you said you'd heard my voice. You told me I was capable of weaving miracles. That you respected me. But no. *I* was the one who stood in awe. I found myself wondering—had I ever tried so hard to heal someone? Had I ever wanted it that badly?"

Kurt reached out and took her hand in his.

"It was always a joy speaking with you. Most people don't bother to respond when I talk. Or if they do, it's to agree and move on. That's why I stopped trying outside of work. But you… You always had something to say back. You challenged me. Laughed at me. Argued with me. You never looked away. I watched your face change with every word, and before I knew it, I wanted more. More of you."

Kurt's gaze softened as if recalling some long-past exchange, though which one, even he might not have known.

"I was…shaken when I tried to heal your skin and failed. I couldn't believe that something so simple, so small, could be beyond me. It stung all the more when you smiled through it. Through the tears. That was the first time I truly felt what it means to want to heal someone and be unable to."

His grip on her hand tightened slightly.

"I finally understood. That's the pain the others carry. That's what I never saw."

He exhaled slowly, eyes dimming with memory.

"When I feared you'd died…I don't know what happened. My heart—" He paused. "It just…sunk. And when I learned you were alive, it was as though something inside me eased that I hadn't even known was taut. Both hit me harder than I thought they should."

He looked away then, somewhere far beyond the room.

"And again, after the eastern expedition, when you healed me. I felt it through the magic. Not just your spell but your intent. Your kindness. I'd never known that a healer's heart could pass through their hands like that."

He turned back to her, more earnest now.

"I used to think kindness was worthless. That it couldn't heal wounds. Couldn't bring the dead back. And watching grieving families cry beside the dying…I saw it as a hindrance. But you—"

His hand rose, brushing gently against her cheek. His voice softened.

"You showed me the truth. That kindness does heal. From the inside. That heart heals hearts. That I still have one. One that can grieve. One that can rejoice. And I learned that here, from you."

He drew her gently into his arms, his voice warm at her ear.

"You have my everlasting respect and love, Ms. Sophie. You are my teacher in all things human."

Sophie felt the warmth of the man she loved. She returned the gesture, wrapping her arms around him. Tears began spilling down her cheeks.

"Why are you crying?" Kurt asked.

"Because you are such a pitiable, lovable creature," Sophie replied.

"Yes, I'm pitiable. Pathetic, aren't I?"

"No. You went to such lengths to try and understand."

He pulled back, his eyes searching hers in quiet confusion. Sophie reached up and cupped his face, her thumbs brushing gently over his cheeks.

She looked at him—the shape of the man he was. This awkward, earnest, stubborn man. And all she felt was love.

That his eyes, dark as they were, could still look at the world without bitterness. That they hadn't clouded over from all he'd seen, all he'd borne… The tears came faster.

That, she thought, was the greatest gift she could have ever received.

"Because that's just the key, isn't it?" she said, her voice trembling. "You've always tried to understand. What a person is. What a heart is. I can't imagine how hard it must've been. To not grasp things most people just seem to *know*. Things said between the lines, things that never had to be explained. You were afraid, weren't you? You hated it, didn't you? Speaking your truth—only to be met with silence. With rejection. With coldness."

She blinked, her hands still gently holding his face.

"And yet, you never gave up. You kept reaching out. You kept healing. Even in a world that felt foreign to you, you didn't grow bitter. You didn't turn cruel. You didn't blame others for not understanding you. You blamed yourself for not understanding them."

Her hands, now soft and smooth, rested gently on his face, radiating all the warmth she could give.

"But make no mistake, I wasn't the reason you came to understand. That was you. Your perseverance. Your refusal to give up on connection. You kept extending your hand again and again. And again and again, it was swatted away. But still, you never stopped reaching. Just as no two faces are the same, no two hearts are tempered in quite the same way. And just as the world shuns what looks unfamiliar, it turns from what feels unfamiliar too."

Her hand drifted down from her cheek to his chest.

"What lies here, Kurt…must have been forged to endure. Hardened—not from cruelty, but necessity, so that when others' hearts wavered, yours would not. So that in the most harrowing moments, you alone could remain calm. You were never meant to feel the world the way everyone else did. You were meant to hold it together. For someone given that burden…it was never softness you needed here. It was a particular kind of strength. A necessary hardness."

She leaned in, resting her cheek against him, her hand drawing slow, quiet circles.

"It doesn't make you evil, it doesn't make you deserving of hatred, but it does make you…different. Hard things, when they move openly among soft things, will inevitably cause harm. It's nature. It's regrettable—but it is something we can change.

"So, let's learn together. We'll find a way for you to be among others without hurting them. You can trust me—I won't break. Whatever you say, whatever you show me, it won't scare me. Just like you saw past my appearance and never flinched at what others feared, I'm not afraid of what's inside you. You know why that is? Because I love you, Kurt."

Beautiful, transparent tears soaked their way into Kurt's breast.

"We'll talk. So much more than we have until now. We'll learn, we'll practice, and I have no doubt—wonderful things will keep happening. Again and again. More people will come to understand you, the real you. Without fear or contempt. And I truly believe the world will begin to open up. To become joyful, to become fun, just like the world you saw your parents in.

"So please, don't be afraid of offending me. If something hurts, I'll say so. I won't hide it. I won't stay silent and slowly drift away. You can count on me to tell you exactly where things went wrong. I promise you that."

She lifted her face with an air of finality and gave Kurt a warm, reassuring smile.

But—she then looked away, burying her face in his chest so she might preserve his dignity.

"I love you," she heard him whisper.

"I love you, too," she replied.

"Marry me?"

"That's the plan."

Kurt gently wiped her tears and ran his fingers through her hair. Sophie looked up, meeting those obsidian-black eyes—now shimmering, just slightly—with something unspoken.

And at that distance, with no more words to say, she closed her eyes.

On the salon floor, their shadows stretched across the wood, merging slowly into one.

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A pristine white building. Out front, a gaggle of young girls had gathered—chatting, squealing, and generally making a racket.

"Ugh, can you see him?"

"No! Not at all! Maybe he's in the back today?"

Their blouses were cut low, their skirts hiked high—every trace of their "womanly charm" meticulously weaponized for one purpose and one purpose only.

"Wait! There he is!"

A shriek went up near a particular window, and the others swarmed to join her. All eyes pressed in, drawn to a single figure within. At the center of their breathless, lovestruck attention was a young, raven-haired healer.

He had only been dispatched here a few months ago, but that had been more than enough time to set off a quiet storm among the most eagle-eyed, conniving girls in his age bracket. With his cool, unreadable gaze, that low, soothing voice, and features so perfectly still they seemed chiseled from stone, he was the very picture of a romantic ideal. And the final, critical detail: the unsplit identification tag dangling from his neck.

Single. Handsome. Elite.

Day by day, the crowd at the infirmary window swelled with hopeful candidates, all dreaming of a smile, a word, or—if luck struck—a promise to accompany him to the capital one day.

A door slammed open.

"Hey! Scram, kids! This is a medical facility, not a stage for your little theatrics!" barked the infirmary director as he stormed out.

The girls immediately recoiled, their faces curling in collective disgust.

"Ew. Go harass someone your own age, creep."

"Eek!"

"Help! We're being assaulted!"

The man's face turned a blotchy red. "Q-Quiet down! Damned brats—get out of here, now! I know where all of you live! Keep this up, and I'll tell your parents exactly what you're up to!"

"Of course, he's a snitch."

"Ugh, gross."

"Why don't you do us all a favor and just drop dead already?"

"Hey, now—that's going too far! Adults have feelings too, you know!" the director cried.

"Guh-rossss!"

The girls dispersed, but not before making a theatrical show of their departure—huffs, eye rolls, and exaggerated groans echoing behind them as they went. They were halfway down the path from the infirmary, still making noise, when someone came walking in the opposite direction.

She had long, slender limbs that caught the light like glass. Immaculately kept platinum-blonde hair gathered neatly at the nape of her neck in a refined low twist.

She wore a midnight indigo dress that swept past her ankles, the sleeves covering her arms entirely. The fabric gleamed with understated opulence, the kind that whispered old money without ever raising its voice. A little skin was exposed, yet the pale nape of her neck, where a few loose strands had fallen, seemed somehow more intimate, more alluring than any of them had been all day.

The conversation dried up mid-sentence. A hush spread through the group like fog. All eyes turned toward her.

Her skin was porcelain-pale, unblemished. Her emerald eyes, gentle but knowing, carried the weight of someone who had already lived through more than they let on. Her cheeks were faintly rosy. Her lips were full, but not overdone.

And the way she walked—still, upright, measured down to the tips of her fingers—it wasn't anything like the clomping, posturing way they carried themselves. It wasn't showy. But it was undeniably *elegant.*

This woman didn't try to outshine them. She simply existed and, by virtue of that, made them all feel clumsy, loud, and tragically provincial by comparison.

Without meaning to, the group parted to let her pass. Like water yielding to the moon's pull.

She strode by without hesitation, heading straight for the infirmary. Just before she reached the door, she lifted something from beneath her collar: a slim, metallic tag that glinted in the sun.

"Hello. I'm Sophie Olzon, Sir Kurt Ozhorn's fiancée. He should be expecting me."

The guard didn't even blink before opening the door. And just like that, she vanished into the pristine white halls of the infirmary without so much as a fuss.

A cascade of sighs sounded.

Then, a rustling of fabric as all gathered pulled up their blouses and unrolled their skirts.

"Oh, what a disappointment. Of course that's the kind of girl he went with."

"If I had her face, I'd need nothing else. The world would bend around me."

"Didn't peg him for shallow, but I guess men really are all the same."

"Life's unfair. I bet she's coasted through life looking like *that*."

One after another, the complaints spilled out, each one met with murmurs, nods, and another round of deflated sighs. Then:

"Anyway. Who's up for something sweet? Eat the heartbreak away, am I right?

"Say less!"

And just like that, the noise returned—as though the hush had never happened—and the group wandered off in search of pastries and their next object of affection.

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"ALLOW me," said the infirmary head, squinting suspiciously at Sophie, "to confirm—beyond a shadow of a doubt—what it is you just said."

"Of course," Sophie replied pleasantly.

"You are Kurt Ozhorn's fiancée."

"Yes."

"*His* fiancée." He gestured to the man next to her.

"Yes."

"The man in the iron mask, Mr. Automaton, He Who Had a Don't Laugh Competition With a Statue and Won."

"I…believe so, yes."

"The man who, on his very first day here, looked me dead in the eye and said, 'Still healing that tiny little wound? Impressive. Most people are done by now?'"

"Ah. He was terribly nervous about meeting his new superior. I do apologize for that."

Meanwhile, just outside the director's office, a crowd was steadily gathering. Thankfully, no critical patients were in need of care at the moment.

Inside, the director folded his hands and addressed Sophie with sudden gravity.

"Ms. Sophie, was it?"

"Yes," she answered politely.

"If it's your vision that's troubling you, rest assured—we have treatments available."

"Oh? Thank you for your concern," Sophie said, smiling. "But I see just as well as anyone."

The director slammed a fist onto his desk. "Argh! I don't know what you've done, Kurt Ozhorn, but you've done *something* to this young woman!"

"I have," Kurt said. "I confessed my love to her. Exactly as you advised me to, director."

The director's mouth hung open. "You did what I told you to?"

"To the letter."

"The all-white suit?"

"Wore it."

"A hundred roses, exactly?

"Exactly. That part had been harder than expected."

Still gaping, the director turned slowly to Sophie. "And you said yes?"

"Naturally."

"Why?"

"Because." A flush rose to her cheeks. "The feelings were mutual."

She and Kurt shared a tender look, then broke into quiet, happy smiles as the poor director sat sandwiched between them.

This sent a shockwave through the gathering at large.

"He smiled…"

"He *can* smile…"

"They're so sweet…"

"His fiancée's a total catch…"

"Is that…a halo? Is she an angel?"

All eyes remained fixed on the delicate young maiden in the room. They stared, reverent and stunned, as if a celestial being had descended into their midst.

The celestial being then turned to face them, stood with perfect posture, and dipped into a graceful, dignified bow.

"It's a pleasure to make your acquaintances," she said. Her voice, though soft, seemed to echo larger than life through the hall. "Kurt speaks very highly of all of you. Though I imagine the sentiment may not be entirely mutual."

She lifted her head and smiled.

"For the remainder of his time here, we shall devote ourselves to improving what we can in regard to his…behavior. I offer my apologies and urge you all to look forward to the future."

There was only silence. And a sea of blushing faces shifting uneasily.

"Well, I'll be. It's possible after all," the director murmured, barely audible even in the hush.

"Kurt," Sophie said, turning slightly.

"Yes?"

She stepped closer and rose onto her toes to whisper in his ear. He bent down instinctively to meet her.

"My father was wondering if you'd come for dinner tonight. To go over the ceremony plans."

"All right. I'll come by after work."

"I'll be waiting."

Their eyes met.

"Shall we read in your room afterward?" he asked.

"Will that be all we do?"

"I can't promise that."

"Then absolutely not."

Their voices were low, meant for no one else, but Sophie's cheeks still pinkened, her smile gentle and full of affection.

Kurt looked at her with an almost unrecognizable expression. A softness that was suspiciously close to sensual.

A golden afternoon light, like the first breath of spring, filtered through the windows, bathing them in its gentle glow.

"Pretty…" someone whispered.

The crowd could only stare, dumbfounded, as if watching something just slightly unreal.

"I mean, I… Well. I'll be damned," the director murmured, his voice lost somewhere in the golden haze as he nodded solemnly to himself, adrift in some private, heroic epiphany.

Mamoryllis

THE dreadful news arrived just as preparations for Sophie's departure were well underway at the estate.

"There's a rat in the house," Martha had announced, her tone more somber than the occasion seemed to warrant.

Sophie had raised a hand to her mouth in mild astonishment—not because she was particularly afraid of the creatures, but because she knew how deep Martha's hatred for them ran. That even one had slipped past her vigilance was difficult to imagine.

A few days into the extermination effort, with Martha casting handfuls of poisoned bait about the house in a near-trance-like fervor, Sophie encountered something curious in the salon.

She'd been in the middle of cleaning it. With how many ornaments and trinkets were crammed into the space, Claire and Martha had offered to help. But Sophie had refused. It was her space. And she wanted this final send-off to be hers alone.

The salon had seen no visitors since Bianca's final call. With the wedding feast a month away and her journey to the capital set for a fortnight beyond that, Sophie had quietly ceased advertising her services. So it felt only natural—a little too natural, in fact—that when the letters stopped coming altogether, it didn't strike her as strange.

Perhaps that was how it ought to be. In a world always grasping at the next new thing, where nothing was irreplaceable, and everything was destined to fade, it seemed only right to accept that Sophie's Salon might as well have never existed beyond her own memories and the memories of those she had treated.

Sophie began to count them off on her fingers, slowly, as if to commit them once more to memory. Sixteen faces. Sixteen names.

Just sixteen.

She had blanketed the town in flyers and had sailors shout the name of her salon in ports and marketplaces far beyond the horizon. And still, in the end, only sixteen people had been healed by her hand.

Taken out of context, it was a laughable number. The sort one might expect from a pampered merchant's daughter playing at work, indulging in a little fantasy between afternoon teas and dress fittings, but…

She placed a hand gently over her chest.

But within its proper context—within her heart—those sixteen people were everything. They had altered the course of her days. What had been shared here—the words, the silences, the tentative exchanges of trust—had become more enduring than anything she could have imagined. She would carry it all with her.

Just sixteen. She'd thought it herself only moments ago, but now she wished she hadn't. There had never been anything "just" about it at all.

Not when those days had coaxed a reclusive girl out from behind her own walls. Not when they had given her the courage to love and to follow that love wherever it might lead. All those stories, all that pain once belonging to others—transformed under her hand, reshaped into joy and ease—had left their mark on her. Each small miracle etched into her being quietly showed her how to lift her head. How to walk forward.

In the end, it wasn't Sophie who had done the healing. It was Sophie who had been healed.

"Oh?"

Her eye caught on a small slip of notepaper resting on the table. She was certain it hadn't been there before—likely dislodged from somewhere during her cleaning. She picked it up and examined it.

The surface was covered in a mess of tiny, uncertain lines—more like a child's scribbles than anything that could be called writing.

Tilting her head, she was about to throw it into the waste bin when she caught herself. For seemingly no reason whatsoever, she chose to keep it, tucking it into the side of an empty painting frame she'd kept in the salon as a kind of decoration; she had liked the pattern etched into its edges, even if it had never held a painting.

"It's time for lunch, milady!" came Raymond's voice.

"Coming!" she called back, leaving everything where it was and hurrying out of the room, the faint echo of her footsteps swallowed by the quiet behind her.

✶✶✶

LATER that afternoon, Sophie returned to the salon, fully intending to continue her work. But a book on the shelf winked at her, and before she knew it, she'd been lured into its pages. Twilight had crept in unnoticed, and there she sat, curled up on the sofa, deep in another chapter.

She was flipping the page when she heard it.

Squeak.

A small sound. But something about it struck her as…peculiar. It was too sharp, too…pronounced. Not the sort of noise you'd expect from something just scurrying about.

Squeak.

There it was again; she looked up.

On the table she used for receiving clients sat a tiny figure—no larger than her fist. Covered in soft fur, it stood bathed in a last beam of sunlight, which turned its coat a burnished gold.

"Oh, my," Sophie breathed.

Was it a rat? No—it couldn't be. It was far too neat, far too composed. Perhaps another sort of rodent, though even that seemed insufficient.

"And just how did you get in here?" she asked it gently. "This is a dangerous place for someone like you. There's a very frightening head maid on the hunt, I'm afraid."

She closed her book and rose. Oddly, she felt no fear. No revulsion. Only a mild, inexplicable sense of familiarity. Something in the creature's bearing—its stillness, its presence—told her it meant no harm.

Would it run? Would it bite? She was almost amused by the thought that it might, in a high-pitched voice, start speaking and say something like: *Wrote to you. Please heal.*

"Wrote you. Please heal!"

Sophie froze.

She glanced about. The salon was empty, still. Only the two of them were in the fading light.

"Mamoryllis wrote! Wrote like you said. With hand. Hurty hand! Please heal?"

Her gaze returned to the creature. Slowly, she stepped closer.

"Did you…just speak?" she asked, almost whispering.

"Yes-yes!" the creature chirped, nodding eagerly.

"Goodness. I must say, you're very good at human speech."

"That because Mamoryllis is Mamoryllis," it said, puffing up its chest with pride.

"Well then, mister—or perhaps miss—Mamoryllis, I must admit you've taken me by surprise. You don't…bite, do you?"

"Mamoryllis never bites humans. No-no. Because Mamoryllis is Mamoryllis."

"Not even a teeny-tiny, eensy-weensy nibble?"

"Nooo. Not ever. Because Mamoryllis is Mamoryllis."

"I see. In that case, I'll take you at your word. Excuse me."

Sophie pulled out the chair opposite the creature and lowered herself into it. The little being mimicked her, settling upright on its hind legs. Then, it extended a tiny paw toward her.

Looking closer, Sophie saw what appeared to be a burn—red, raw, and recent.

"And what happened here?" she asked.

"Was round. And white. Mamoryllis thought, ooh, shiny! So went touch-touch."

"Touch-touch?"

"Yes! But then—*tsssSSS*!" Mamoryllis jumped, fur fluffed in horror. "It burn! It ouch! Bad trap! Bad poison! Someone try hurt Mamoryllis!"

"I'm sorry, but you squeaked before…didn't you?"

"Is quirk of speech." Mamoryllis replied immediately.

"Ah. Is that so?"

Sophie could only imagine the white, round thing Mamoryllis touched was the bait Martha set out. She perched the tiny paw on a finger. Poor thing. The skin was peeled, red, and sore like it had

been scraped raw. Her brows pinched in sympathy. "Oh, you poor thing. This is entirely our fault. Our head maid set a trap, thinking you were a rat. I'm so sorry."

"A rat?!"

Mamoryllis flew straight up into the air, then crash-landed back down in a flurry of hops, stomping their little feet against the tabletop in the cutest outrage Sophie had ever seen.

"Mamoryllis is Mamoryllis! Not rat! Rat is gray! Does rat look like *this*?!"

It spun dramatically and flicked its plush, golden tail toward her as if to say: *Look at this tail. Just look at it.*

"I truly am terribly sorry," Sophie said, bowing her head. "That she missed the radiance of your tail is simply inexcusable. I will speak to her. Firmly."

Mamoryllis sniffed. "You not scary maid. You pretty lady. Not put round-hurty on floor. Is not your fault."

"But the head maid is someone very dear to me," Sophie murmured. "Please, if you can forgive her."

Mamoryllis paused. Then, it folded its tiny arms in deep thought. "…If you heal Mamoryllis, then Mamoryllis no hold grudge. Also, Mamoryllis did bad, too. Touched thing that was not Mamoryllis's."

"You are far too gracious."

"Mamoryllis knows this place! Knows you! That's why Mamoryllis wrote! Wrote letter! Heal-hand letter!"

Sophie blinked. "A letter…? Ah!" She leapt to her feet, hurried to the empty picture frame, and carefully pulled out the scrap of notepaper. "Was this your letter?"

Mamoryllis bounced into the air again. "Hurty hand! So had write letter with nose!"

"Goodness, that must've been quite the undertaking," Sophie said, eyes soft with pity. "Then, if you know me, you know how this works. Could you tell me, please, where exactly you found this 'round hurty'?"

"Mamoryllis tell! Please listen!"

✶✶✶

UNTIL just last month, Mamoryllis had lived in the halls of a nearby estate. A quiet place owned by an elderly noble couple with no children. The only other resident was their butler—older still and so discreet he might as well have been part of the furniture.

Their days moved slowly. They would sit together in one room, enjoying each other's company in silence, shift slightly for lunch, and then move to another room, where they would resume enjoying each other's company, this time with a view of the garden.

One day, the old man brought the old woman a flyer. *"Look what the greengrocer gave me, dear,"* he'd said.

The old woman leaned in, squinting at it. Then her eyes popped open. *"Oh my! Isn't that just next door?"*

"What do you think?" he asked*. "Want to give it a try?"*

She gave a thoughtful hum, then slowly shook her head, the purple birthmark across her face moving across the light. *"Best not,"* she said. *"You couldn't handle the competition if I turned beautiful at my age!"*

Ha ha ha ha ha! They shared a hearty laugh, leaving the flyer on the table between them, where it was promptly forgotten.

"But Mamoryllis no longer Mamoryllis of that house anymore," Mamoryllis said.

"Not anymore?" Sophie asked.

"Old man went bye-bye. Then his lady, too. Both got sick. Sickness take them."

Sophie's expression softened. A quiet frown settled.

Mamoryllis recounted how the old butler, after cleaning the house one final time with his trembling hands, stepped out to the doorstep, bowed deeply one last time, and walked away with all his worldly possessions in a single small bag.

"So! Mamoryllis no reason to stay anymore. Had to find new house. This place smell nice! So Mamoryllis moved in. Little bit. Here

and there. Flit-flit-flit. Until bam! Under hallway vase—found hurty-round thing! The one Mamoryllis went touch-touch! OUCH!”

“I must apologize for my ignorance, Mamoryllis,” Sophie said gently. “But what is it that a Mamoryllis does?”

At this, Mamoryllis puffed up like a pastry in the oven. Chest out, tiny paws on hips, voice full of pride.



"Whatever house Mamoryllis living in, people inside become slightly happier! Just slightly. If not that, then warm feeling in chest at least. Become kinder! Kinder to others."

"That sounds wonderful, Mamoryllis!" Sophie exclaimed.

Mamoryllis puffed up so much it looked like it might float off the table.

"Of course! Because Mamoryllis is Mamoryllis! Very special creature!"

Sophie giggled. "And what kind of food does a Mamoryllis like to eat?"

"Mamoryllis does *not* eat food!" Mamoryllis said firmly. Then paused. "…Unless you offering. Then maybe teeny nibble. Of something sweet. But Mamoryllis never take by self! Not like dirty-gray crumb-thieves!"

"But don't you get hungry?"

"Mamoryllis eats moonlight," it said, eyes gleaming. "Big pie in sky—glowy, round, tasty for soul! On moon-nights, you look up, you see—roofs full of Mamoryllises! Dancing! Squeak-squeak, spin-spin, all full of joy!"

"Wooow…" Sophie gasped, clasping her hands.

She pictured it—little glowing forms flitting across rooftops, paws tapping softly, tails swishing in the silver light. Not monsters. Not spirits. Not even demi-humans. Just…something else. Something that perhaps ought not to be defined by humans or their ilk.

"All right, little Mamoryllis," she said, smiling gently. "Let's take care of that paw. And after, I'll bring something sweet. Won't you stay and have some tea with me? It gets a bit quiet here, all on my own."

"Tea with pretty lady? Yes-yes! Mamoryllis would like very much!"

It held out its tiny paw again. Sophie cupped it gently in both hands.

"Pain, pain, go away," she whispered.

Though I don't know where you've come from or how long you've been here…

"To the mountains you go, to the mountains you stay."

You strange and darling creature who warms hearts just by being—may your little pink pads be whole once more.

A gentle glow faded from her hands. And there it was: the paw, healed.

"Such…*delicious* light…" Mamoryllis murmured, eyes wide with awe.

"I'm glad you like it." Sophie smiled. "Now, if you'll wait here, I'll see about getting us some snacks."

Sophie exited the salon and padded down the halls of the manor, eventually making it to the kitchen. Peeking inside, "Raymond?" she called out.

No response. The kitchen was empty.

She stepped in a little further. "Raymond? Are you here?"

"Ah, milady."

The voice came from deeper inside, around the corner. Sophie followed it and found him seated at a side table, hunched low over the surface. Crumpled balls of paper littered the table; a pen was in his hand.

"What are you doing?" Sophie asked.

"Well, you and the family are taking Mr. Ozhorn out for dinner tonight, right? So, I figured I'd use the time to work on the wedding feast plans. I'm doing the food for the guests with invites—some other ship's cook'll handle the public tables. Feeling a bit of pressure, I guess. Some nobles'll be there, yeah? Gotta make sure I don't embarrass the household."

He gave a sort of faint, sheepish grin, his golden ponytail shifting as he scratched the back of his neck.

Sophie stepped closer and glanced over his shoulder. The page was covered in his familiar, unmistakable handwriting—lists of well-loved dishes, some neatly penned, others scrawled, crossed out, and scribbled in again. Each name called up a warm aroma, a bite of something remembered. Thinking that the poor chef had turned his brain inside out and outside in again and again until the whole thing was poured out onto the page, she curved her lips into a quiet smile.

"You're overthinking it," she said. "There isn't a thing you make that isn't delicious. I think that. Everyone else does, too."

There was a glint of gold—Raymond turned—and suddenly, she was met with eyes the color of the open sea.

The air between them drew taut. Her breath caught, just slightly. His gaze didn't shift.

"You're too close, milady," he murmured, voice low. "I've mentioned this before."

She couldn't move. That blue—its depth—seemed to draw her in.

"I'm still a man. Always will be."

For a moment, neither of them moved.

Then, almost imperceptibly, Sophie took a step back.

A beat of silence. Then Raymond gave a soft, rueful chuckle.

"You were lovely before," he said, lighter now, "but now you've got the kind of face that could start a war. Take that as a warning. Walk too close to men like me, and you might not like the ideas it puts in their heads."

Sophie could only blink. "Um, right. Thank you. I'll be careful."

Just like that, the moment snapped back into place. Raymond leaned back in his chair, casual again, as though nothing had passed between them.

"So? What can I do you for?"

"Oh—right. I was looking to see if we had anything to eat. Something sweet and sugary. Juice, too, if we have it. Just a thimbleful or so."

"Do we have a guest?"

"A very tiny one, yes."

The ease with which he returned to normalcy was almost jarring. So smooth it made her question if anything had really happened. Had she imagined it?

Wordlessly, Raymond rose and moved across the kitchen. He retrieved a glass jar of old-fashioned fizzy sugar candies and some juice. He held both out to her, saying nothing.

"Thank you," she said. "And sorry for bothering you."

"Not at all. Take care, milady."

"Thanks."

She glanced up at him before taking the goods. Tall, golden-haired, with ocean-blue eyes and a frame that had always made her feel a bit like she had to look up and up to find his face. Raymond stood there with a smile that was too gentle to read, like a page turned just out of reach.

He had come to the household when she was thirteen—the same year she quit school and withdrew from the world. At first, he had frightened her. Too tall, too loud, too easy in the way he filled a room. But he brought sweets. Dishes filled with warm, quiet magic. He fed her through her silence, her sullenness, her sorrow.

And slowly, over shared meals and stray jokes, stories told and retold, they'd fallen into something easy. Familiar or sibling-like, she had thought.

"Congratulations on your engagement, milady," Raymond said.

"…Thank you."

Nothing more was said between them. Only the light brush of fingers as he handed off the candy jar.

✶✶✶

"MAMORYLLIS? Are you still here?" Sophie called into the quiet salon.

"Yes-yes. Mamoryllis still here, pretty lady."

Squeak, squeak. Mamoryllis scampered out into the open.

"Ohh? Pretty lady," Mamoryllis said, squinting up at her.

"What is it?"

"Have you been crying?"

"…No."

"No? Ah, then forget Mamoryllis. Ooooh. That look tasty."

Sophie handed over the sugar candy. Mamoryllis took it reverently with its now-healed little paws and began to nibble with great ceremony. Sophie watched, silent, as it stuck candy after candy into its cheek pouches.

Then—it paused. Nose twitching. Ears rising.

"Pretty lady getting married," it said.

"Yes," Sophie murmured. "I'm engaged."

“Mmm. Can tell. Mamoryllis can always tell. About-to-get-married people have special smell. Sadness, excitement, joy, loneliness—all at once. Smell like soup.”

Sophie gave a small, tired smile. “I’m sure they do.”

Mamoryllis popped another candy into its cheek. It buzzed softly from the fizz. “Mamoryllis was going to stay here. But maybe Mamoryllis go with you instead. To your new home. Make it warm. Happy and warm.”

Sophie’s smile faltered.

“Mamoryllis…” she said.

“Yes-yes?” it chirped, blinking.

She reached out. Her fingers brushed gently over its soft head. Mamoryllis didn’t flinch—just leaned in, melting a little into her palm.

Unable to help herself, Sophie bent down and pressed her cheek against the top of its fuzzy little body. Mamoryllis froze, trembled all over like a tea kettle about to boil over, then gave a very tiny, very happy squeak. “This embarrassing, pretty lady!”

“Would you consider staying here, Mamoryllis?” Sophie asked gently.

“Why? You hate Mamoryllis?”

“No, not at all,” she said, tears slipping down her cheeks. “It’s just… There are so many people dear to me in this house. People who’ve cared for me, who’ve been by my side. And now I’m leaving them all to start a new life. I want to believe they’ll be all right without me. That even when I’m gone, this house will stay warm.”

She paused, brushing at her eyes. “I’ll do my best to bring that warmth to my new home. But here…this place still needs someone. So, Mamoryllis—will you stay? Will you watch over it in my place?”

A few of Sophie’s tears plopped onto Mamoryllis’s face, soaking its tiny snout. It twitched its whiskers, then blinked up at her.

“What about round-hurty?” it asked. “Still place around house?”

“No. No, of course not. I’ll speak to the servants. There’ll be no more round-hurty. Only sweets. Only things meant to make you happy.”

“Then that okay, Mamoryllis guess. Mamoryllis stay here.”

“Thank you,” Sophie whispered.

She took a small jewelry box and pulled out a red velvet ribbon. She tied it carefully around Mamoryllis's tail.

"Too tight?" she asked.

"Is perfect. Honor, in fact!" Mamoryllis's eyes bugged in delight.

"I'll tell everyone in the house that the tiny creature with the ribbon is a friend. If you ever lose it, go to the large bedroom on the second floor. The woman there is my mother."

"Ah, yes-yes, the other pretty lady."

"Indeed."

"Yes-yes. Mamoryllis understand."

It hopped, then it stood up as tall as its little body allowed and gave a deep bow.

"Mamoryllis is now the Mamoryllis of this house! Until next time, pretty lady!"

With a flick of its tail, the smallest guest in the salon scampered off into the distance.

✶✶✶

SHORTLY after: "Ms. Sophie, I hope I'm not intruding."

The usually squarish man entered with his usually squarish words. Sophie stepped forward and pressed herself into his chest, crying without restraint.

Immediately, she felt Kurt wrap his arms around her. What she felt in that embrace—those arms that held her without asking why, that offered nothing but unconditional comfort—was love. Pure, uncomplicated love.

In the now half-empty, half-tidied salon, there lingered a scent. Of sadness, excitement, joy, and loneliness.

All at once.

Not unlike a soup.

The Last Party

SMALL children dressed in matching white outfits pranced down the streets, passing the flyers and yelling the news: "There's going to be a wedding!"

"Between Kurt Ozhorn, third rank royal healer, and fair daughter of the Olzon family, Sophie Olzon!"

"It'll be all-you-can-eat, a grand buffet!"

"There'll be drinks enough to lose your way!"

"Tell your friends and family near…"

"It's free for all, so gather here!"

The girl leading the procession—bowl-cut hair and clear blue eyes—shouted so loudly her soft, doughy cheeks flushed bright red.

The commotion drew a crowd; they all took hold of a flyer.

Printed on it were the time, date, and location of the feast, along with a simple message: invite whomever you like—everyone was welcome. It was written plainly enough for even the simplest townsfolk to understand.

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ON the day of the feast, the entire Olzon household stood frozen at the venue's entrance, gaping at two enormous golden crocodile statues.

They were from Annie. Sophie had written, hoping she might attend, but court duties made that impossible. In her place came a parade of gifts—among them, the statues.

Not just statues, as it turned out. Wind both their tails and let go, and they played a charming, harmonized tune.

They were music boxes. Very large, very golden, and very crocodilian music boxes.

The Olzons, as mentioned, were speechless.

Struck dumb by the extravagance. By the absurdity.

So much time, money, and effort poured into this great big triumph of excess.

Annie had written:

Warmest congratulations on your wedding, Sophie. I am truly sorry I cannot be there to celebrate with you in person.

In accordance with my father's unwavering dedication to tradition (and against my better taste), the statues have been sent along. Please rest assured—they are very much his doing, not mine. Should you find them too unsightly, feel free to convert them into gold at your earliest convenience. I won't take offense.

As for my own gift, I've sent a selection of the finest fruits and flowers from our homeland. I trust you'll find them more agreeable.

My father, regrettably, remains in the most stubborn good health imaginable, so it seems our little promise must remain unfulfilled for the time being. Still—don't forget, will you?

Your fiancé is a healer, is he? Since he comes with your endorsement, I shall withhold all commentary and trust entirely in your judgment. You've never led me wrong before.

You're welcome to visit whenever you please. I'll see to it that you receive the full royal treatment.

Yours, with fondness,
Princess Annie of Crocodilia.

The tone was casual—too casual for a letter from a princess. Sophie could practically see that toothy, crocodilian grin as she read.

Knock, knock, came the sound from an already open door.

Sophie turned—and immediately smiled.

The man who stepped in stopped cold at the sight of her.

A beat.

Then, wordlessly, he crossed the room.

He took her white-gloved hands in his.

"Such a beautiful thing," he murmured. "I shudder to make it mine."

"Then will you stop?" Sophie asked.

"Not in this life. Not in the next."

He dropped to one knee.

"Ms. Sophie. Will you marry me?"

"Of course, I will, Kurt Ozhorn"

He pressed a kiss to the back of her hand.

Sherlotte and Martha dabbed at their eyes. Claire and Emma just smiled, watching over the newly minted couple.

✶✶✶

"WOW..." Kristoffer murmured, eyes wide as he took in the bustle of the venue. The air was alive with clatter and chatter, and somewhere not far off, several cooks stood behind a wide iron griddle dressed in crisp white. Their sunburnt faces were flushed from the heat, brows glistening, hands moving quickly and surely over the sizzling surface.

Meat, vegetables, and seafood tumbled and flipped, hissing and popping as they cooked. The scent was warm and savory. Dish after colorful dish was plated and whisked away, but one caught Kris's eye: a shrimp, deep red and impossibly large, its shell expertly peeled to reveal the plump flesh beneath, glistening under a glossy orange sauce. He made a quiet promise to himself to come back for it later.

It had been Mick—his newest and possibly best-ever friend—who'd burst into the lab, waving a flyer overhead. It boasted about a festival offering delicious food, free entry, and a time like no other. Mick hadn't even finished reading before the rumbling stomachs and watering mouths had made it clear—they were all going together.

For Kristoffer, it was more than just a fun outing. Having spent so much of his life without anyone to hang out with, just being invited—being part of something—felt like stepping into a dream he'd quietly carried for years. He'd gone home with a jaunty tune on his lips and a spring in his step, only to find his mother waiting at the door, practically buzzing with the same excitement.

She'd handed him a beautifully penned letter. It was a formal invitation from Sophie, inviting him and his whole family to her wedding. Kris had it figured out before he was even halfway through the letter—the wedding and the festival Mick had read about were one and the same. But as his mother twirled, spun, and skipped

away, already muttering about dresses and shoes and whether feathers were too much, Kris sank into a rather sullen expression. The excitement drained out of him like someone had just asked him to chew a fistful of sand.

He'd worn the expression throughout dinner. Later at night, there came a soft knock on his door—his father. He asked about school and his studies, but something about him felt distracted, like he wasn't listening to the answers. It was clear he was circling something else entirely, working up to a question he couldn't quite bring himself to ask. A few more rounds of this, and Kris couldn't take it anymore. He burst into tears and confessed what had been on his mind.

He said he wanted to celebrate Sophie. He wanted to go out with his parents and share the joy with them, too. But he'd already made a promise. A promise with his friends, one he'd very much like to keep.

He said he'd never had anything like this before. A festival. A day out. Friends to go with. The memory. But the thought of telling his mother that—of shattering that bright, sparkling smile she'd worn all evening—was more than he could bear.

His father blinked. Then, slowly, a kind of pride swept through him so suddenly it shook his whole frame. He clapped a firm hand on Kris's back, mussed his hair with the other, and let out a warm, echoing laugh.

"I'm proud of you, Kris," he said, "you've finally become a man."

And now, today, his parents were here. Somewhere in the crowd, he knew.

After that talk, his father came home with a beautiful dress and an extra invitation addressed to his wife alone.

There'd been something sweetly earnest in his father's face as he presented the dress, admitting it had been far too long since they had gone out, just the two of them. And his mother, cheeks warming with a bashful smile, had run her fingers over the fabric, insisting she was far too old to pull off something so youthful, though the way she kept touching it said otherwise.

They had been adorable. Completely, embarrassingly adorable.

A red-nosed clown with a white-painted face passed in front of Kris, snapping him from his thoughts. He was juggling oversized, candy-colored balls while trailing a stream of soap bubbles in his wake. Off to the side, a group of sunburned, barrel-chested men hollered and laughed around a keg, hoisting foaming tankards into the air like it was the best ale they'd ever tasted. People were everywhere. The air shimmered with drifting flower petals, the sky a flawless blue overhead. It was bright, it was noisy, it was alive…

It was fun.

"Kris! Over here!"

A familiar voice rang out through the crowd. He spun—and promptly laughed.

There they were. All his friends squeezed around a table bearing a towering pile of food so improbably constructed it seemed to defy physics just by staying upright.

He trotted over. The girl in white who'd called him waved him in, handed him a drink, and scooted aside to make room. He set his plate down, took a seat, and glanced over at Mick, whose entire face was already smeared with streaks of cream and sauce.

"Eating with your whole face there, Mick?" Kris teased.

"There's no time for a napkin," Mick shot back, mouth half-full. "You'll understand once you start eating."

"I believe you. Did you see the shrimp over there? They're huge. Like, this big."

"We'll get some. Don't worry. But first, we gotta clear off meat mountain here, first!"

The table was a blur of matching uniforms and clattering plates, an endless parade of dishes passed back and forth. Shouts overlapped: *This is the best one! No, this is! Slow down, someone save me a bite!* And if you took even a moment to chew, something was already gone. It was then, when Kris was shoveling yet another contender for the most scrumptious dish of the day into his mouth, that music began to play.

He froze mid-bite and looked up.

At the far end of a long, elegant carpet, a man and a woman had begun walking toward the crowd.

The woman wore a veil.

Kris's chest twinged.

His mother had once told him that a wedding was the grandest moment in a woman's life. That no matter if she was rich or poor, plain or lovely, this was the one day she would shine the brightest through the power of love, magic, or something else entirely.

So for Sophie—kind, gentle Sophie, who had once healed the burden his mother had carried for so many years—to have to hide herself on a day like this…it stung in the deepest, most visceral sort of way.

As they reached the platform at the center of the procession, the man beside Sophie reached for her veil.

Kris froze. His breath caught.

What was he doing? They were in love, weren't they? That was what getting married meant. So then why—why would someone who loved her do that? Strip away her dignity? Humiliate her on the most important day of her life?

His legs tensed. He was just about to rise, to shout, to stop it—when the veil lifted.

Just at the corner. Just enough to reveal the face beneath.

And what he saw made him relax all at once.

She was beautiful.

Radiant. Dazzling. Glowing with something warm, clear, and gentle. She seemed to shine—not just from the way the sunlight kissed her skin, but from something within. A smile played across her lips.

It outshone the sun.

A breathless silence followed. Then came the swell of voices—somewhere between a murmur and a gasp, a wave of sound washing over the crowd. She stood there smiling, strong and serene, as if she'd made up her mind not to let anything faze her. And she looked only at the man before her.

And the man before her looked at her, squinting a little, like he was struggling to make out the shape of something too bright to look at directly.

What passed between them was something deep and wordless. A kind of stillness. A certainty. The kind that made your heart ache without knowing why.

In other words, love, Kristoffer thought.

With a clatter, his chair scraped back behind him. He stood tall, lifted his arms high above his head, and clapped. With all his might.

Tears streamed down his face. Why, exactly, he couldn't say—but it surely wasn't sadness.

"Congratulations!" he shouted, voice ringing out loud and clear—louder than he'd ever heard himself speak.

His voice cracked a little. His best friend Mick turned to stare at him like he'd just grown wings, but Kris didn't care. No emotion he felt at that moment could be construed as anything remotely resembling embarrassment.

To stay quiet now? To keep all those warm feelings for Sophie hidden away inside?

That would have been the truly embarrassing thing. The cowardly thing. The kind of thing he'd long since graduated from.

Graduated. Back then, in that salon. Thanks to a certain "monstrous miss."

Just look at this place. So vibrant, so full of life, so fun.

Just look at her. So pretty. So happy. And no longer the monster she once purported herself to be.

What other words could possibly suit this moment?

So he said the one thing he knew, without question, was right.

"Congratulations, Ms. Sophie! I'm so happy for you!" he shouted again.

This time, his friends joined in. One by one, they rose to their feet, clapping just like he had—and before long, the entire square erupted in applause.

Hoots and hollers rang out. Someone whistled sharply and clearly. Soap bubbles drifted through the air, mingling with a fresh shower of flower petals as the happy couple made their way down the long carpet.

And when they passed by his table, Sophie turned.

She met his eyes and offered him a smile. Warm and radiant.

Her green eyes shimmered—not from sadness, but from something full and overflowing. And in that moment, a single tear slipped free. Clear and round like a gemstone, it rose into the air.

Without thinking, Kris reached for it.

His fingers closed around nothing. But he held them there, suspended in the air, before gently drawing them back. He cupped the empty space in his other hand, cradling it like something precious.

Then he watched her go.

That slender figure in white grew smaller and smaller as she walked on ahead.

What his mother had said wasn't wrong. Not in the slightest.

Today, Sophie really was the most beautiful woman in the world.



At that moment, Kris made a quiet vow.

One day, when it was his turn, when he stood at the head of that same path, he'd make sure the woman beside him walked with that same radiant joy. That same shade of happiness.

He'd barely finished the thought when a group of burly men swept in from behind, lifted him clean off his feet, and tossed him into the air with a triumphant cheer as his friends looked on, helpless and mildly alarmed.

✶✶✶

WHILE the all-you-can-eat, all-you-can-drink chaos raged on in the public part of the feast, a quieter but no less joyful celebration was unfolding in the VIP section. Sophie had originally wanted all the Olzon family sailors seated here, but they'd refused, saying they belonged with the common folk, roughing it up where they felt most at home.

Fair, Sophie thought, smiling as she remembered the drinking contests and arm-wrestling matches she'd grown up watching.

Out in the venue, Olzon cooks manned the food stations while children from the orphanage—dressed in neat little uniforms—wove between tables, carrying plates with careful hands. They'd eat later, in a special section set aside just for them, where they could sit down and truly enjoy the fruits of their work.

Now and then, a slightly dated but well-practiced clown drifted past, performing tricks with an easy rhythm that drew bursts of laughter and surprise.

At the front gate, a sleek black panther stood on silent guard, as he always did—ears pricked, gaze sharp, not missing a thing.

Even the explosively popular actor—whose tickets were hard to obtain on the best of days—had sent a pair, along with a single rose and a handwritten note of congratulations. Sophie and Kurt would go. Before the capital. Before the next chapter.

Not everyone could be here. And yet, in the food, the laughter, the watchful eyes, the letters and gifts sent from far-off places, Sophie could feel it.

There were still those who celebrated with them in spirit. Who entertained. Who protected. Who remembered.

And that, more than anything, made her heart feel full.

"Ah, that was nerve-racking," Sophie said to the man beside her.

"Really? I couldn't tell," he replied.

"I could tell, though. *You* were perfectly fine."

"I don't get nervous. People are just tubes of flesh and bone. A crowd's no different—just more tubes."

"Charming. Really paints a picture."

He reached out, brushing a finger just beneath her eye.

"What is it?" she asked.

"Have you been crying?"

"…A little," she admitted. "But they weren't sad tears."

Her gaze dipped just slightly. He watched her carefully.

"Ms. Sophie," he said.

"Yes?"

"You're beautiful even as you are on most days, but this might be the prettiest I've ever seen you."

"Well, I'm just flattered you can tell the difference. The usual me, this me—they're both yours, you know?"

He nodded solemnly. "Just making sure. I wasn't certain."

"Prudent to a fault, aren't you?"

Sophie laughed quietly, her gaze lingering on his before she let her eyes flutter shut.

✶✶✶

"AND now, presenting the bride and groom!" Johann announced with gusto—clearly more than a few drinks in.

The curtain drew back to reveal the couple.

The VIP section fell into a stunned hush.

Then came the snorts. A few muffled giggles.

"…Kurt," Johann finally said, voice flat.

"Yes," replied the groom, dead serious.

"Would you mind explaining why Sophie is so desperately trying to wipe your mouth clean right now?"

"I regret to say…I forgot she was wearing lipstick today."

"You forgetful fool!" Johann bellowed. "Honestly, the moment Sophie's involved, you fall to pieces!"

He shouted it, but at least there was no tantrum this time. Just a dramatic sigh and the delicate, overwrought grooming of his already immaculate mustache.

"Ah, well," he said, softening. "Not like I was any different." He turned to Sherlotte, took her hand, and gave her a fond look.

"Get it, Sophie!" Isadora whooped from the sidelines, earning another wave of laughter.

Lily smiled gently, dabbing at her eyes with a handkerchief, while the rest of the adults watched on, smiling indulgently.

✶✶✶

SOPHIE was in the middle of her rounds, making sure to greet each guest personally, when she noticed something unusual.

"Good afternoon," she said, approaching a lone gentleman. "I'm so glad you could make it today. Lord Edvard Northman, I presume?"

"I am," the forty-something dandy replied, his baritone voice low and resonant.

Arasyll's new husband.

He was every bit as dashing and composed as Arasyll's letters had claimed—perhaps even more so. But if he was here, then where was…?

Sophie glanced around the venue. No sign of her.

Noticing this, Lord Northman offered a kind, slightly rueful smile. "I must apologize, Ms. Sophie. Arasyll…couldn't make it today."

Sophie's voice evaporated. Arasyll couldn't make it? When she had written how much she was looking forward to it? When she'd said she'd be there no matter what?

"Is Lady Arasyll quite all right?" Sophie finally managed, her voice barely above a whisper.

He frowned. "Two days before we were slated to leave, she…"

The words trailed off, and Sophie's heart lurched. Her lips parted, trembling, when something unexpected happened.

A soft pink crept into Lord Northman's weathered, dignified cheeks. The meaning of his hesitation became immediately clear to Sophie—and it wasn't anything to worry over. Quite the opposite, actually.

"She's expecting, isn't she?" Sophie said, her face lighting up. "Oh, congratulations!"

Tears welled in her eyes, but before they could spill, a neatly folded handkerchief appeared—Kurt, ever at her side.

"Oh, I'm so happy to hear that," she said again, dabbing carefully at her eyes, her smile wide and warm.

"Thank you," Lord Northman replied. "She wanted desperately to attend, of course. But, at my insistence, she relented. If anything were to happen to her on the road, I… I know I'd never forgive myself."

"Well, thank you," Sophie said softly. "For stopping her. I know it couldn't have been easy."

"Yes, well, I had to pry her off the floor."

"Oh, dear," she murmured. Knowing Arasyll, that wasn't just a figure of speech. Sophie could easily imagine her. Stubborn, emotional, dead set on coming. Still, the image of her prostrating herself was more than she'd expected.

She looked at the man standing before her—a man who had once lost a wife and child to childbirth. The joy he must have felt at Arasyll's pregnancy… It had to have been accompanied by fear. Bone-deep, unspeakable fear. If something were to happen again—if he were to lose her or the child…

Sophie briskly shifted the conversation. "I hope you've been taking proper care of Lady Arasyll," she said. "She's the type to take everything on herself when left alone. Is she doing well? Has she been overdoing it?"

Lord Northman gave a quiet, wry smile. “You know, when word spread that I’d be marrying an eighteen-year-old girl from the capital, reactions were mixed among the household. The younger servants were curious, but the older ones were…decidedly less than thrilled. They feared she’d neglect the graves of my late wife and child. That she’d be a pampered city girl who wouldn’t last a month in the countryside. One who’d faint at the mention of chopping firewood or preparing the root cellar for winter. Not me, of course; I’d met her by then. But for some of the others, well… Let’s just say they were practically mourning. Until they met her, that is.”

“I believe that.” Sophie nodded.

Lord Northman chuckled quietly. His demeanor vibrated as though he’d been impatiently waiting to get to this part of the conversation. “Their graves are cleaner than ever. Winter preparations were twice as lively as they’ve ever been. And if the staff doesn’t step in, she ends up doing twice the work of the best among them. Does that answer your question?”

“I believe it does.”

Sophie smiled. Just in time for Lord Northman to return one of his own. The kind that just radiated kindness. The kind that crinkled the face all over.

“You’re just as Arasyll described,” he said. “Kind, magnanimous—like gentle moonlight that forgives everyone it touches. So lovely, I almost hesitate to let my gaze linger.”

Sophie offered a gracious smile. She felt a prickle of frost brushing against her from the right but chose not to pay any attention to it.

“If you’ll indulge me a moment, I’d like to share a small anecdote. About my birthday, just the other day.” Lord Northman’s piercing blue eyes rested attentively on Sophie.

“A belated happy birthday,” Sophie said.

“Thank you. Knowing her, I suspected she’d have something planned. I had a meeting that day, and on my way home, I deliberately entered through the rear gate. I surreptitiously made my way through the house to the front entrance, and sure enough, there she was. Standing just inside the door, clutching a basket full

of flower petals and paper confetti, waiting for me to walk in so she could shower me in celebration."

"Oh, Lady Arasyll, ever the one for surprises." Sophie chuckled.

Such a childlike, endearing quality. She could just picture Arasyll planning it between her duties and studies, counting down the days, barely able to stay still as the moment drew nearer and nearer…

"As I approached her from behind," Northman went on, "I could see she was…trembling. Trembling with excitement."

Sophie's smile softened. "…Yes."

"She was so thrilled. So eager to make it perfect."

Sophie reached for Kurt's breast pocket and retrieved the handkerchief tucked inside, offering it to Lord Northman.

He accepted it with quiet gratitude, dabbing at his eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know what came over me. But seeing her there like that…I just couldn't help myself. I ran up, and with tears streaking from my eyes, I hugged her from behind. I just had to."

His voice cracked. Sophie felt tears rising in her own eyes. She blinked them back with a sad, understanding smile.

Oh, Lady Arasyll.

Her thoughts turned to that dear friend somewhere far away.

I'm so happy for you, my lady. Truly, deeply happy.

Happy that the girl with her hair streaked angrily across her face, who once looked at the world with hurt and suspicion, no longer lives in this world.

Happy that you now love and are loved. That you've found a new life in the north, one you and your beloved will build and nurture together.

"Do come visit us sometime, Ms. Sophie," Lord Northman said. "We'll welcome you with everything we have."

"It's a promise," Sophie said. She wiped at her eyes, then lowered into a graceful, elegant bow.

"And you, Kurt Ozhorn," Northman continued, turning toward him.

"Yes?"

"You've won over the moon. Treasure it—or someone else just might. It's good you're so passionate about your work, but you should spare some of that attention for your wife every now and then."

"Thank you for the advice."

Kurt placed a hand over his heart and bowed as if sealing a vow.

✶✶✶

"LADY Yvonne, thank you so much for joining us today. How was the journey?" Sophie asked.

"Hello, Sophie. It was just fine, thank you. And might I say, you look utterly magnificent."

"Wonderful. And thank you."

Yvonne held her fan lightly over her mouth; she glanced at Kurt.

Ah, Sophie thought, knowing where this was going.

And knowing Yvonne couldn't have chosen a worse target.

"Aha!" Yvonne cried, snapping her fan aside. That exclamation hadn't been part of the act when she'd done it to Sophie—it must've been a new addition to the repertoire.

Though, of course, Kurt was utterly unfazed.

A beat of silence. A second, then a third.

"Ms. Sophie. Is your future spouse here related to gargoyles by any chance?" Yvonne finally asked.

"One hundred percent human, as far as I know. Just a little tight in the facial muscle department, is all," Sophie replied.

With a sigh of disappointment, Yvonne flicked her fan back into place. Beside her was a large teddy bear of a man—presumably her husband. He gave Sophie a warm, gentle smile that made her smile back without thinking.

"Hello there, it's a pleasure to meet you. I'm Sophie Olzon."

"Pontus Baird. The pleasure's all mine." He extended a pillowy, soft-looking hand.

She took it and shook it. Oh dear, it was even softer than she'd expected.

"Now, at some point in a handshake, dear, we let go—or is the soft hand of a young lady simply too much to resist?" Yvonne cut in.

"Ah! My apologies, sweetheart. I was rather taken," Baird stammered.

Another prickle of frost.

"If I may, Ms. Sophie," Baird said, recovering himself, "I realize this is hardly the moment, what with it being a celebration and all, but I wonder if I might steal a moment with Lord Northman. A grown-up conversation, if you will. Would that be permissible?"

Ah. Sophie offered a gracious smile. *Likely something about potatoes that could survive a chill,* she thought.

"Of course," she said. "I understand Lord Northman is a rather elusive guest. Rarely leaves his domain, does he? Please, do speak with him as much as you wish."

That refined dandy of a man did look a touch lonely, lifting a forkful to his mouth without Arasyll at his side.

And if something fruitful could come from this time of celebration, then Sophie could hardly think of anything better.

✶✶✶

SOPHIE and Kurt approached the infirmary table.

"Hello," Kurt said simply.

"Hello?!" The infirmary director sprang to his feet. "I am your direct superior, and all I get is a *hello*?! This is an outrage! A scandal! Am I not the very reason you're betrothed to that beauty on your arm?! You ought to be showering me with gratitude, Kurt Ozhorn!"

"I'm thankful, director."

"Are you?! You could've fooled me!"

The director huffed and puffed. Sophie gave a quick wave, motioning for Kurt to lean in. She rose up on her toes and whispered something into his ear.

"Mm-hm… Mm-hm… That tickles, I like that," Kurt muttered.

"Yes, but I'm trying to tell you something. Are you even listening?" Sophie said, exasperated.

More whispering. Kurt's face slackened, all the sharpness melting away. Around the table, the infirmary staff stared, mouths slightly agape, as a universal blush crept over their faces.

"…Is that really Kurt Ozhorn?" someone breathed.

"This is…extraordinary," another whispered.

"You can say that again," came a third.

The man who'd once seemed carved from stone had softened into butter under his wife's hand.

Though, to be fair, when they looked upon the very girl, up on her tiptoes, earnestly trying to impart some wisdom into his ear…

"I suppose it makes sense."

"One very obvious reason why."

"Kurt Ozhorn. Human, after all."

Should they *really* have been so surprised?

In the end, not a single whispered word from Sophie made its way to Kurt's head, distracted as he was by the intimate, spine-tingling feeling of her voice at point-blank range, and Sophie had to introduce them properly herself.

✶✶✶

SOPHIE felt like crying the moment she saw her.

"Oh, Ms. Florence. How have you been?"

That calm, dignified woman had once been her magic tutor—her guiding light through a dark and uncertain time. Firm, but never harsh. Steady, but never cold. Sophie owed more than she could say.

Kurt noticed her at nearly the same moment.

"Madam Florence…" he breathed and stiffened almost instinctively. He drew himself upright, as high and tight as he would go, then bowed low. It was precise, respectable, and the exact sort of thing the infirmary director would've killed to witness.

So you can do it, you just don't bother, Sophie thought, fighting a wry smile.

"Kurt Ozhorn, rank three healer of the Royal Fifth Healers, at your service, ma'am," he said.

"Sir Ozhorn," Ms. Florence replied, "it's good to see you again. Already forgotten we've crossed paths once, have you?"

"No, I remember," he said. "I just didn't think you would, ma'am."

She gave a warm, quiet chuckle. "Of course I would. As if I could forget that little bronzeling of just sixteen, striding into a case even a handful of rank fives couldn't sort out and making fools of them all."

Kurt said nothing. For a moment, Ms. Florence seemed content to fix him with her kind, attentive gaze, but then…

"Those who walk ahead of others are, by nature, often fated to solitude," she said quite suddenly. "From the day we met, Sir Ozhorn, a quiet fear took root in my heart. You were too young, too brilliant. I feared that the great gift the heavens had placed in your hands, already streaked by the deepening hues of twilight, might one day turn dark with loneliness and, in time, lead you astray."

She held Kurt's gaze for a moment, slowly shook her head, then turned to Sophie.

"You were a joy to teach, Ms. Sophie Olzon. Studious, courteous, steadfast—you possessed a spirit that would not yield, even when your efforts seemed to go unrewarded. In your words, there was always a hidden warmth, a quiet light born of compassion, and I feared, too, that this kind girl might live her entire life behind closed doors, the world never knowing the gift she carried within."

She reached out, took Kurt's hand in one of hers, Sophie's in the other, and gently brought them together. As if dazzled by the sight of them, she narrowed her eyes slightly, blinking back the emotion rising within.

"The pointless frettings of the old are, as it so often proves, exactly that. Fate has a way of coming to those who need it at the hour it is needed, in the form it should. Take pride, in the miracle that brought you together in this vast world. You feel that hand? Do not let go of it. When your sight clouds, when doubt creeps in, close your eyes and trust in the hand you hold. If you do, you'll find your

way. Always forward, always toward the light, bringing life and happiness to many along the path.

"Sophie. Kurt. My heartfelt congratulations on your marriage. May your days together be long and filled with joy."

Sophie felt Kurt's hand tighten on her own. She looked up, smiled at him, and squeezed in return. Harder and harder until it should've hurt, but he didn't flinch. Just smiled back faintly, his expression calm and unbothered.

✶✶✶

"THANK you all so much for the other day. We couldn't have found him without your help," Sophie said, dipping her head gently.

At once, every member of Yaora's family leapt to their feet, waving their hands in flustered dismissal. "No, no, not at all!"

Sophie's gaze shifted to Yaora's grandson's wife, who wore a familiar light-blue dress. "Oh—that's…"

"My grandmother's, yes," she replied a little bashfully. "Truly, I'm sorry for dragging down the dress code just by being here, but it was all I had…"

"Oh, no, not at all," Sophie said quickly. "I was just glad to see it. It's like…Ms. Yaora's here, celebrating with us."

Her eyes lingered on the white, patterned flowers stitched into the fabric. For a moment, the air seemed to drift with the scent of summer. She swore she heard the chirping laughter of two girls, their voices lifting in a cheerful, uneven harmony.

"This potato is delicious!" Yaora's great-grandson suddenly exclaimed, frowning in disbelief as he chewed.

Sophie smiled. "It's a cultivar called Yvonne. See that couple over there? They developed it. I'm sure they're talking shop right now—if you join them, I bet they'd be glad to have you."

The rest of the family recoiled in horror. "Commoners? Us, strike up a conversation with nobles? We couldn't possibly!"

All except the great-grandson—still full of piss and vinegar. "I'll be right back!"

He sprang up and marched over to the table, sunlight glancing off his back, casting him in a soft, bright glow as he went. It felt fitting. It was on that back that the story of Yaora, the greengrocer, would carry on, ready to touch even more lives along the way.

✶✶✶

"MS. BIANCA, thank you so much for coming."

"Thank you for the invite, Sophie. And congratulations."

"Thank you."

As beautiful as ever, the barkeep flashed Sophie one of her bewitching smiles.

Seated beside her was a rather skinny, sincere-looking man dabbing anxiously at the sweat on his brow. Thinking this must be the "bread and soup" man Bianca had mentioned, Sophie glanced at her, and the two shared a quiet, knowing look.

Then, Bianca's sultry gaze flitted between Sophie and Kurt. "You look stunning, Sophie. And this must be the young man who vanquished the goddess of mischief?"

"Oh, no," Sophie said, glancing up at Kurt, his deep, obsidian eyes holding steady on hers. "He simply didn't realize there was any mischief to begin with."

"I can see that," Bianca said, laughing warmly. Her heavy-lidded eyes softened as they came to rest on the solemn man standing at Sophie's side. "Congratulations, Mr. Kurt Ozhorn. Those lucid eyes of yours have shown you the truth."

"I'm honored," Kurt said quietly.

"You've uncovered the hidden treasure and taken it for yourself flawlessly. I hope you treasure her, always."

"I shall, for as long as I live."

"Wonderful."

✶✶✶

TWO men approached, bearing delicious cooking. One was loud and outgoing, the other more earnest and reserved.

Sophie greeted the earnest one first. “Mr. Scrumptious!”

His eyes caught on hers and softened into a smile. “Hello, Ms. Sophie. Congratulations.”

Sophie trotted up to meet them, Kurt trailing behind.

Despite being a guest, the earnest man, Scrumptious, wore a pristine white chef’s coat, amplifying his clean-cut, polished look. He’d written back, *If it’s not a bother, I’d like to help out in the kitchen. I only know how to cook, after all,* and so it’d been decided he would help Raymond on this important day. There was something brighter about him, tanner too, like he’d been standing in the sun grinning for days, which only made Sophie think something good had happened.

“Has your father…?” Sophie began.

“He’s finally let me work the food cart,” Scrumptious said, his smile growing. “We’ve been getting a lot of young female customers lately, too. I’m not quite sure why.”

“Well, I can venture a guess or two.” Sophie giggled. The food had always been irresistible. Of that, she had no doubt. But now, with a certain handsome young man working the counter, foot traffic was probably through the roof.

Said handsome young man dipped his head politely to Kurt.

Kurt returned the gesture, then stuck out his hand. “Kurt Ozhorn. Sophie’s husband.”

Scrumptious took it. “Scrumptious. I’m a cook. Congratulations, Mr. Ozhorn.”

A pause. Then: “Ow,” Scrumptious winced.

Sophie jumped in alarm. “Darling, what are you doing to Mr. Scrumptious’s hand! That’s a cook’s hand!”

“We’re just shaking hands,” Kurt said coolly.

“Shaking hands? The poor man’s about to lose his livelihood!”

Sophie hurried in and pried the two apart.

“I’m so sorry, Mr. Scrumptious. Is your hand all right?”

“Oh, yes,” Scrumptious said, shaking his arm like he was snapping out of a trance. “I’m fine. It’s just I felt something…sinister. It made all the hairs on my arm stand on end.”

Sophie turned to Kurt, arching an eyebrow. “Sinister? What funny ideas have you gotten in your head?”

“Nothing,” Kurt said. “Like I said. We were just shaking hands.”

“Oh, don’t give me that. You felt something, didn’t you?”

Sophie scolded him as Scrumptious watched her with a soft, bemused squint.

“Hey, my turn now.”

The louder, outgoing man finally cut in. Raymond, the Olzon family cook, turned to Kurt with a broad grin and a hand thrust out.

Expression calm, almost indifferent, Kurt regarded him a moment before taking his hand.

Grk, grk, grk, grk, grk… It sounded like two leather-bound beasts locking horns, even if Raymond’s grin stayed easy and Kurt’s expression stayed blank.

“Congratulations. Name’s Raymond. I’m the Olzon family cook. Been with the household for four years. Always. Constantly. Right by milady’s side.”

“Kurt Ozhorn. Ms. Sophie’s husband. I find it’s the quality of time that matters, not the quantity.”

Grk, grk, grk, grk, grk… The strange, stubborn contest rumbled on, their clasped hands unmoving except for the strain beneath.

“You’ll make her happy, won’t you?”

“I’ll do nothing less.”

“She’s the boss’s little girl. Don’t forget it.”

“She’s everything to me. I won’t forget a thing.”

“That so?”

Raymond finally loosened his grip.

The two parted.

Raymond gave Kurt a polite smile, a small nod, and then he was off, hauling Scrumptious and all their cooking along with him.

Sophie lightly punched Kurt’s arm. “What was that just now? Why were you fighting with him?”

“That wasn’t a fight. Just a handshake,” Kurt said, glancing down at his hand.

She followed his gaze. “…Does it hurt?”

"No. He…was holding back." There was a rare edge of frustration in his voice.

After a moment, he looked up at her—there was something tender in his gaze.

He took her hand in both of his, enclosing it in his warm, comforting hold.

"After today," he said quietly, "I've realized just how many people feel affection for you."

"Affection? You're overthinking it," Sophie immediately said. "I'm sorry. I've overwhelmed you with too much, too fast today, haven't I?"

"Not at all. I'm glad to know you better. To see how many people care for you…" His voice softened. "It's made me fall in love with you all the more."

"I'm glad," Sophie replied bashfully.

"But at the same time, it makes me anxious. Say. How can I make sure the girl I love will always keep loving me? That her feelings for me won't ever change?"

His eyes wavered. There was genuine fear in his voice.

And to the man she'd once thought unshakeable—shaken now only by the thought of losing her—Sophie said only this: "Trust her. Continue to love her."

She wove all the truth she had into her voice, her gaze steady as it met Kurt's obsidian eyes.

A quiet moment passed.

"That's it?" Kurt asked.

"That's it," Sophie responded.

She nodded once, firm and sure.

And with that, the tension in Kurt's chest seemed to break and scatter, and a broad, boyish smile spread across his face.

"If that's all, then…I can do that."

Still holding each other's hands, they gave one more firm squeeze, feeling the warmth and the weight of everything they shared.

✶✶✶

THE greetings continued.

Sophie trotted over to Lily and Isadora. They laughed, they cried, they smiled, and at last, Lily and Isadora pulled her into a hug from both sides. Sophie cried even harder—then broke into a shaky laugh…

And cried all over again.

The celebration roared on and on and on.

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JUST beyond the edge of the port town, on the banks of a quiet pond, there stands a humble little eatery famous for its fried foods.

At a small table, set a little apart from the rest, a demi-human sat alone, tearing happily into a slab of freshly fried meat.

The seat was special—a place reserved for any who wished to dine unseen, no matter their station, their face hidden behind a simple partition.

Outside, the sign creaked gently in the wind. *Everyone Welcome*, it read in bold, cheerful letters.

And sometimes, when the breeze caught it just so, the reverse could be glimpsed—a faded, half-erased scrawl of *Humans Only*, split clean through the middle.

The old words swung there still, forgotten, unused, a relic of another time.

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A fiery, red-haired dancer had made history with the way she moved upon the stage.

The type of dancing that had been seen as lowly, even vulgar, was now celebrated as a true art—she had made it so.

She had famously vowed to live her life as a lifelong bachelorette. *"Death will have to come up on the stage to claim me!"* had been a famous quote of hers.

But in the end, it was not the stage but a warm bed, surrounded by her son's family and her grandson, where her bright,

fiery life finally burned out. And on her face, a smile, as if even then she had one last dance left in her.

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AMONG all the lodgings of that bustling port town, there stands one building far more delicate, more beautiful, more eye-catching than the rest.

That famous, storied establishment had earned renown across the land, not only for the novel ideas it brought to the art of hospitality but for a standard of service that redefined what it meant to go above and beyond.

It was a favorite of many, but none more so than the beloved sage queen herself—the seventeenth queen of Crocodilia.

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ONE would never guess it now from its current status as the breadbasket of the entire kingdom, but the northern reaches were once known as the kingdom's "forgotten and abandoned lands."

What changed this was the introduction of a new type of potato, hardy enough to bear big, meaty tubers even in that frigid, unforgiving climate.

Travelers were drawn in by a simple but remarkable meal—salted, smoked meat with a flavor found nowhere else in the world, served alongside a steaming potato. A meal that warmed not just the body but the soul.

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WHEN it was revealed that the beloved author behind the latest reading boom for boys and girls alike was, in fact, a woman, the world erupted in uproar.

Across towns and cities, the common cry was the same: *It seems women can weave stories, not just socks!*

More and more female authors followed, their thanks quietly given to the former seamstress who had cracked the door open—and left it swinging wide behind her.

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THERE was once a legendary first-rank healer—one who, as the royal family's personal attendant, served monarch after monarch across generations.

He was known for his great kindness: always calm, always listening, always speaking in a low, steady voice, with words as gentle as the hands that healed.

He had a particular quirk, one many thought was the secret to his greatness.

When asked a question, he never answered at once. He would nod, take it in, and carry it home with him—sleeping on it, pondering it—before returning the next day with a thoughtful, measured reply.

It was proof of his character, they said; of the weight he gave his craft, and the seriousness with which he treated the hearts entrusted to his care.

By his side through all those years was his deeply beloved wife.

When, after decades and decades of devoted service, the time finally came to set their burdens down, they retired to a small estate in the north, where they spent the remainder of their days watching the shimmering northern lights, hand in hand.

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ONCE upon a time, in this bustling port town, there was said to be a strange and enchanted salon.

There, a "monstrous miss" with an unusual skin disease was rumored to heal all manner of afflictions—so long as they were limited to the skin and so long as you paid her in a good story.

Many spoke of the tales that sprang from that little salon, though few could claim to have ever found it themselves.

Ding, ding, ding.

Now and then, the light, sprightly sound of a bell could still be heard, though most would say it was only the salty wind playing tricks on the ear, blowing in from the sea.

Bonus Chapter: Raymond, the Cook

RAYMOND the cook thought to himself:

Was that really love, after all?

"Chef! The meat for tonight's dinner is shot!"

"Whoever was on meat duty's dead after service! Switch it up—we're running the B menu!"

"Yes, chef!"

Somehow, Raymond had found himself aboard a squalid pirate ship, serving meals to rough-tempered men.

He loved the sea but hated to fight.

Leaving behind the restaurant where he'd worked as a live-in apprentice since boyhood, he leapt aboard the pirate ship and let it carry him far away.

Day after day, night after night, the endless blue sea stretched out before him, like his dream given form, boundless and free.

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DURING the winter of Raymond's twenty-first year, he fell overboard. Narrowly escaping being eaten by a shark, he survived, but the experience left him scarred. He gave up his life afloat and returned to land. Twenty-one, he figured, was as good an age as any to leave all that behind.

It was during a night out drinking with some of his pirate mates that the following conversation caught his ear.

"Did ye hear? The Olzons be lookin' for a young lad to take up the post of family cook."

"The Olzons? That rich merchant family? Hold on—isn't that where…"

"Aye. 'Tis where dwells the Monstrous Miss…"

The Monstrous Miss.

For whatever reason, the words lodged themselves in a quiet corner of Raymond's mind.

He went for an interview, passed with flying colors, and soon found himself thinking he might've just landed the post to carry him through the rest of his days. The ingredients at his disposal were all top-notch, there were no rough-tempered men except on occasion, and the pay was nearly double. Not to mention the patent absence of sharks.

All this—the excitement, the sense of something new—came even before he met the young miss who would change his life.

The first hint that a younger human was on the premises came when the head maid, Martha, asked him for a sweet treat.

When he asked, she told him it was for the family's young daughter. A girl of just thirteen, she had an unusual ailment and rarely left her room. As for leaving the estate itself, it seemed she no longer did so at all.

Raymond wasn't much of a baker, so he asked an acquaintance for a recipe and a few tips. He whipped up what he could, handed it off to Martha, and watched her disappear, only to return a short while later with a clean plate, devoured to every last crumb.

The same thing happened a few more times until, one day, the plate came back with a note. *Thank you. It was delicious.*

Following that, it was a year later that she finally appeared—a girl wrapped in bandages, nervously poking her head into the kitchen. From the gaps, Raymond could just make out that her skin was rough, bumpy, and brown. Whatever she had, it was no mild thing.

"Are you…Mr. Raymond?"

Her voice was soft. Pretty.

"That's me. I'm the cook around here."

"I just wanted to thank you personally for all the sweets you've made for me. Our previous cook used to add a bit too much sugar, but yours are just right."

He could tell she was smiling. And that was enough to bring a grin to his face.

After all, there wasn't a cook alive who didn't love hearing a compliment about their cooking.

"If there's anything you like, I'd be happy to see if I can't make it for you, milady."

"Thank you."

That was just the beginning. Slowly but surely, bit by bit, the two became good friends.

Years later, Raymond, the cook, had well and truly cemented himself as a member of the household, holding the unique distinction of being the man closest to young Sophie, who wasn't family.

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RAYMOND had come to realize he was the Olzon family's "B menu."

Nobody had said as much—not even hinted at it—but of the fact, he was entirely sure.

The menu the kitchen switched to whenever there was an issue with the ingredients, or if the original menu, for one reason or another, became impossible to carry out, had another, much less flattering name: the backup plan.

Only then would he appear.

When the young daughter of the family came of marriageable age, and then passed it.

When she, all alone in that room, turned twenty, then twenty-five, then thirty.

When it seemed no one else would come to take her hand.

Raymond had no doubt about it. Johann had put out the call, recruited a young man, and put him within reaching distance of his daughter. Someone whom she wouldn't hate. Someone who wouldn't hate her. Someone who'd stay—because of the pay.

He didn't think the actions of this doting father were underhanded. Perhaps he would've if Johann had ever told him,

“Don’t marry,” “Stay single,” or any variation of the sort, but he hadn’t.

He was just insurance. A bit of peace of mind.

Knowing this, Raymond only shrugged and went back to work.

After all, the ingredients were top-notch, there were no rough-tempered men except on occasion, and the pay was nearly double. Not to mention, he was rather fond of the young miss.

Perhaps he pitied her.

Perhaps he found a person in need in her and decided he could be of use.

But if anyone asked him whether it was love, he thought he would have hesitated to say yes.

He didn’t have the passion of the man who had spirited the young miss away.

He’d only ever wished the young miss would say his food was delicious.

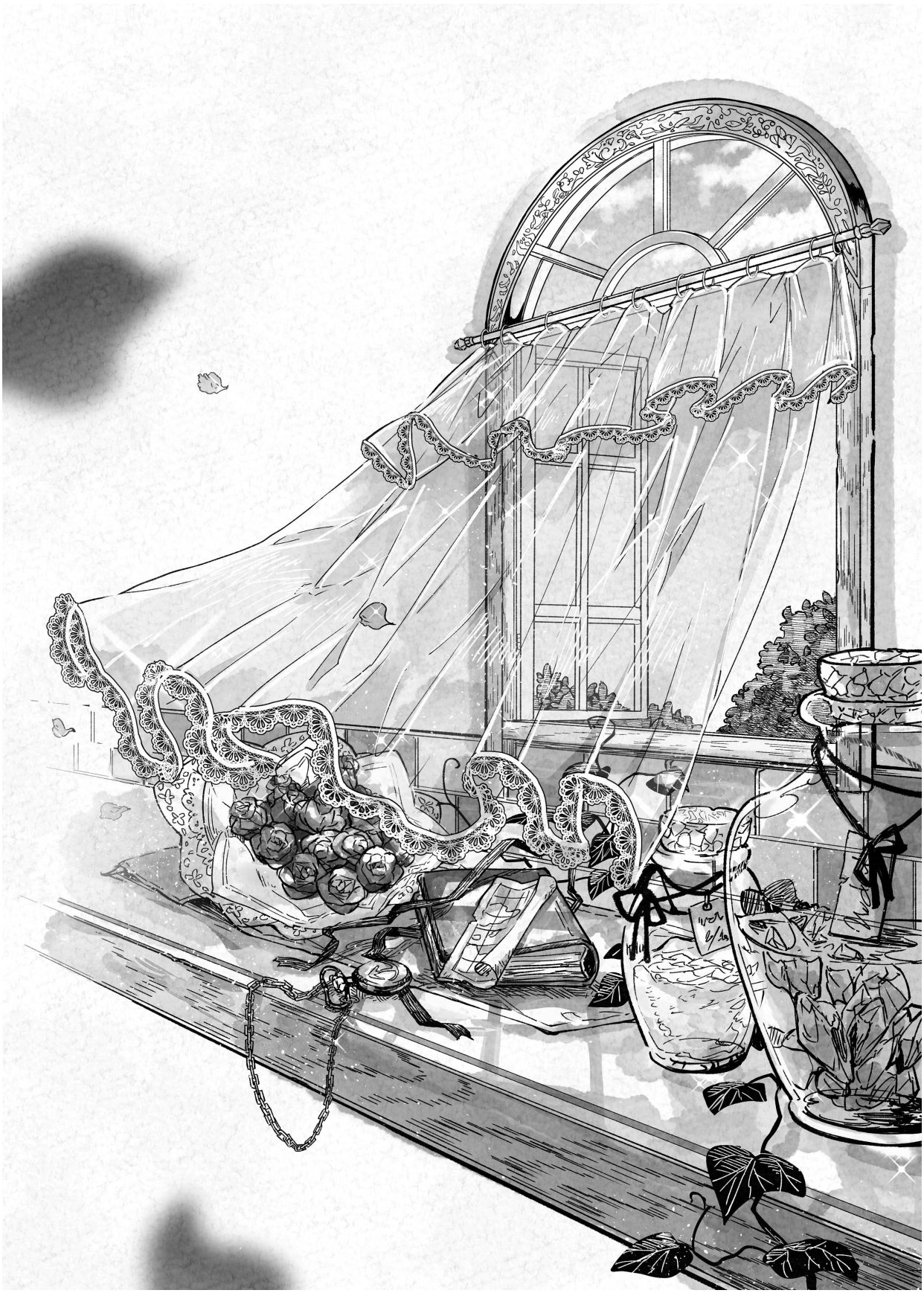
He’d only ever wished that she would smile.

Like a ship swaying gently over calm seas, his feelings for her stirred only faintly. Quietly.

“*Raymond.*”

He thought he heard an echo of that clear, soft voice.

He turned to see only lace curtains gently fluttering in the breeze.



Epilogue: The Orphanage and the Clown

***"WE** paint our faces white so they won't show emotion."*

Before the mirror, Pierre whitened his face, the rasp of a long-forgotten voice whispering at his ear.

"We draw vertical lines across our eyes because the clown is blind to evil. To the clown, everyone in the audience is a good person."

Pierre picked up his brush and painted careful lines. Even with his eyes shut, he never missed—not by so much as a hair.

"Our lips are red so we can smile bigger, brighter. The clown is a joyous character—he's always laughing. We draw tears beneath our eyes, but that sadness is not ours. It is the audience's. It's our job to take that sadness and leave happiness in its place."

His hands moved easily, knowing just where the reds, blues, and yellows belonged, where to place the teardrop and the stars.

When he opened his eyes, a short, stubby little clown smiled back at him from the mirror.

He smoothed down his colorful, mismatched outfit. Every detail was just right. From a box, he gently pulled out a dove, kissed it, and tucked it into the secret hatch in his hat. He pumped his arms, and soap bubbles filled the room. He gave his necktie a yank—a fake ear popped out with a silly *whoop!*

This trick was new. He planned to pretend he couldn't hear the children and shout, "Whaaat? I can't hear you!" He had tried it out just the other day. They had loved it.

Without his makeup, Pierre found that people treated him like he was nothing but empty air.

The first time he stepped out into the world with a bare face, it startled him. No curious stares. No giggles. No delighted gasps. It

was so strange that he wondered if he had died and turned into a ghost for a moment.

But no—he still got hungry. If he called out to a shopkeeper, they answered, plain and polite. No bright smiles, no expectant looks like he'd been used to.

This, he realized, was just what normal life felt like. And though it was simple and, in its own way, a little sweet, Pierre couldn't help feeling a little restless inside. A little ticklish. A little…unsatisfied.

Before he knew it, he was donning the outfit of a clown once more. He did his makeup, put the dove in his hat, and hit the town. With his whimsical, candy-coated music box in hand, he bounded up and down the streets, singing his usual refrain: "*Welcome, one and all, to Pierre Pierrot, Pierre the Clown's Spectacular Sillytime Extravaganza!"*

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LATELY, Pierre had begun to try something new, following a bit of advice he had received from a certain someone.

He began visiting hospitals, orphanages, and places where the elderly gathered. There, he met people who were too busy to find him, too weak to leave their rooms, too shy for noisy crowds, or simply too poor to buy a ticket for a show.

Here was this whole world of people he and his grandfather had never gathered tears from before. It was a shame. But perhaps it was also an inevitability. Even a clown had to eat, after all.

He turned the handle of the box.

His feet began to move on their own, his arms swung wide, and bubbles floated into the air.

A wide smile spread across his lips, and a song slipped free.

Pierre became Pierre the Clown.

Amid a burst of cheers, Pierre the Clown leapt into the crowd.

He sent bubbles soaring, produced doves from his hat, multiplied balls in his hands, stumbled into invisible walls, climbed and descended unseen stairs—all to the delight of his audience.

Here, Pierre the Clown was "it" once more.

Here, before children with eyes round with wonder, cheeks flushed with delight.

He caught glimpses of countless gap-toothed smiles and heard the high, bright laughter of dozens of little voices ringing together like a chorus of tiny silver bells.

Sweeping his gaze across the sea of clapping hands—here was a smile, and there, and there—the child who had been crying just moments before, the shy one lingering in the corner, even the ones who tried to act above it all, adjusting their glasses with a serious air, were leaning forward now, drawn in with their whole bodies, laughing without restraint.

Here, at the center of all this joy, Pierre the Clown was at home.

Now came the time for the grand finale.

Pierre pulled out the long cylinder he had prepared just for the occasion. He held up his fingers and began to mime a countdown. The children sat still with bated breath. Then, *bang!* Like a mini cannon had gone off in the room, the top of the oversized confetti popper flew off, filling the room with a cloud of smoke. When the smoke cleared, little parachutes floated down from the air.

One quick boy jumped up and caught one. He peeled off the wrapper, looked at what was inside, and popped it into his mouth. His eyes went wide.

"Mmm! It's sweet! It's candy!"

The room erupted. All at once, everyone leapt to their feet. Tiny hands stretched up, grabbing for the parachutes as they drifted down.

At first, it looked like the taller kids would take everything for themselves. But height came with age—and with it, a little bit of maturity, too. The biggest boy gathered up the candies and shared them with the smaller children who couldn't reach.

What a wonderful orphanage this is, Pierre thought to himself.

"It's a star," mumbled a particularly small-looking girl, looking at the candy she held. Her big eyes glimmered. As did her plump cheeks, which seemed to shine under the light.

She held it up closer and closer, the drool practically coming out of her mouth, when another girl who looked much like her, probably her sister, pushed her hand down.

"It isn't yet snack time, Mairi," she said gently. "We must be patient, you and I. Be strong now, just as I taught you."

The little girl looked despondently up at her older sister, then back down at the piece of candy. Tears welled in her baby blue eyes. A glance at the nearby clock revealed that it was one whole minute before it was the top of the hour, no doubt the aforementioned "snack time." At once, the rowdy atmosphere died down. Arms drooped, eyes dimmed, and all the children seemed to shrink back in front of Pierre as if they had stumbled into a funeral.

Be strong.

How many times have these children told that phrase to themselves, he wondered.

Your mother isn't here any longer. Be strong, be strong.

Neither is your father. Be strong, be strong.

You have no home, no job, and you're starving. But you just have to be strong.

The wiry old woman watching over the children pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose. She gave Pierre a pointed look, then glanced toward the clock.

Ah. Pierre understood.

With a hop, skip, and a jump, he made his way over to the grand, old, towering grandfather clock. It had stood watch over every bit of the children's hard work; surely, it wouldn't mind a little indulgence now and then.

Pierre pulled out a big red scarf. He gave it a good shake—once, twice, three times—then tossed it into the air. It fluttered gently down, covering the face of the clock.

Then, with his foot and his cane, *thump, thump, thump*, he began to tap out the rhythm of the second hand.

He swayed to the left.

"Tick."

He swayed to the right.

"Tock."

The children blinked, glancing at each other, then back at him.

"Tick, tock."

Thump, thump. The rhythm quickened.

"Tick, tock."

"Tick, tock!"

An astute child caught on. Some faces lit up with recognition. Others stayed blank with confusion, but even then, they knew something was coming. Their eyes stayed locked on Pierre, waiting for the grand reveal.

"Tick, tock."

"Tick, tock!"

More children joined the chorus.

"Tick, tock, tick, tock."

"Tick, tock, tick, tock!"

Even louder still. The stomping of feet on the ground. Expectant eyes.

"Tick, tock, tick, tock, tick, tock, tick…!"

Then, with a sharp strike of his cane, Pierre hit the ground hard. At the same moment, he whipped the scarf away from the clock.

Pop!

His hat burst open, and a white dove soared into the air.

The second hand of the clock struck home, and the great clock let out three deep, resonant gongs.

Dong… Dong… Dong…

"Pieeerre!"

The room exploded into cheers. The older children, too, let smiles flicker across their faces—but they quickly reined them back in, their eyes turning toward a single figure. One by one, all gazes followed, swiveling toward that particular direction. Pierre didn't even need to look. He already knew: all eyes were on the wiry old woman.

She stood there, arms crossed, with the same stern expression. She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose once more.

The room fell quiet. A faint hush settled over them all.

Then, so small it almost seemed like a dream, she chuckled.

"The clock has spoken," she said. "Go on, eat."

The room erupted again, this time louder and happier than before. Big kids, little kids, all laughing, all shouting. When one child popped the last of his candy into his mouth and looked ready to cry, another rushed over and offered him theirs.

As the children laughed, chattered, and nibbled away at their sweets, the caretakers watched from the edges of the room, their eyes full of quiet, indulgent kindness.

A shaft of sunlight streamed in through the windows, bathing the timeworn, weathered, yet carefully polished wooden room in a soft golden glow. The different shades of the children's hair, the varied hues of their tender cheeks, and their bright eyes were awash in that same dazzling light.

This is a place of warmth, a truly wonderful orphanage, Pierre the Clown thought, his bright red lips curling into a gentle, cheerful grin.

Epilogue: Bianca

"ARE you sure you don't want a ceremony?"

Asked the fiancé, sweat trickling down his brow, even though it wasn't yet the hottest season. He wiped it away as he walked with Bianca down the sloping path to the beach.

"I'm sure," Bianca replied. "We're hardly kids anymore. Nobody wants to see that."

Her fiancé looked down at the ground.

"What is it?" she asked.

He hemmed. He hawed. He wiped his sweat and cleaned off his glasses. Then, this nervous, underfed rat of a man looked up at Bianca with a sudden light of determination in his eyes…!

Only for his face to fall again. Just as quickly as it'd risen.

He said nothing. Just stared at her, like he'd forgotten whatever bold thing he meant to say.

Of course, this was exactly why Bianca was marrying him.

If he'd been the type to puff out his chest and declare, *I think it's a shame I won't get to see you in a wedding dress!* she would've wanted nothing to do with him.

She gazed out at the sea. The waters were calm tonight, the setting sun casting long streaks of red and orange across the endless surface.

The harsh, scintillating shine of the ocean at noon was already too much for Bianca. For a last date as a single woman, this place, at this time, was exactly what she had asked for.

The bar would be closed today. After this, they would go to a small church and swear their love to each other.

Then, they planned to head to dinner at a spot he was always talking about.

He’d said he had been going there for years, though he never really talked to the staff. He would come in every few days, sit at the same table, order the same stew, eat, and quietly leave. He wasn’t even sure if the owners recognized his face, he’d joked.

But Bianca knew better.

There was no way the owners didn’t remember.

Someone who had loved their little restaurant enough to keep coming back all those years—that was a precious customer if ever there was one.

So that the presence of a woman like her wouldn’t disturb the quiet peace of that place, Bianca had chosen a subdued, unassuming dress. Even so, she doubted she could truly conceal herself. To one in the same line of work, the old scent of blood, the stale breath of the night, would surely be sniffed out at once, no matter how carefully she tried to mask it.

But then again, she thought, if the proprietor were the kind of man who had allowed her fiancé to come and go in silence all these years, asking nothing, saying nothing, then surely, tonight and in the nights to come, he would leave them be, just as he always had.

Bianca loosened the bouquet of red flowers she held against her chest. White flowers were the custom for honoring those lost at sea; these, then, were not for mourning.

One by one, she set them adrift, each bloom trailing a faint red thread across the red waters as it floated away.

From tomorrow on, Bianca would no longer dream of setting sail on summer seas.

She would no longer wish to sink beneath the winter waves and die.

For Bianca, now standing at the end of her story, the sea was nothing more than something to be gazed upon from the land, with a distant fondness.

As if to etch that resolve into herself, she continued to draw that line into the sea.

The tears came unbidden. Her fiancé, noticing, looked at her in concern.

She was smiling faintly, still looking toward the sea.

A great ship drifted into view.

Her smile faltered. Her eyes followed its steady course.

"It's a merchant ship from the east," he said, following her gaze. "The blue coral they gather there's in high demand."

"I see," Bianca murmured. Her eyes stayed fixed on the ship. "It's just… It looks just like a pirate ship."

"It seems that in imitation of the Olzon family, some trading companies overseas have started hiring former pirates for their crews as well. But from what I hear, it hasn't gone half as smoothly. Pirates, after all, aren't the easiest lot to tame. If anything, the whole business has only made clearer just how formidable in leadership the young Olzon company president really is, for all his age."

"Really? Now, that I find very interesting." Bianca smiled at the familiar name.

So that's where she got it from. Her thoughts drifted to that seventeen-year-old girl possessing far more compassion, far more strength of heart than her lovely, delicate face would ever let on.

Turns out, it was a rare bloodline trait after all.

The towering sails of the ship cut across the last glimmer of the sun, the dying light flickering in and out through the forest of masts and lines. A serpent carved into the main mast caught Bianca's eye. She blinked in surprise.

"Strange, the things that cross our path," she said.

"What?" He looked at her in surprise.

"Or maybe we just keep coming up with the same old stories the world over."

"What are you talking about, honey?"

"There's an old tale," she said. "It tells of the horned serpent—the charm that wards off lightning. They say lightning is no natural thing at all, but the wrath of a great bird. Long ago, the horned serpent sank its fangs into the bird's leg, and ever since, the bird has

hated it with all its being. And so, if you place a horned serpent high and in plain sight, the bird will turn its fury elsewhere."

"I…can't say I've ever heard that one before."

"Aye—because I'm the one who came up with it."

Her gaze drifted down.

"That boy was always… Always so afraid when it stormed."

That boy.

It struck her as curious how, even now, though she knew what he looked like as a man, the face that came to mind was still that of a boy.

That sniveling, scared little boy who cried just as much as he laughed.

Whenever it thundered, he would cry and hide, and for that, he was scolded.

Bianca, wanting to help, had stitched him a charm—something that would promise, *lightning will never strike you so long as you hold on to it.*

She was no expert seamstress. The serpent she'd embroidered somehow came out with horns, so she made up a tale to suit her mistake.

The boy had believed every word.

He had clutched that terrible embroidery tight to his chest and grinned up at her, his mouth wide—a single gap in his teeth.

Bianca's face fell.

On the ship's deck was a tall, skinny man—not so young, or so Bianca thought. Life at sea had a way of tanning people into leather, making their age hard to tell.

A bandana tied around his head fluttered in the wind. His body, still as a windless night, was perched at the ship's bow, staring out at the ocean ahead.

His profile looked familiar.

She stared a moment longer, then shook the thought away and gave a small, pained smile.

Coincidences like that don't just happen, do they?

A sea breeze swept through.

That boy.

Why hadn't he cut her down that day, along with her love?

It was a question that had always left a faint bitterness inside her.

The blade should have gone for her neck before it ever touched William's.

That way, she would have left the world still young, still beautiful, her love unspoiled, never having known the pain of losing it.

On the deck, someone ran up to the man. He turned. Two, three words were exchanged—then he laughed.

It looked like there was a gap in his smile. But again, she shook the thought away and smiled. *No such coincidences…*

She quietly hummed the song they had all sung together back when the ship was still small and they were still young.

The star-filled sky.

Great, beautiful creatures. Glittering treasures.

Songs and dances, laughter ringing all around.

What a beautiful, dream-like time.

If someone in this wide world still kept the memory tucked away in the book of their life, then Bianca could think of no greater joy.

As she sent the last flower drifting away, she stopped humming and lifted her head.

"Sorry for making you wait," she said to her fiancé. "Shall we go?"

"I'm fine. We can stay longer if you'd like."

"No," she said, smiling. "I'm ready to leave now."

"All right, then. It's getting cold now that the sun's gone. I can lend you my gloves if you'd like?"

She gave him a look—half fond, half exasperated. "In moments like this, you're *supposed* to say, 'You must be cold—let's hold hands.'"

He stared at her, caught somewhere between panic and confusion.

"Say something, dear."

Still nothing.

She let out a dramatic sigh. “Ugh, look at that hill. It’s a beast going back up. Come on, escort me like a proper gentleman.”

“Sure,” he said simply.

“We hook our arms like *this.*”

“Right, right. Got it. Uh…do you still want the gloves, though?”

“I’ll take them, thank you. It’s rather chilly.

Sharing a smile, they set off on their merry way.

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RED flower petals floated across the surface of the sea.

The ship, its mast carved with the figure of a horned serpent, cut cleanly through the drifting line.

A sun-kissed man, no longer young, stood on deck and, for reasons he could not name, found himself humming a familiar tune up into the sky, just slightly off-key.

Epilogue: Kuro

"OH, she's so pretty…"

The white-furred feline demi-human let out a soft sigh. Her white coat was wonderfully sleek, and her dreamy blue eyes shone with a gentle light.

A short distance away, a young male demi-human kept sneaking glances at her, his eyes drawn to the alluring curves of her body, wrapped snugly in a little black dress.

She pretended not to notice.

Her blue gaze, steady and composed, was fixed ahead, where a beautiful bride, her fur as dark as the summer night sky, walked solemnly down the antique red carpet laid out for the occasion, arm in arm with her father.

Demi-humans filled the venue, each one watching the pair with the same soft, touched expression.

They were in a small restaurant nestled in the forest, a little way out of town. Its owners were an elderly couple—a demi-human and a human. The place was modest but, all the homier for it, with warm light streaming through the old wooden structure, giving it a bright, welcoming air.

As the father-daughter procession made its way down the aisle, the daughter suddenly paused before a certain guest. Turning, she smiled brightly.

"Thank you so much for coming. You have no idea how much it means to me," she said.

The one she smiled at was a young human girl, seemingly unfazed by the sea of demi-humans around her. She giggled, her springy red hair bouncing along with the sound.

"Of course! I mean, miss my favorite colleague's wedding? Not a chance," the human girl replied. "Oh, but don't think I'm here purely out of friendship. Maybe your happiness'll rub off on me, and I'll snag a good man this year, too!"

Beside the bride, her father gave off a distinctly gruff air.

"You look so beautiful," the human girl added, softening. "I mean, you're always beautiful—but today, Miina, you're positively radiant. Congratulations."

The gruffness by Miina's side gave way to something gentler.

Then—

"Oh?"

A soft sniffling sound.

It took the human girl a second to realize it wasn't the bride sniffling but the father.

Blinking rapidly, she averted her gaze, pretending not to notice.

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SHE'S *a good girl,* Kuro thought, holding Miina's hand in his.

At the same time, the fact that she was the only human from her workplace to come sat in his throat like a lump of coal. If it had been about him, he could have swallowed it down easily. But because it was about his daughter, it stuck fast, scraping sharply against his chest and neck.

Kuro knew better than most what it meant to be a demi-human working among humans. He'd asked her more times than he could count how things were at work. Every time, she'd smiled and said, *Everyone's kind. They treat me very well.*

Today was supposed to be the happiest day of her life. The day a daughter became a wife. A day worth celebrating.

She hadn't been celebrated the day she was born, not given the circumstances. So today, more than any other, she ought to have been showered with blessings to make up for all that was lost.

"Daddy…" Miina looked up at him with upturned eyes.

He didn't answer.

"It's all right," she went on. "*I'm* all right. I'm sure…there's a good reason."

A good reason? he wanted to snap. *For everyone? Grown adults, all of them, who knew exactly how important this day was?*

He swallowed the words, along with the rage, clenching his teeth beneath tightly pursed lips.

It couldn't have been easy for Miina to decide to invite them at all.

She prepared special dishes to suit human tastes just for them. She set up their only little table, complete with smaller chairs to match—only for a single, sweet, innocent young girl to sit there and partake.

Kuro remembered it clearly. He would never forget it. The way Miina's tail had flicked with worry that night as she looked over the finished invitations, torn over whether to send them or not.

Times were changing. Demi-humans could sit at the guild's reception window now. By some stroke of luck—or perhaps grace—his very own daughter had managed to claim that seat.

And yet, Kuro knew that seat by the window was no seat at the table.

Still, he'd hoped they would come to celebrate. Even if it was only for appearances. Even if they faked smiles through clenched teeth.

He had wanted them to endure it, just for today.

Because today—of all days—was his and his wife's beloved daughter's happiest, most precious day.

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SURROUNDED by their kin, the gods of heaven and earth as their witnesses, the bride and groom swore their undying love.

The groom let out a proud *Aooo!* as part of the ritual, then turned toward Kuro with a pleased grin. Kuro jerked his chin at him as if to say, *Eyes front.*

This brown-furred fellow—Miina's soon-to-be husband—had taken a strange liking to Kuro from the very first time they met.

Suddenly, the door slammed open with a loud bang.

Every guest turned at once. Hackles rose, ears twitched, and bodies tensed into defensive stances. But all they found in the doorway was a group of humans—panting, red-faced, and dripping with sweat. Each of them clutched a strange, gleaming, tube-shaped object. Their clothes hung crookedly off their bodies, thrown on in obvious haste.

"We are…so sorry!" gasped the man in front.

"Section chief?" Miina breathed, startled.

"After work, we stayed late to practice…then we overslept. All of us!"

The room was silent as they gazed upon this pack of latecomers.

"Please! Accept our sincerest apologies!"

Disheveled, wrinkled, and covered in last night's grime, they each held their metal tubes—what now appeared to be musical instruments—in one hand and bowed low, all of them, their regret written plain on their faces.

Miina blinked. "Practice? After work? But yesterday, we were on duty until—"

The man known as "section chief" turned to Kuro, eyes shining with urgency. "We practiced and practiced and practiced, but we're still absolutely awful! Even so, Mr. Kuro—might we have the honor of playing just one song?"

The whole room swiveled to look at Kuro. The groom was a stray with no parents. The bride had no mother. Of everyone present, only Kuro could speak as family.

He straightened his back, chest rising smooth and proud.

"Of course," he said. "But first, allow me to welcome you. Why don't you all have something to drink? Please."

He unclenched his jaw. Unpursed his lips. And brought out a smile instead.

"Welcome to my daughter's wedding. Your being here…means more than you know."

The section chief just smiled.

They were roughly the same age, Kuro guessed. The chief was surely old enough to know the long, painful history between humans and demi-humans. Old enough to have spent years behind the guild reception desk, dealing with demi-humans who had long since learned it was easier to be short-tempered and ill-mannered than to hope for respect.

Despite that. Despite all that. He had come running—sprinting—to a demi-human's wedding.

To Kuro, if that didn't feel like a sign of the times, he didn't know what would.

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THE chairs were all set up. The section chief stood in front of his section and gave a tentative wave of a long, thin wand.

Bwaaah. Fweee. Skreee.

Feeble, clashing, lurching notes sputtered from their instruments. They stacked atop one another just a hair out of tune—layer upon layer of tonal discord, forming a concoction of sound that could only charitably be called a cacophony.

A few demi-humans instinctively moved to clap their ears shut but managed—just barely—to restrain themselves, settling for a grimace instead.

A sharp *ding!* came from off to the side. Looking over, Kuro saw the red-haired girl from earlier tapping a silver triangle with a metal rod.

"Chief told me I didn't have to come to rehearsals since this is all I play. Said I should just focus on getting myself ready instead. Talk about rude, am I right?" she said off-handedly.

She puffed her cheeks out in protest, but Kuro couldn't help thinking she probably should have gone to rehearsals—because that one lonely *ding!* had come in wildly off-beat from the rest.

Then again, maybe it was for the best. If that *ding!* had joined the rest of that sorry symphony, the whole room would've shut their ears for good.

The humans were drenched in sweat, blowing, strumming, and plucking. But then, little by little, note by clumsy note, what had begun as mere noise and nuisance began to take shape. Music. A song. It drifted through the restaurant, carrying a solemn mood that was, in its own way, beautiful. Cheerful.

Kuro had no acquaintance with refined human music such as this. But even then, his sensitive ear could tell—this was a song of celebration.

Congratulations, the notes seemed to murmur, threading their way into his thoughts. The playing was clumsy. The tones unclean. But they carried something honest. Something insistent.

I'm happy for you, Miina. You deserve this, Miina.

His golden eyes blinked once. Then again. What spilled out wasn't loud. It wasn't sudden. Just something warm, slow, and quiet, melting into his sun-darkened fur.

Congratulations, congratulations. Those words hadn't been spoken on the day she was born. Not with any heart. So Kuro would say them now. So Kuro would say them with his heart.

"Congratulations, Miina."

Another set of golden eyes filled with tears. The daughter's, this time. Always the crybaby. Always daddy's little girl.

"Are you sure you won't be lonely, Daddy?" she asked.

Kuro paused a beat. He rested a hand over his chest. He could still feel it there—the soft, squishy weight that used to press against it.

Something only he had ever known.

His own little squish. His own little bald spot.

"Lonely? Who do you think I am?" he said, a touch too quickly.

Admit to weakness? To feeling? Not even on his deathbed. Kuro had to be their pillar. Their dependable father. Because he was the only one either really had.

"Go on," he told them. "Build something together. A beautiful life. A beautiful home. And when the mood strikes you, come back and visit an old man. You're always welcome. Both of you. Just…do try to let the mood strike now and then."

He clapped a firm hand on the bride's shoulder, the other on the groom's, and pulled them both into a strong, warm embrace.

The music swelled. A chorus of howls and happy growls rose to meet it. Then the kitchen doors swung open, and out came clouds of fragrant steam and towering platters of food—meaty dishes of every kind, raw cuts and all, enough to feed the pack.

Kuro raised his brimming cup high.

"Thank you all for coming! Eat 'til you're stuffed! Drink 'til you burst! Cheers!"

"Cheers!"

Foam and laughter spilled in equal measure. Cups clinked. Smiles bloomed.

Out of the corner of his eye, Kuro spotted a young fellow sidling up to a beauty, only to be promptly brushed off.

Go on, lad—try again. That's the name of the game, Kuro thought, nodding to himself.

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THE music roared on. Song roared on. When the banquet finally began to ebb, Kuro slipped outside for a breather.

The sky had reddened, the last light stretching thin, and at once, that old jolt of panic struck him. *Uh-oh. I've got to get home.*

It had been years since Miina had last waited for him on the doorstep. Yet, somehow, that feeling of urgency—the pull—had never quite left him.

He looked up at the sky and asked quietly:

Have I been a good father to her?

In his heart, he posed the question to someone no longer there.

The beautiful woman he had loved, fiercely, deeply, hopelessly, offered no reply.

She had always seemed distant at a glance, but in truth, she had been the gentlest soul he had ever known. Perhaps she thought that if she ever came to him now—if she ever answered these lonely

questions of his—he would lose himself in longing and try to follow after her.

Maybe that was why, from the moment she left this world, she had never once appeared to him.

Looking back on it now, Kuro figured her quiet nature had always been partly her own—and partly something shaped by a life lived as a demi-human among humans.

He had always shouted his love for her from the rooftops.

She had always answered with a soft smile. A gentle flick of her tail. The light touch of her hand, the brush of her tail's tip as she passed by.

Those were her words. And somehow, they'd always said enough.

A sudden commotion behind him pulled him from his thoughts. The youngsters were dragging the party outside now—lugging chairs, hefting tables, ready to celebrate long into the night.

And there she was, right in the thick of it, hauling a chair without so much as a fuss. Her mother's grace and ears, her father's coat. That once-tiny, helpless little thing now laughed with all her fangs. Surrounded by demi-humans, surrounded by humans, genuinely happy, through and through.

That is your answer, dear.

A breeze, soft as breath, stirred the fur at Kuro's back.

He turned slowly; there was no one there.

In that quiet space, he gave his tail a little shake. Once. Twice. Three times.

And in the last light of day, the small, weathered bald spot on the aging gatekeeper's chest caught a faint glint—like an old, worn medal pinned there long ago, still shining, just a little.

Afterword

ON an unremarkable day of an unremarkable month in the year 2022, a thoroughly unremarkable novelist hurried toward a meeting with their editor and the illustrious illustrator, Harenochihareta.

Clutched in their hands were a stack of printouts—reference images, each one showing people drawn from behind.

When the news had come that their series would be published, that idiot of a novelist had failed to consider what that actually meant: Sophie would have to be illustrated. Panicking in the days leading up to the meeting, they scrambled together this haphazard collection of materials and a few feeble arguments, desperately hoping to convince everyone involved to only ever depict Sophie with her face hidden from view.

Sophie's skin—her appearance—was essential to the story. It had to be the way it was. But to have it displayed, front and center, on a book cover? That felt far too cruel to do to a seventeen-year-old girl.

As it happened, the meeting went well. The novelist was especially overjoyed when Harenochihareta-sensei burst out laughing at the suggestion, somehow having things just so happen to block Sophie's face every time she appeared, like an old Showa-era comedy sketch. And in the end, they all agreed to go with the cover the book has now.

I cried when I opened the image for the first time.

"Sophie's Salon." And there she was—Sophie—standing under the light, facing toward the audience.

Never did I imagine I'd see the day when I'd get to see Sophie's smile, just as I'd pictured it in my mind all this time, captured so perfectly on paper. Harenochihareta-sensei—I can't thank you enough.

With that, my deepest worries about the book vanished like mist, and Sophie was immortalized in a storybook world.

Here's a memory that comes to mind now when I think about it: Ozhorn's full white suit scene.

I was suffering from the flu when I wrote that part. If I looked down, I coughed; if I looked up at the screen, it was Ozhorn in white. Even now, thinking back on it, it feels like some fresh kind of hell.

When I received the full-spread illustration of that scene for the first time, there was Ozhorn—his handsome face, his beautiful white suit—and for a brief moment, I almost forgot.

I almost forgot that when I wrote that scene, I had meant for him to be lame as hell.

Thus, out of no fault of their own, I had to send a message to Harenochihareta-sensei:

"Can you please make him dorkier? I mean, really go for it?"

And in the end, they really did.

The version we ended up with, its sheer, unrelenting dorkiness, was almost dazzling. It had this refreshing, brilliant quality, like a cloudless blue summer sky. It felt absolutely wonderful.

By the way, I literally squealed when I spotted the hidden Mamoryllis in the illustration. Ganpo is there, too. Have you spotted them, too?

Sophie's Salon is complete now.

There was a lot of scrambling. A dizzying amount of back-and-forth. But in the end, the destination was every bit worth the journey.

Thank you so much for picking up this book. I hope that at least one of the stories inside finds a place in your heart.

To everyone who so kindly cheered me on during the serialization, to those who helped bring Sophie's world to life alongside me, and to every reader who picked up these pages, I offer you my deepest, heartfelt thanks.

Truly, thank you.

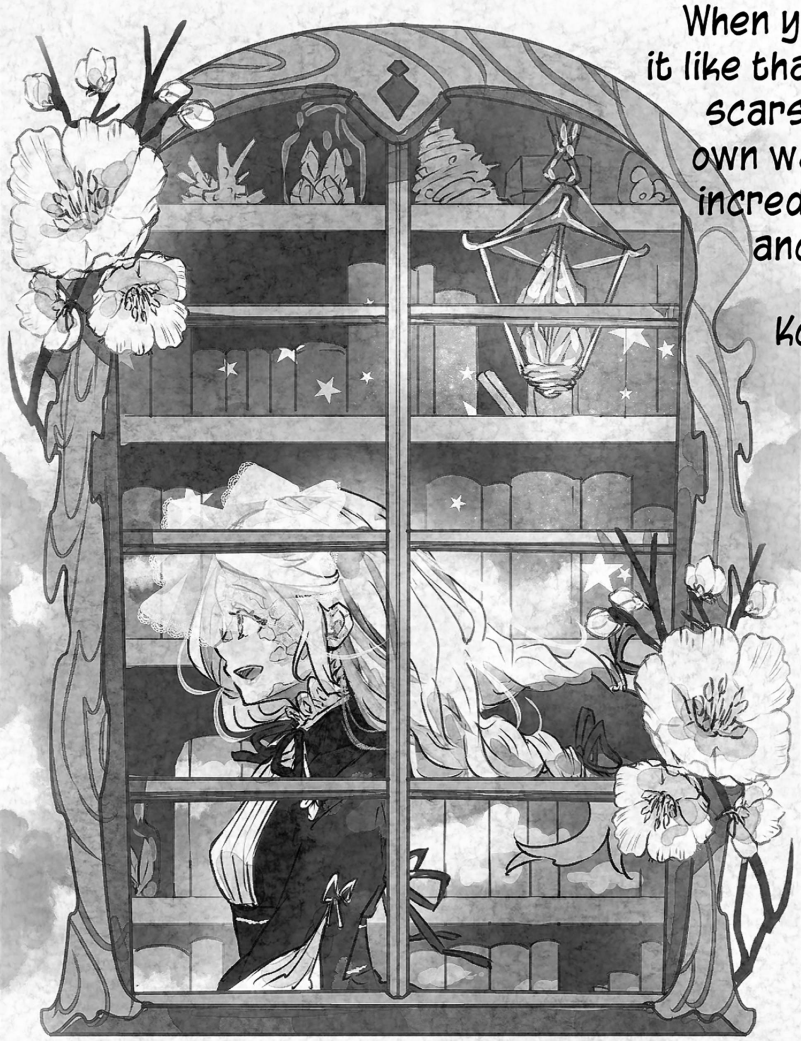
Sachi Konzome

Hello there! This is the illustrator of *Sophie's Salon*, Harenochihareta!

So, what did you think? The grand finale of "Monstrous Miss" Sophie's story, with all her clients, everyone she'd helped, coming out for her like that... I mean, wow, right?!

Now, I know that whether Sophie gets her skin healed or not, there is absolutely nothing at this point that can come between her and Kurt. But I have to say. That she and Kurt even met in the first place owes everything to the fact that she channeled her single mother powers to open her salon in the first place.

It's all because she took that *one giant step* into the light that she met all these wonderful people who ended up coming together to help her!



When you think about it like that, even Sophie's scars are, in their own way, something incredibly beautiful and precious.

Konzome-sensei,

you are incredible!

When I first received the request for this job, the *title* boggled my mind. Like a monster? Skin? What???!

But then I read the story. Cried for lots of it. (Especially Cecili and Mairi's, and Kuro's story.) And shot back a reply saying I'd love more than anything to play a part in bringing this wonderful story to life.

Apparently, Konzome-sensei asked for me by name for Sophie's story, knowing me previously from my work on *White Letter*, a *PBW* (play-by-web. Like play-by-mail, but using the internet) roleplaying game. Like, are you an angel, Konzome-sensei? No, you're an *arch*angel! I am in your debt, truly. If I ever have the chance to meet you again, I'm asking for your address! No? Okay! Just point in the general direction you live, then!

Now, here's a fond memory. At our first meeting, Konzome-sensei told me:

"Ozhorn is handsome. That's his only redeeming quality, so make sure to make him extra pretty. But not like danmei-pretty. He should still be manly. If only he didn't have short hair, right? Ha ha... I know, it makes everything so much more difficult."

And I thought with an impressed shiver,
Here... Here's a person who's dabbled in art before!

To this wonderful work of art known as *Sophie's Salon*, to the author, the editor...

To my pals who've always had my back, my friends, my partner, my children...

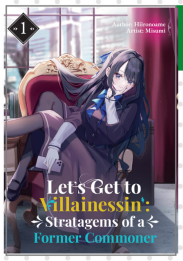
And, of course, to you, the reader—thank you!!!

I am blessed. It has been an absolute pleasure!

Truly!
Thank you!!!



P.S. Namazakana-sensei's *manga adaptation* is incredible as well, so make sure you check that out, too!



Let's Get to Villainessin': Stratagems of a Former Commoner

By Hiironoame Illust Misumi

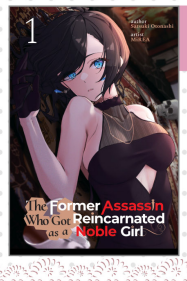
Would you become the villainess to save your beloved baby sister? Mio agrees to do just that! Survive three years at an elite academy where the progeny of tycoons and moguls roam, and in return, the real villainess will cure Mio's terminally ill sister. What lengths will Mio go for her sister?



Soup Forest: The Story of the Woman Who Speaks with Animals and the Former Mercenary

By Syuu Illust Muni

Olivia has a secret she can't tell anyone: she can hear not only people's thoughts, but also animals'. She's lived surrounded by animals at her soup restaurant on the edge of the forest, until a former mercenary appears on her doorstep. How will they change each other's lives?



The Former Assassin Who Got Reincarnated as a Noble Girl

By Satsuki Otonashi Illust MiRea

High Society Is Rough For Assassins!
A cold-blooded former assassin has to figure out a new use for their killer skillset in high society after they reincarnate into a noble young lady!



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