



NOVEL

4

Written by  
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# THE MOST HERETICAL LAST BOSS QUEEN

FROM VILLAINESS TO SAVIOR

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Airship

Seven Seas Entertainment

Higeki no Genkyoutonaru Saikyou Gedou Rasubosu

Joo wa Taminotameni Tsukushima. Vol. 4

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## Chapter 1: The Heartless Princess and the Alliance Negotiations

**T**HERE ONCE WAS an otome game known as *Our Ray of Light*. ORL grew popular enough to earn its own series and many, many fans—including me. My love for the game was just another unremarkable thing about my unremarkable eighteen years of life. At least, until I became part of the game instead of just a bystander.

“Arthur!”

Captain Alan, my imperial knight, pointed Arthur out once we arrived at the royal knights’ training grounds. We’d rushed over here along with Stale, my younger brother-in-law, and Tiara, my little sister, specifically to find Arthur. He stood amid a crowd of people who were patting him on the back.

The moment I called for him, Arthur whipped his head toward the sound, his long silver ponytail flying from the motion. Judging by the look in his bright-blue eyes, he was surprised to see us. “Oh, Princess Pride! Sta—er, Prince Stale, Princess Tiara, Captain Alan, and Captain Callum too...”

It was funny hearing him address all of us so formally—especially Stale and Tiara, with whom he hung out often. But we *were* members of the royal family, and we had somewhat of an audience. Stale was the firstborn prince, and Tiara was the second-born princess. I, Pride Royal Ivy, was their older sister. I was more than just the eldest, though: I was the crown princess of this kingdom.

This was Freesia, the only place in the entire world where humans could be born with special powers. As the firstborn princess in a land ruled by queens, I earned my right to the throne the moment my own special power of precognition awakened eight years ago. That was when I became the crown princess. I was still

getting used to the title, just like I was getting used to being Pride—a fearsome princess with wavy crimson hair and sharp purple eyes.

Saucer-eyed at my arrival, the knights around Arthur stepped back and got down on one knee to make way for us.

“I just...heard from Stale! Is...is it true?” I blurted between gasps. I still hadn’t quite caught my breath, so great was my urgency to get here and confirm the rumor.

Arthur’s eyes went as wide as the rest of the knights’, and he shared a quick glance with Stale. Then he faced me and offered a nod.

“It’s true,” he said. “The commander has officially appointed me vice captain of the Eighth Squadron.”

I gulped, then heard the same noise from Stale and Tiara on either side of me. My heart beat against my ribs. Heat rushed into my cheeks, and I dug my heels into the dirt. Right as the feeling overwhelmed me, I lunged for Arthur at the same instant Tiara did.

“Congratulations, Arthur!”

At just nineteen, Arthur had become the youngest vice captain in the history of the order.

Stale had heard the news first. He said he’d noticed Arthur’s name on a reassignment document delivered to Uncle Vest’s office. Stale was sixteen now and had spent the past year or so assisting and studying under Uncle Vest, the seneschal, so he would be prepared to support me when I became queen.

Stale’s smile had been radiant when he rushed into my room to inform me of Arthur’s promotion.

“Um... P-Princess Pride!” Arthur squeaked.

I lifted my head off his chest at the sound. The arms I’d wrapped around him now felt oddly warm.

Upon closer inspection, I realized Arthur was desperately bracing his feet against the ground to keep himself steady now that he had the weight of Tiara and me on him. His arms trembled as he held us upright, and when I looked up at him, his face was as red as a streak of fresh paint. In my joy, I must have grabbed him too tightly. Tiara's arms were around his waist, but I'd thrown mine right around his neck, placing us chest to chest. I'd been growing in the past year, including *there*. Nowadays, I couldn't even give adequate hugs unless I pulled the recipient in very, very close.

About two months ago, I tried on some sportswear that Lotte and Mary, my maids, had made for me. They'd remarked that the bust of my clothes needed to be taken out more and more lately, but that they'd be happy to attend to it. One by one, they'd had to replace my dresses as well... It was a striking contrast to how flat-chested I'd been only a year earlier.

Yet here I was, pressed up against Arthur without a lick of consideration. No doubt I was suffocating the poor fellow.

"Ack!" I jerked back. "Forgive me, Arthur! Did I hurt you?!"

Tiara followed suit, but Arthur was still blushing as he murmured, "N-no... That wasn't..." He covered his mouth with the back of his hand and turned away from us. Had I upset him that much? But after a moment of silence, he simply whispered, "Thank you very much."

Stale stepped in to fill the awkward silence. "Congratulations, Sir Arthur."

The kingdom's firstborn prince had jet-black hair and matching eyes, hidden behind black-framed glasses he only wore for show. He possessed the remarkable special power of teleportation and trained in combat alongside Arthur, his best friend since childhood. At the age of sixteen, he was already incredibly intelligent and a brilliant swordsman—and someone I was proud to call my younger brother.

While Stale and Arthur were close friends, Stale kept up the formalities when we were around the other knights. He gracefully offered his hand to Arthur, who managed to shake it once he caught his breath.

"Thank you, *Your Highness*," Arthur said.

To any outside observer, this was a normal handshake between a prince and a knight. But their silent exchange of glances told a much deeper story. I was sure they had plenty they wanted to discuss, but for Arthur's sake, Stale kept that kind of stuff out of earshot of the other knights. Apparently, Captain Alan and some other knights had heard the two boys having a very frank discussion about a year ago. The incident embarrassed Arthur, who felt it was discourteous and inappropriate for everyone to know about his friendship with a prince. Even his position as my personal imperial knight, which put him in proximity to Stale as part of his duties, didn't ease his worries on this front.

"I can't believe Arthur's already a vice captain! Talk about fast..." Captain Alan said.

"True," Captain Callum agreed. "It's only been five years since he joined the order as a new recruit. Harrison must be proud."

These two emotive men were also part of my small cohort of imperial knights, as of last year. Captain Alan, with his orange eyes and short, dirty-blond hair, was captain of the First Squadron. Captain Callum, with his reddish-brown hair and eyes, commanded the Third Squadron. The pair were excellent knights who Arthur deeply respected. Even before I made them my imperial knights, Arthur was always sharing stories about them.

Harrison, the man Captain Callum had mentioned, was captain of the Eighth Squadron—Arthur's unit. I had met him a few times during my observations of the order and came away with the impression that he was a very calm and composed knight. During our

few interactions, he always greeted me briefly and avoided eye contact. We'd never managed a real conversation. I heard that Captain Harrison was only talkative during battle, so it wasn't personal. Or so I hoped.

He let his long black hair hang loose down his back, while his straight-cut bangs covered his face entirely whenever he hung his head. His purple eyes caught the light at times, but when we met at night, it was like being face-to-face with a specter from some sort of television show. Arthur told me he was a very scary man.

"I could hardly believe it when I heard the news from Commander Roderick," Vice Captain Eric said. "He's quite the ladder climber, this one!"

Vice Captain Eric rose from the line of kneeling knights to cheer for Arthur. Even though the vice captain had been an order newbie longer than Arthur, the two had reached the rank of vice commander in roughly the same amount of time. His joy for Arthur was genuine, which was clear from the sparkle in his chestnut-colored eyes. He had hair to match, and it blew in the gentle breeze.

Arthur, Captain Alan, Captain Callum, and Vice Captain Eric—these four men served as my imperial knights. They protected me, two at a time, with one shift change each day. Today, Captain Alan and Captain Callum served as my morning guards, with Vice Captain Eric and Arthur coming to take over in the afternoon.

"It still doesn't feel real," Arthur muttered. He turned to Captain Alan and Captain Callum, dipping his head in gratitude. "It's all thanks to your mentorship."

"Of course it doesn't feel real. It only just got announced, didn't it?" Captain Callum said.

Nodding in a daze, Arthur replied, "But the rest of you have been here longer, and you've got so much experience... It's the same in the Eighth Squadron."

The Eighth Squadron that Arthur belonged to was a special unit. Each squadron of the Freesian royal order had somewhat different roles and specialties, and Arthur's Eighth Squadron was organized for "individual performance" in battle. Despite having a captain and vice captain, its members were generally permitted to move on their own. They were an elite combat squadron, and their ability to offer support and unique methods of attack at each member's own discretion made them formidable on the battlefield.

Word had it that the members of the Eighth Squadron were therefore much more independent than the rest of the order and rarely interacted with each other. Come to think of it, I couldn't actually recall a time I'd seen Arthur speaking with a squadmate.

"Every single captain of the order agreed unanimously on this decision, you know," Captain Alan said.

"When I got promoted to vice captain, I wasn't worried about those kinds of things. I was jumping for joy," Captain Callum added, patting Arthur on the back.

"It was unanimous? Then that means..."

As Captain Callum's hand clanged loudly against his armor, Arthur repeated the revelation to himself. A flush lit his face as he stood there contemplating the words.

"That's right," Captain Callum went on. "Alan and I both agreed to it. So did the Eighth Squadron captain, Harrison. We all approved of you."

Arthur's eyes shone as the words sank in. I didn't know much about the relationship between Arthur and Captain Harrison, but I knew how much the captains' opinions mattered to him.

"Thank you very much!" Arthur shouted.

"I hear the Eighth Squadron doesn't make as much work for its vice captain as other units do. I'm sure you can handle it, Arthur," Captain Alan said.

"Plus, what's most required of their captain and vice captain is obvious enough," Vice Captain Eric chimed in.

Captain Alan ruffled the hair on Arthur's bowed head. Vice Captain Eric—now patting Arthur on the shoulder—nodded, trying and failing to hold back a smile. It was clear how much Arthur was loved by the entire order.

"What do you mean by 'obvious?'" I asked, cocking my head.

Stale and Tiara also turned their curious gazes on Vice Captain Eric and Captain Alan. The two knights exchanged a look, then cast a glance at the still-bowing Arthur. Since he didn't seem keen on answering, his superior officers responded on his behalf.

"It's all about strength," they replied with perfect unity.

*Whoa! You can really tell they're brothers-in-arms! Is this what people mean when they say someone has muscle for brains?*

I struggled not to smile. Tiara covered her mouth with both hands, while Stale's eyes opened a bit wider. He was usually so levelheaded, but I understood why this shocked him too. Their "obvious" requirement was just about the simplest, most meat-brained thing I could imagine.

Now that Arthur had been acknowledged as his unit's second-in-command—the youngest knight to be promoted in the order's storied history—it was hard not to see him as the future commander already. It had only been five years since he joined too!

"Well, Arthur's already beaten Harrison in a few fights now, so I guess it was just a matter of time," Captain Alan said.

"His victory rate is even higher than the previous vice captain's," Vice Captain Eric added.

Captain Callum nodded. "When it comes to raw fighting talent, I'd put him in the top five knights in the whole order."

The trio made it all sound like the most natural thing in the world. Their praise left Arthur blushing.

“No, you’re exaggerating...”

“Arthur’s so amazing! Don’t you think so, Big Sister? Big Brother?” Tiara asked, her wavy blonde hair bouncing from her excitement. As her golden eyes sparkled, my heart swelled at the sight of my little sister...the heroine of this world.

“Well, he’d better be strong, since he’s one of Princess Pride’s imperial knights,” Stale said. He adjusted the black-framed glasses on his face, but he couldn’t conceal his genuine happiness. When he and Arthur met each other’s gaze, Stale smirked.

“I just didn’t wanna be weaker than my partner,” Arthur said.

Stale’s grin spread. The glint in his eyes was a blatant challenge.

Tiara jumped in. “Big Brother was so happy too! As soon as he heard that Arthur had been promoted, he—”

“Tiara,” Stale said tersely. “It’s time for us to leave. I’m sure Sir Arthur has a lot to do now that he’s a vice captain.”

Stale clamped a hand over Tiara’s mouth to shut her up, but it didn’t hide how flustered he was. I had to cover my mouth to stifle my own laughter.

“Well then, Arthur. I’ll see you again this afternoon,” I said.

“Bye, Arthur! See you later!” Tiara said.

Tiara and I waved goodbye while Stale bid farewell to the rest of the knights. We then returned to our carriage with Captain Alan and Captain Callum.

It was so weird that this—knights and carriages and princesses—was my life. Especially because nine years ago, I was just an ordinary, boring person who liked otome games. But that was my past, before I got reincarnated into the world of ORL, a series I obsessed over.

Tiara was supposed to be the game's protagonist, while Arthur and Stale were love interests.

I'd realized all this the day I gained my power of precognition. In this world, it was seen as the divine revelation of the future ruler and the official mark that I would inherit the throne. But it also allowed me to remember that past life, that life where I was just a normal eighteen-year-old girl. I'd played ORL so often in that life, and the third game was always my favorite. I'd burned through every possible route the game offered, but my memories of the first installment—and initially, the overarching plot—were hazy. With the awakening of my precognition, I faced the startling revelation that I was Tiara's older sister and the wicked, evil, last boss of the story.

As the villainous queen, I inflicted horrifying physical and emotional scars on the love interests and died at the end of every route. Tiara, the heroine, healed all the souls I wounded and stood together with them against the final boss—Queen Pride, aka me.

The game's story began one year from now. My all-consuming goal was to spare these people their in-game fates, especially the love interests Pride tortured in ORL. Of the five love interests, four of them had already formed harmonious relationships with Tiara.

Only *four* of the five.

Someone was still missing.

\*\*\*

“Damn it...”

The mere memory lit my cheeks on fire. I pressed my hand over my lips to keep from smiling, head down as I paced toward the training grounds. After seeing Pride's carriage off and bidding

farewell to the other knights, I slipped away to find some solitude in which to process everything that had just happened.

I'd nearly burst into tears so many times over. My father, the commander of the order, and Vice Commander Clark had appointed me vice captain of the Eighth Squadron. Then the older knights actually celebrated my promotion. After that, Princess Pride and the others rode all the way here from the castle to congratulate me. I knew Stale was incredibly busy learning to become seneschal, yet he still took time away from his duties just to see me.

Hearing that the captains had voted unanimously for me, even declaring I was among the top five knights in the order, was almost too much to bear. Even captains Alan and Callum, the senior knights I respected so dearly, had sung my praises in front of Pride. My face was so hot I could have cooked an egg on it.

### *Princess Pride.*

When I remembered her smile, blooming on her face like a lovely flower as she spread her arms for a hug, my heart sped up all over again. I could still feel her warmth against my body.

It had also been a reminder of just how much she'd grown into a woman over the past year. Both her elegance and delicate fragrance were inescapable. The look in her eyes was a calm, mature one, and that refinement had tempered her face as well. As for her body...

“Hnng!”

The memory of Princess Pride pressing up against me nearly sent my brain boiling again. I cradled my head and sank to the ground. Her hug had been deadly enough on its own, but her apparent ignorance of the ways her body had changed made it even worse. It was a vivid reminder that Princess Pride was no longer the eleven-year-old girl I'd first met—she was now a mature woman of seventeen. Her feminine charms had ensnared a number of new recruits at first sight, even before they knew of her impressive past.

“Why the hell’d she have to hug me like we’re still kids?!”

*She smelled so good! She was so soft! And close! And so damn cute!* My brain was screaming, but I gritted my teeth to keep it in. The image of her smile, so close to my face, lingered in my mind, but I had to wave it all away and get back to my training exercises.

“Arthur Beresford.”

I sprang forward when a voice called out to me, my thoughts going into overdrive. Right where I’d been standing, ten or so knives now jutted out of the ground. Then a single knight landed before me. I raised my sword instantly.

“Impressive,” the knight said, lifting his chin. He drew his own blade and sent it hurtling at me like it weighed nothing. I barely managed to dodge before dashing at him.

Possibly reading my moves, the knight rushed to meet me. I dug my heels into the ground and jumped into the air, opting to hold my sword in front of my vulnerable belly so I didn’t take a painful punch there. He stayed on the defensive.

Just when I thought I had him cornered, the knight sent a fresh spray of knives flying at me. Unable to twist out of the way in midair, I slashed them down to the ground. The metal blades clinked as they made contact. I held my sword aloft, diving straight toward my enemy’s skull. He dodged it with a single step backward, but that wasn’t good enough—I still got a second blade against his throat before he could escape.

“Good day, Captain Harrison,” I said.

“I forgot to mention something before. Sometime today you have to go see the former vice captain, Isidore Beaton, so you can complete the transfer of power.”

With the impromptu bout over, we both relaxed.

"You took your time today," Captain Harrison said matter-of-factly. "Finish the job faster next time." Then he turned and headed for the training grounds as though nothing had happened.

Captain Harrison led the Eighth Squadron, making him my direct superior. He liked greeting every member of his unit with a surprise attack, so this sort of thing had become a daily occurrence for me. But these ambushes weren't a tradition for the squadron, special training, a required role of the captain, or an act of contempt. Captain Harrison merely called them "a test of strength."

I admit, they were shocking at first. I really thought I might die during the first few. But the first time Captain Harrison and I took on a combat mission together, I realized these were just training. He wasn't *really* out for blood.

*Still... That was really terrifying.*

A chill ran down my spine. When I witnessed Captain Harrison's true strength in battle, I discovered just how much he'd been holding back all along and worried I'd joined the wrong squadron. Considering my ambitions, however, this was my only option.

"We'll have more things to talk about next time we meet." I said to no one in particular.

I hadn't had many chances to speak with fellow members of the Eighth Squadron. When I tried, their responses were sparse at best. At first, it made me think they didn't like me, but it turned out that was just how they were. Unlike other squadrons, the Eighth was a group of introverts who only really cared about getting stronger.

"Damn it!"

*It's no good. I'm just gettin' more and more nervous!*

I smacked my own cheeks to dispel the self-doubt. I'd been entrusted to lead these knights, and I couldn't let my seniors down—not the captains; not Vice Commander Clark, who was like a brother to me; and not my dad, the commander himself.

*Princess Pride, Stale, and Tiara were all so happy for me.*

Stale was too busy with his new training as seneschal to train with me this past year, but I'd sparred plenty with Captain Alan, Captain Callum, Vice Captain Eric, and Prime Minister Gilbert as well. Even my father helped out sometimes. And now that I'd be working alongside Captain Harrison, I'd have even more chances to get in sword practice.

*All the Eighth Squadron needs is "strength," but...*

"That's exactly what I'm already after!"

*Then I'll just have to get stronger. Strong enough to defeat every last enemy.*

*"Congratulations, Arthur!"*

It was all to protect the person I cared about. Stale was already making progress toward that end, so I couldn't slack off either.

*I'll never lose anything again.*

I bit the inside of my cheek and swallowed hard. With a glare at the whole world, I set off for my next training session.

\*\*\*

"By the way, Pride, do you remember the United Hanazuo Kingdom?"

I flinched at the name, willing my heart not to thrum away.

I'd been entertaining my guest in the parlor, but the name of that country, one Freesia had no official relationship with, knocked me off-balance. I stared at the man lounging in a chair across from me. Though he was beautiful—with his dark blue hair, jade eyes, charming smile, and androgynous features—I called this man my sworn friend and nothing more. Leon Adonis Coronaria was the crown prince of our ally nation Anemone, a kingdom bustling with

trade that sustained the continent. These days, he was a regular visitor as we worked together for the good of both of our kingdoms.

In fact, a year ago, Leon had met with a representative of the United Hanazuo Kingdom on my behalf. He spoke to them about forming a partnership. They never responded to my letters, but they traded extensively with Anemone—the latter being a commerce hub just a sea away—so I'd hoped Leon could break through their silence for me.

"Yes, I remember," I said, trying not to sound too eager.

"Six days ago, I visited the kingdom of Cercis—one half of the United Hanazuo Kingdom—to sell some exports," Leon said. "Their second-born prince brought up something unexpected. He said he'd like to strengthen their country's relationship with Freesia for the potential formation of an alliance. In fact, he mentioned your name in particular."

Leon's last sentence came out slightly deeper in tone than the rest.

The kingdom of Cercis was under the domain of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, which used to be two separate countries. Hearing that they were now open to trade negotiations was an incredible development on its own.

Tiara, also present for this meeting, cried out, "That's great news, Big Sister!"

Even Jack, the imperial guard, and Captains Alan and Callum couldn't hide their surprise.

"I think it will be five days from now. He said he'll be paying a visit to Freesia, so he hopes you can meet him then," Leon informed me.

"Huh?!" My eyes went wide. Tiara was gaping at me as well. We got plenty of foreign visitors who dropped in with little warning, but this was a kingdom we'd approached over and over with no

response. Now they were sending not just a messenger, but a member of the royal family. It was unthinkable.

“Leon, did the prince ask you to tell me this?”

“He did. I was a little surprised too. But it was right after I mentioned I’d be visiting Freesia soon, and you’d already said you hoped your two kingdoms could form a relationship.”

Leon chuckled a bit awkwardly. He would understand well just how odd this whole arrangement was. Using him as a messenger was impolite, to say the least. Leon was just as much royalty as this prince from Cercis. He and Leon weren’t even friends; they were just trade partners.

I ducked my head in shame. “I’m sorry about that.”

“There’s no need for you to apologize, Pride,” Leon said with a smile.

But I couldn’t help it. Leon had to travel five days to get from Cercis to Anemone by sea. For him to be here now meant he’d rushed to Freesia without a moment’s rest.

“I was eager to see you,” he admitted, but that didn’t make me feel any better.

“Is it really such an urgent matter?” asked Tiara, cocking her head.

*Yes. That man is in quite a hurry.*

I tried to recall what I knew about Cercis’s royalty in the year leading up to the start of ORL’s story. The prince rushed to Freesia—that I remembered. At least here he’d sent a messenger in the form of Leon. Poor taste for royals, perhaps, but it came as somewhat of a relief.

“Would you like me to act as an intermediary on the day of the visit?”

He leaned in, brow furrowed in concern. Removing my hand that had snuck up to rub my temple, I shook my head vehemently and smiled. I couldn't disrespect him the same way Cercis had.

"Negotiations for an alliance should take about three days," Leon mused. "Pride, can I return to Freesia again in eight days?"

He was clearly still unsettled about the whole thing, but I could see him mentally running through the calculations. Eight days wouldn't conflict with the visit from Cercis, and he'd be able to get the details of the negotiations.

I agreed.

"Good," Leon said, then rattled off a few reminders before taking his leave. "If you run into any trouble, please send a messenger my way. I'll come straight here to be an intermediary. Call for me right away if the prince causes you any problems."

While I appreciated that he wanted to support me, he was going a little bit overboard. Sure, this prince from Cercis was rude—and maybe the mannerless fellow would insult me too—but I didn't need Leon placing himself in between us as an intermediary. Nevertheless, he seemed ready to rush to my side the moment I asked for it. I imagined that the moment he climbed into his carriage home, he'd start making plans with his prime minister for a return trip here.

I simply thanked Leon and told him I'd contact him if there were any problems. But from the look in his eyes, I couldn't help but worry about this negotiation.

\*\*\*

"Is that clear, Pride? If you can hit me even once, then victory is yours. If you can't hit me by the time Arthur arrives, then I win. I won't use my special power, so you can chase me if you wish."

Having finished his lunch, Stale had changed into training gear. Tiara stood in a corner of the practice room along with Captain Alan and Captain Callum. I faced Stale as his opponent. My maids were busy mending my training gear so it would fit again, so I was wearing one of my usual dresses as I squared up against Stale and raised my sword.

I nodded to show I understood.

Arthur was running late due to finalizing the details of his promotion. It was Tiara who'd suggested I step in as Stale's training partner in the meantime. At first, Stale had insisted it was too dangerous, but when I slumped with disappointment, he gave in. He did insist that we change the parameters a bit on account of my current garb. Instead of sparring, I simply had to catch him and land a hit. He wasn't allowed to do anything but run and dodge. This setup brought evil game-Pride to mind, but the fact that our swords were merely the kind used for practice eased my anxieties. Presumably, he didn't want to make things too taxing for me, even though he knew how strong I could be.

I set my feet and gripped my blade in my dominant hand, determined to give this my all even if it wasn't a real match. I couldn't let my little brother-in-law get bored.

Tiara shouted the starting signal, and we darted toward each other. Stale traversed the large practice room as fast as he could, while I did my best to keep up in my heavy dress. In contrast, Stale wore lightweight training clothes. As a man—and the one with the superior leg muscles here—he could move far more easily than me. He ran along the walls, doing laps out of reach without even needing his teleportation power. Just as he looked to be gearing himself up for a jump...

*Bang!*

Stale's shoulders jerked as I kicked off the floor. He let out an "Oh no!" and tried to spin toward me, but I was already looming over him, my dress billowing around me as I hung in the air. Tiara and the imperial knights cried out in awe, but Stale didn't have that luxury. He'd sparred with me enough to know about my jumping ability, so he probably assumed I'd do this, yet the sheer distance evidently surprised him.

I sailed toward Stale. No, not just toward him—my jump took me toward the wall. I kicked off, rocketing back at him so quickly I couldn't control myself in midair. Acting on the sound, Stale recoiled out of the way as I brought my sword down. He slashed upward automatically, managing to deflect my attack just in time. Still, the force inevitably knocked him to his knees. He gritted his teeth as his brow creased with regret.

He hastily adjusted his glasses from where he crouched on one knee. No sooner had his fingers pulled away than Stale regripped his sword to swat away my next strike. Metal clashed against metal with a screech.

"You never disappoint, Stale," I said with a laugh.

My ability to fight him stemmed from the fact that I was the evil Queen Pride from the game. Her last boss combat skills surpassed anything any normal human body could achieve. And she could use more than just swords. Even fighting hand-to-hand or with a firearm, Queen Pride was terrifyingly formidable.

This bout was stacked against Stale. I got to attack as I liked while he could only flee or defend. He couldn't return the aggression or use his special power.

And it was getting to him.

"Don't jump around in your dress!" he shouted with genuine frustration. I couldn't help but chuckle.

He steadied himself and put some space between him and the walls. Clearly, he wasn't going to let me get away with the same trick twice. He wanted me to have to work hard but not actually be in any danger, but his pride kept him from just conceding.

Stale raced around the room at top speed. I kicked off the ground to shoot after him. If I could fly over his head, I could cut him off.

Captain Alan broke into cheers, while Captain Callum silently swept his bangs aside. It had to be a sight for them—two members of the royal family going all out, displaying more fighting prowess than people with our station needed to possess, even with the restrictions of the game in place. Perhaps we were inspiring them to work even harder at their own training.

Of course, a prince and princess were never supposed to experience a true battlefield. Not in theory, at least.

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"I can't believe a representative from Hanazuo is coming in five days. They've ignored us for so long," Captain Alan muttered as he poured himself more liquor.

We were all gathered late at night in his room. Earlier in the day, Prince Leon had left and Princess Pride had told the queen all about the situation with the Hanazuo alliance.

"It surprised me too," Vice Captain Eric said. He took a sip of his drink, eyes fixed on Captain Alan. "Such a sudden visit is unheard of."

"Her Highness had been writing letters to Hanazuo, hoping to form a relationship with them," Captain Callum chimed in, looking thoughtful. Perhaps he was reflecting on Prince Leon's words. "But

this is really sudden...and they're even talking about an alliance now." His eyes fell on each of us in turn, searching for agreement.

With a wary tilt of my head, I ventured, "It...definitely seems sudden. Doesn't it take ten days to reach Hanazuo by royal carriage?" I brought my own glass to my lips, seeking confirmation from Vice Captain Eric.

"Indeed it does," he replied. "It means he asked Prince Leon to be his messenger, then left for Freesia the very next day. I just can't make any sense of it."

Vice Captain Eric took a swig, then set his glass back down on the table. Crossing his arms, he leaned back in his chair beside me, and turned to Captains Alan and Callum for more details.

However, it was Stale who spoke up. "Prince Leon said the second-born prince was looking to form a friendship with my elder sister in particular, right?" Captains Alan and Callum immediately nodded at his words.

Over the past year, Stale had frequently come to visit me and the other three imperial knights. We all gathered in Captain Alan's room for drinks when Stale was done with his seneschal training for the day. He would simply teleport to my location and join in our drinking and chatter. We welcomed him with open arms, though I secretly thought he was more interested in hearing stories about Princess Pride than anything else.

"Yes, I remember that," Captain Callum said. "Although, in all honesty, Princess Pride receives quite a lot of similar requests these days..."

His expression turned grim. He looked down at his glass to break eye contact with Stale while the rest of us let out faint groans. Ever since Princess Pride called off her engagement to Prince Leon, correspondence and even marriage proposals from various Freesian nobles had been flooding in. She got some from foreign royalty as

well. But since this would be Pride's second engagement, it was necessary for her to be extra careful in selecting a fiancé. She had never once expressed a desire to meet with any of these suitors after reading their letters, leaving the position of her fiancé vacant.

"Does that mean the prince is opening discussions with Freesia for the same reason?" Vice Captain Eric asked. His keen eyes swept over us, measuring our reactions.

His theory wasn't unreasonable. The second-born prince of Cercis could have finally gotten around to contacting Freesia in an attempt to marry Princess Pride, like so many other princes. It was proof of the incredible value of Freesia and its heir.

"The second-born prince turned seventeen this year...just like her," Stale said.

There was no rule that Princess Pride's fiancé had to be older than her. Freesia wouldn't reject an engagement between two seventeen-year-olds. In fact, the prince's newfound interest in forming a relationship with Freesia could very well stem from the fact that he was now the right age to be considered as a possible fiancé for Pride.

A thought rose to my mind, and I turned to Stale. "Hear any other rumors about Hanazuo during that seneschal training of yours?"

Since Stale was shadowing Vest, the current seneschal, he easily could have overheard something useful—Vest's duties included diplomacy and foreign affairs.

"They've generally refused all contact with outsiders for the last hundred years or so," Stale said. "The only land they trade with is Anemone, the largest commerce hub. Cercis was known for their abundant gold and mineral deposits before they closed off the kingdom, but Uncle Vest says that King Lance—who naturally ascended the throne as firstborn prince—is a fine king who stays

abreast of the goings-on of the world. There's very little information on Prince Cedric, the second-born prince."

We all groaned in response to Stale. Everyone's expression got a little tighter, and the tension was up. A year earlier, the five of us had witnessed firsthand what could happen when a second- and third-born prince tried to undermine their older sibling.

"Well, the fine firstborn princess will have her fine younger brother as her seneschal when she rules," I said to break the silence. I patted Stale on the shoulder, and the other knights nodded deeply.

Stale looked a bit startled by the sudden praise. After a beat, he returned my smile with one of his own, brimming with faith and confidence. "I guess we'll find out in five days, for better or worse. I want you guarding her at all times when the prince comes to visit. Be sure to adjust your schedule."

Stale took a long drink, perhaps to hide his embarrassment. He met everyone else's eyes, and the other knights dipped their heads in assent. Captain Callum would arrange our schedules—all except mine. Their expressions told me I was *meant* to be excluded somehow. I furrowed my brow in concern. After all the unfair doubt I'd cast upon Prince Leon and the worry I'd caused Stale back then, maybe he was wary of trusting my opinion again.

But Stale simply filled my glass with more booze, as if to distract me. He set the bottle down with a thud, spooking me, and faced me at last.

"More importantly..." the prince began, pressing his fingers to the black frames of his glasses and meeting my eyes. "I'm not satisfied yet, Arthur."

He'd lowered his voice. To an outsider, it might sound like he was scolding me. I just kept my mouth shut and waited.

"Don't think something as simple as being the vice captain of the Eighth Squadron is good enough for me," he said.

I gulped. “Simple?” *My promotion was “simple”?*

Stale’s mouth curled around a smile. He hummed as he rested his elbow on the table and jabbed a finger at me. “You still have a long way to go. I want to see more out of you, Arthur.”

*Stale really must be drunk.* I kept quiet, not wanting to spoil the prince’s rare good mood. His words hung in the air.

I’d received my promotion in front of a crowd of knights, so Stale never had a chance to speak with me properly about it. After training that day, I’d spent the night celebrating with my knight friends, so Stale couldn’t speak with me then either. Plus, Stale was busy with his own duties. This was the first chance he had to comment on the promotion, so he must’ve been waiting to tell me his thoughts.

I swiped his hand away and grinned. “Hah! I know that, obviously!”

Stale was always so careful not to consume too much alcohol, but this was the first time he’d ever gotten drunk in front of anyone else. Was he that happy for me? Or maybe that nervous, to comment on the promotion? Both? A glance at the other three knights told me they’d already figured it out.

“When exactly will you be satisfied with Arthur’s rank, Prince Stale?” Captain Alan said, emboldened now that the knights realized how tipsy Stale was.

The prince smirked mischievously. “Well, let’s see... I guess I’ll stop pressing him once he’s commander of the whole order.”

*Pfft!* I spit out an entire mouthful of liquor. The other knights exchanged bemused smiles at Stale’s wild request and my embarrassing reaction.

“What?! You little...! You can’t say that in front of the captains!” I spluttered.

I glanced back and forth between Stale and the knights he just casually suggested I'd surpass someday.

"Oh? You're not confident you can ever be better than Commander Roderick?" Stale said.

"The Eighth Squadron's nothin' like the entire order!" I said. "The commander's gotta be the best at everything, not just with a sword!"

*Wait. That makes it sound like I think I could beat Dad if it came to a sword fight.*

Captain Alan caught on first and barked a laugh. Vice Captain Eric and Captain Callum noticed the slip as well and cracked up, saying, "That's Arthur, all right."

"So you understand the problem. Then hurry up and improve the rest of your skills too," Stale snapped.

"Well, it's not exactly easy to become the commander of the order," Vice Captain Eric said.

Captain Callum nodded his agreement. "Your capabilities are an important part of it, certainly. But unlike captains and vice captains, who can change positions at any time depending on the unit's requirements or the captain's wishes, the commander and vice commander of the order never change unless they're slain in battle, choose to retire, or get relieved from duty."

"Commander Roderick and Vice Commander Clark have still got their jobs for a long while to come!" Captain Alan said.

Resting my chin in my hand, I smiled. They were right. Dad and Clark weren't super old or anything—they could keep going for another ten or even twenty years. I breathed a quiet sigh of relief as the captains spoke up to defend me.

A dry chuckle escaped Stale's lips. He clapped a hand on my shoulder, red-faced, earning him a couple glares. "Then I guess it'll still be a while before you reach the level that'll satisfy me."

"Moron! I'm already doin' whatever I'm able to. I'm an imperial knight, so it's my duty to look after Princess Pride."

The other knights snickered this time. Even with all I'd done, Stale still insisted it wasn't good enough. My face was heating up with anger.

"I won't ever lose a sword fight, at least," I muttered, turning my head away.

This childish petulance only drew more laughter. Captain Alan snatched a bottle of booze and rose to stand behind my chair. He ruffled my silver hair, ponytail and all, like I was a little kid.

"C'mon now!" he said. "I know how good you are. You've put up a real fight lately when we go at it unarmed."

I cried out at the sudden treatment and stammered, "P-please don't do that!"

"So the next skills you need to master are marksmanship and military strategy. Isn't that right, Mr. Future Commander?" Vice Captain Eric teased.

"You're not as skilled with firearms as Eric, but you're hardly lacking," Captain Callum said. "You're a fast thinker too, Arthur. That just leaves military strategy. Would you like me to teach you sometime?"

"Oh! Good thinking! You've gotta improve over the next ten or twenty years or so! You don't want the great Callum to surpass you now, do you, Mr. Future Commander?" Captain Alan said.

I was helpless to do anything but hang my head as Captain Alan refilled my cup. I covered my face, but it only burned hotter thanks to the booze and the topic of conversation.

"Please lay off me a little," I groaned. "But yeah, I'd appreciate your guidance in strategizing."

Captain Callum nodded. "Alan, stop making Arthur drink so much."

"It won't be the same as what knights learn, but I can teach you some basics in strategizing too," Stale offered. "That is, if you can keep up with a brain like mine, Mr. Future Commander."

That was one jab too many. I couldn't take any more of their backhanded offers and snide comments. I snapped and grabbed for the person I knew I could lunge at—Stale. We scrabbled there at the table, pulling at each other's hair. My ponytail flew loose before we finally stopped our mad clawing.

"I guess," I said, still panting, "if you're free at night, I wouldn't mind those lessons." Chest heaving, I tied my hair back up.

"No problem," Stale said. "I'll keep it nice and strict so even an idiot could understand."

Stale checked his glasses for damage, clutched his forehead, then glared at me. He grabbed my ponytail with one final, vicious yank.

"Argh! Wh-what the hell was that, Stale?!"

"What if you'd cracked my glasses?!"

"Well, you started it!" I retorted, desperately trying not to fall out of my chair as my body was pulled backward.

"Arthur's the only person outside the royal family who could ever do a thing like that to Prince Stale," Captain Alan remarked quietly. The other knights had all backed away from the scuffle.

He was right, although he didn't realize that I'd pretty much always acted this way around Stale. As time went on, I put up less of a front around the prince, even with the other knights present.

"You're quite correct," Captain Callum said. "Prince Stale is the only person he talks to like that, as far as we know."

"Well, they're both still teenagers," Vice Captain Eric piped up.

The other knights hadn't been teenagers in a while. We probably looked like silly kids to them. But they just refilled their glasses and clinked them together, toasting to their youthful future seneschal and commander.

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The United Hanazuo Kingdom consisted of two smaller neighboring countries constantly at war. About one hundred years ago, the threat of invasion forced them to form an alliance and unify into a single nation. However, they remained unchanged and independent in both name and culture. An old rumor said that the royal families and aristocracies on each side still resented each other, and the alliance of the last hundred years existed in name only.

On their own, the kingdoms of Cercis and Chinensis possessed less land than Freesia. Even together, they were only a third our size—though considering how big Freesia was, that was nothing to sneeze at. Still, they could trade with each other for everything they needed. The village closest to Cercis's castle sat along the ocean, allowing them to easily trade with Anemone as well. Chinensis, however, currently refused all contact with other countries except for Cercis. Even Cercis had no formal relationship with any foreign country aside from Chinensis and Anemone.

They'd certainly never sought out a relationship with Freesia before now.

"Your Highness, the carriage from the kingdom of Cercis has just arrived," said Jack, my imperial guard.

I braced myself for the formal meeting with the kingdom of Cercis, one half of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. It opened up an opportunity for us to form an alliance not just with Cercis, but perhaps with Chinensis as well.

"Let's go, Big Sister," Tiara said.

She'd been waiting outside my room. The entire royal family was going to join the meeting as a sign of respect. The second-born prince of Cercis had only specifically requested me, however.

I imagined Stale was already there, as he was shadowing Uncle Vest, the seneschal. My escort included Jack, Arthur, and Captain Callum, as well as my personal maids, Lotte and Mary. They led me to the throne room with Tiara at my side.

A year ago, the firstborn prince of Cercis had ascended to the throne to take over for the previous king. From what I'd heard, he was a brilliant ruler with great foresight, which was why he made the decision to begin trading with Anemone. The king's younger brother, the second-born prince, was the one visiting us today.

We entered the throne room and found that Mother, Father, Uncle Vest, and Stale were already present. Prime Minister Gilbert, Tiara, and I took our places in line and prepared to greet the prince.

If we formed an alliance with Cercis and therefore also with Hanazuo today, it could reshape our world. Hanazuo possessed large stores of minerals and gold, which was why so many other countries were eager to trade with them. The gold of Cercis and gems of Chinensis were available back before those countries unified and sealed themselves off. Today, however, they were rare and precious commodities. Many members of royalty or nobility sought out these jewels.

But I wasn't just after jewels; if we formed an alliance with a faraway land like Hanazuo, we could start chipping away at the countries near them as well. The more lands we connected with, the

more trustworthy we would seem to others, elevating Freesia's standing in the world. This was even truer because of how Hanazuo had kept its borders sealed all this time. If we could crack into a place like that, other countries would certainly take notice.

The doors of the throne room opened. A young man with blond hair stepped gracefully onto the red carpet cutting through the room, his servants in tow. His hair fluttered just above his shoulders. The prince practically glittered from the accessories all over his body, from his ears to his neck to his wrists. He jingled softly with each muffled step as he displayed the precious treasures of his kingdom. He wore a gold earring in each of his earlobes, a golden chain around his neck, and gold bracelets around his wrists, as well as gold rings on his fingers—some with gems the same crimson color as his eyes. A few, including both his middle fingers, even sported *two* rings.

I wasn't sure if it was all meant to match his hair or display his homeland's specialty, but he shimmered as he stepped into the room. The prince's red eyes alone burned in stark contrast to the rest of him, creating a striking first impression. Somehow, his face outshone all of the flashy accessories. His well-shaped nose and long eyelashes framed a masculine and handsome face, while his hair was slightly wild and disheveled, almost like a lion's mane.

"I am the second-born prince of the kingdom of Cercis, part of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. My name is Cedric Silva Lowell."

He hugged an arm around himself and bowed. The slow, deep motion sent all his accessories jingling again, and the sheer quantity of his adornments impressed me. I even spotted one pendant I recognized from the game's backstory among them.

"You have my utmost gratitude for meeting with me today, Your Majesty."

He flashed an elegant smile at Mother. It seemed to contain a light of its own, so brilliant and bold it edged toward inappropriate.

This was the fifth and final love interest of the first “Our Ray of Light” game in the series. By the time the game began, he was already a victim of Queen Pride’s relentless torment.

ORL began on the day of Tiara’s sixteenth birthday party. The wicked Queen Pride had never once allowed her sister to have any kind of birthday festivities. That day was the first time in years that Tiara was permitted to leave her isolated tower and appear in a formal setting. The party was Pride’s way of announcing the fiancé she’d prepared for Tiara.

Now, that fiancé was standing right before our eyes—Prince Cedric.

Freesia was unlike other kingdoms, in that it was ruled by queens. Once the succeeding queen was decided, any other princesses had to vacate the castle. Some married into the aristocracy and upper classes of Freesia—and even though that was effectively a demotion, they had little choice in the matter. If they weren’t going to become queen, they needed to marry off elsewhere so they wouldn’t be seen as a potential threat. A princess who could challenge the claim to the throne could start a rebellion or attempt an assassination. Therefore, most princesses ended up marrying the firstborn or second-born princes of other countries and helped strengthen Freesia’s alliances. My own mother was an only child. However, in the past there had been times when a queen’s younger sister married off into another kingdom and gave birth to a son who returned to be the next prince consort, so it was always possible for a queen’s errant family to return in some form.

In the game, Queen Pride’s objective was to eliminate the obstacle of her younger sister by marrying her off to Prince Cedric and forcing her to leave Freesia. I knew this firsthand from playing every route in the game. The queen always announced her daughters’ fiancés for the first time during our birthday parties.

It was an old custom in our kingdom, as I learned from my instructors as a child, but it was also the exact moment when the game started.

At the second-born princess's birthday party, Pride announced that a complete stranger would be Tiara's fiancé. He was a wonderful prince from a foreign land. Being temporarily freed from her tower, Tiara would be thrilled to go off on a whirlwind romance with this prince, or so one would think... In reality, it was just Freesian custom.

The current me had no intention of forcing Tiara to marry anyone. In fact, if she fell in love with Prince Cedric now, a year early, I was prepared to fully support her as her older sister. *Even if I kind of wish she would have gone for Stale, Arthur, or Leon.*

Out of all the possible routes in the game, however, Prince Cedric's seemed the most likely to come to fruition. They were already engaged during the game, and art of the two together took up a lot of space on the game's box art. Cedric and Tiara's romance was featured in the manga adaptation, the bonus drama CDs, and even the light novels. Cedric was an important character in the game's plot too—he was the heroine's princely fiancé in the first game. Even before she entered his route, he was constantly flirting with Tiara. But he had his own reasons for seeking to win Tiara's heart.

"I have a single purpose in requesting an audience with Your Majesty here in the kingdom of Freesia," Prince Cedric said.

The conversation between Mother and Prince Cedric washed over me as I mentally rehearsed what I knew of the backstory in ORL. In the game's story, Prince Cedric suddenly appeared in our kingdom one year before the start of the events in the game, which was *now* in this world. I braced for what he was about to say. Despite how clear his reasons were, I would need to act as surprised as Mother and everyone else.

I gulped and focused on the prince. Just as he finished speaking, our eyes briefly met and my heart skipped a beat. He cast an elegant smile at me.

“I’m here to ask that you give consideration to the formation of an alliance with the kingdom of Cercis, my homeland, and the United Hanazuo Kingdom as a whole,” he said.

*Wait. Is that all?*

I had to press my lips together. The surprise trying to leave my mouth hanging open was actually genuine.

“However, I must sincerely apologize for the fact that the Cercian king is currently unable to leave the kingdom due to personal circumstances, and therefore, I’m here to request that you travel to our homeland for the signing of the documents,” Prince Cedric said.

“What personal circumstances?” Mother asked.

“I intend to explain that at a later time,” the prince said with another smile. His vagueness made my stomach clench, but he didn’t elaborate. “My kingdom is a land of gold. Chinensis is a land of minerals. I can promise that forming an alliance with us will be beneficial to Freesia.”

He was brimming with confidence, but I bit back the urge to give him a piece of my mind. *He still hasn’t even brought up the main reason why he’s here, and it’s gonna get a lot more awkward for him if he puts it off too long!*

“Freesia opposes the institution of slavery, just as Hanazuo does,” he went on. “As the world’s thinking begins to change, my older brother, King Lance, believes it’s time for us to unite with lands that share our convictions.”

*Yeah, that makes sense.* It wasn’t a lie, but I also knew it wasn’t the reason he’d paid us such a sudden visit. In the game, he arrived here urgently and pleaded for an alliance. So why was he acting so

laid-back now? The inexplicable differences were nagging at me something fierce.

Mother asked a few more questions. Eventually, she and Prince Cedric agreed to meet in three days to ascertain their respective requirements for an alliance. Today was going to be spent reviewing these requirements, tomorrow would be for hammering out details, and the day after tomorrow was the final confirmation. Usually, we'd follow this by signing the appropriate documents, but Prince Cedric wasn't an official proxy for the Cercian king, so Mother would have to travel to Cercis to finalize the alliance.

Prince Cedric was shown to a guest room where he could stay for the next three days. The moment the guards led him from the throne room, silence swept in to fill the cavernous space.

At last, Mother heaved a loud sigh. "Pride, Stale, Tiara—what do you three think?"

She sat upright, but I could see the exhaustion weighing her down. If not for the knights and guards, no doubt she would've slumped over. For the past year, Mother had gradually been showing me more and more of her true self. As her guard came down, I glimpsed the true weight of the crown upon her head. I'd even caught her resting her head against a table and groaning of her exhaustion as soon as everyone else but family had exited the room.

"An alliance isn't a bad idea in itself," I said. "Prince Cedric promised the alliance would be with Hanazuo in addition to Cercis alone."

*Although, the real reason he wants an alliance will prove to be a bit of a problem.* I swallowed those words. Despite what I knew, the alliance between Hanazuo and Freesia would still be a strong one.

"I agree with Elder Sister," Stale said. "However, I do wonder why the second-born prince would come to propose an alliance

alone, without so much as the king, seneschal, or prime minister at his side.”

Tiara nodded at Stale’s remark. “I also found it strange that he only brought guards and maids with him.”

Evidently, both my siblings were equally put off by the arrangement.

It wasn’t that unusual for a king to send a member of the royal family as a proxy...but when it came to official negotiations with a foreign country, it was unthinkable to exclude the seneschal or prime minister. Yet Prince Cedric had arrived alone for his very first visit to such a large kingdom. Cercis had kept diplomacy to a minimum all this time, so perhaps its prince had little knowledge of the proper procedures and formalities for dealing with other nations.

“I certainly hope he wouldn’t think of coming here to propose an alliance without the permission of his king,” Mother murmured with a tilt of her head.

Sure, this was the younger brother of the king, but the prince couldn’t possibly do something as reckless as negotiate an alliance on his own. However...

*Mother’s got it right.*

I schooled my face into passivity as I flashed back to a scene from the game. The reason for Cedric’s visit and the way he presented himself were different, but I knew from playing ORL that Mother’s guess was more accurate than she realized. In the game, Cedric left nothing but a single letter behind before heading for Freesia to conduct his own negotiations.

The character of Cedric Silva Lowell was nothing like Leon. Where Leon was the prince of sensuality, Cedric was the prince of narcissism, spoiled by living in a closed-off kingdom and by the Cercian people themselves. Cedric had learned to place his faith in

his God-given beauty. But up until a year before the start of the game, he possessed one crucial weakness. A complete defect.

Cedric was incredibly ignorant.

For his own reasons, he'd never spent any time in study of any sort. The result was a shockingly naive, oblivious man—an outright idiot. Even when the people around him insisted he try to pursue some sort of knowledge, he staunchly refused.

In the game, this resulted in Tiara often having to teach Cedric about the world. Including characters in flashback scenes, Tiara was one of five whom the arrogant Cedric ever listened to, with two others being Queen Pride and Stale. In Queen Pride's case, she was only trying to torment him further. She not only wounded his heart but made use of him as he suffered underneath her heel. Once the main story of ORL began, he was no longer childish, cocky, and ignorant, but that came at a steep price. Queen Pride turned him into a dignified prince with sufficient knowledge, but in the process, Cedric lost his ability to trust anyone around him. He even said, "Until a year ago, I was a stupid brat who didn't know anything."

Tiara proved the only exception to Cedric's distrust of others. Despite his arrogant, overbearing personality, she always approached him with a gentle smile and kind heart. Before Cedric realized it, Tiara stole *his* heart and taught him how to love and trust again. In the second half of the game, he revealed his burdens in a scene that made him a very popular character among fans. And while he still had a childish side to him—which often emerged whenever Tiara helped him learn something new—he could also be romantic and affectionate. Players who loved cocky love interests couldn't get enough of Cedric. However...

"Good afternoon, my beautiful Princess Pride. Might I borrow a few moments of your time?"

*What exactly is going on here?*

After the meeting in the throne room, Tiara and I returned to my bedroom to relax, only to have Prince Cedric himself turn up at my door. I wasn't the only one shocked by this—Tiara, Arthur, Captain Callum, Jack, Lotte, and Mary all gaped at the prince.

"Um... Of course, if you'll have me," I said.

*Why me and not Tiara?!* Maybe befriending me was merely a step toward pursuing her. He grinned at my acquiescence and offered his hand, his blond hair glimmering gloriously. When I took it, he didn't lead me anywhere; he simply stood there holding my hand in his, then requested I give him a tour of the castle.

"What about them?" he asked, looking past me.

I followed his gaze toward my imperial knights, Captain Callum and Arthur. The system of having knights constantly guarding me like this was new even in our kingdom. It was probably quite strange to Cedric's eyes.

"These are my imperial knights," I said, then pointed at each of them in turn. "Captain Callum of the Third Squadron and Vice Captain Arthur of the Eighth Squadron. They're here to protect me, and they make for very reliable partners."

Prince Cedric approached the knights, squinting as though scrutinizing their faces.

"Wow. Not too bad. But still..."

He chuckled quietly while muttering to himself. Captain Callum and Arthur stood frozen, blinking in confusion, straight-backed and tense. Was Cedric commenting on their faces? He was a narcissist who prided himself on nothing but his looks. Perhaps he was holding my knights up to the same standard.

Prince Cedric squeezed my hand again and finally finished his analysis of the knights. Then he led me off into the castle. Just when I was about to ask what he'd like to see...

"A-allow me to join you!" Tiara cut in, rushing over to us.  
"I'd like to hear all about the United Hanazuo Kingdom too! May I impose, Prince Cedric?"

The prince's eyes widened at her pleasant smile. A moment later, he recovered and said with a laugh, "Why, of course."

*Is Tiara already smitten by the prince? I guess there is a reason he's the most popular route.*

I caught a glance of Arthur breathing a sigh of relief, likely because he wouldn't have to leave Tiara alone in order to guard me. He couldn't possibly know she was about to embark on the Cedric route of ORL.

"You two are such beautiful young ladies, Princess Pride, Princess Tiara. Do you go everywhere together?" Prince Cedric said as we walked.

"We do!" Tiara chirped before I could get a word in. "We're always together. Big Sister's very kind, so she lets me tag along with her."

"What a coincidence. I was raised alongside my older brother too."

As Prince Cedric spoke to Tiara, I couldn't help but notice how beautiful their matching golden locks looked side by side. *She really must have fallen for him at first sight.* I needed to get myself out of the way, in that case, as I had one of them in each hand. But as I went to release them...

*Whoosh.*

Someone touched my hair while I was caught in mid-thought. I flinched and turned to find Prince Cedric with my hair draped over his fingers, smiling at me.

"Such beautiful crimson hair. And my, it smells lovely."

Seeing that I'd frozen stiff, he bent his tall body over me, peering into my eyes. As soon as I met his passionate gaze, he pressed his lips against my hair.

"Wha—?!"

I couldn't move a muscle. This was the last thing I ever expected. Prince Cedric merely smirked, almost triumphant in his glee. I let my head droop to hide my reaction. Then something jingled above me, and suddenly a cross-shaped pendant appeared in front of my eyes.

*My... My hair?! He kissed my hair?! I didn't even feel it like I do when people kiss my hand! But... But, but, but, it was sooo much more embarrassing! He did it right in front of Tiara, Arthur, and Captain Callum too!*

Heat was surging up my neck and into my face, but Prince Cedric merely tucked my hair back into place with his usual elegant smile.

"Pardon me," he said. "I couldn't help myself. Your hair was simply too beautiful."

*You absolutely could help yourself!*

As much as I wanted to yell at him, it sadly wasn't an option. And he certainly wasn't smiling like a man who felt any guilt for his actions.

"This is the proper place for a kiss, isn't it?" Prince Cedric murmured, pressing his lips to the back of my hand.

This second attack lit another fire in my face.

*Why does this feel so familiar?*

*"Pardon me. I couldn't help myself. Your hair was simply too beautiful."*

*"This is the proper place for a kiss, isn't it?"*

The lines came back to me: in ORL, Cedric said these things to Tiara during his three-day stay in the castle after the announcement of their engagement.

"I beg your pardon, Prince Cedric," Captain Callum interjected. "Despite your status as royalty, I can't allow you to go any further than that."

Captain Callum never took his eyes off the prince as he spoke. Arthur slid in front of me protectively and pulled Tiara aside by the back of her dress.

This wasn't like the time I spent with Leon. He'd also been flirtatious when we met a year ago, but back then, he was my fiancé. It wasn't as if any foreign prince could get away with behavior like that.

"I apologize," Prince Cedric said. "It seems I've been taken captive by the charms of Princess Pride."

His voice held no humility at all. As much as I hated to admit it, all that overflowing confidence—plus his dazzling smile—made for an alluring display. This was the power of ORL's most popular love interest.

"Your Highness," he said, "I'm a prisoner to your beauty. I have a feeling the three days I spend here will be very enjoyable."

*What happened to the alliance?! Not to mention the real reason you came here in the first place.*

I swallowed my retort. Prince Cedric took my hand again and began to lead me around the castle to resume our tour. I hoped I could contain it to just the royal residence. I figured I'd start with the library.

*This is bad. My thoughts are all jumbled.* In my past life, I was never put off by the narcissistic types. I even genuinely enjoyed his route with Tiara. But here and now, I couldn't think of anything but his tragic backstory. I wanted to scream, "You don't have time to play

around!" He should have been wooing Tiara, but instead it was like his route had begun here and now—and I was his love interest instead of Tiara.

When Cedric was introduced as Tiara's fiancé in the game, he spent their first three days together making all kinds of fierce advances toward her even though they were basically strangers. Tiara, who had no exposure to men outside of Stale, grew flustered by Cedric's attention. His aggressive advances were pretty typical for an otome game, but he wasn't actually doing it out of love for Tiara. He had his own reasons for pursuing her so relentlessly.

"Oh!"

I made a little noise before I could stop myself. Prince Cedric asked if something was wrong, but all I could do was blink at him now that the revelation had hit me. *Don't tell me he's doing this for the same reason he pursued Tiara in the game. No, it can't be. But if he really does have some "plan" behind the way he's acting with me...*

Prince Cedric smiled calmly as I stared. He probably just believed I was so taken by his beauty I couldn't look away. He reached out to stroke my cheek while I stood there frozen, desperately trying to sort out my thoughts. Then his handsome, masculine face was tilting toward mine.



*Wait, what?! Oh, right! I remember a scene like this!* It was the moment that, as the two locked eyes, Cedric attempted to kiss Tiara. At that point, the player could enter any love interest's route. But in the game, the kiss was interrupted just in time by Stale, who—

“P-pardon me!”

Prince Cedric’s lips hovered a hair’s breadth from mine when a hand jammed between us, blocking my vision and forcing Prince Cedric to reflexively jerk back. Bewildered, I looked toward the interloper.

It wasn’t Stale but Arthur who had interrupted the display. I hadn’t even had time to react yet to the threat of a kiss, but Arthur had swooped right in. He kept his hand in place as he wedged his body between the prince and me, hiding me behind him.

Even seeing nothing but his back, I could feel the anger tensing through Arthur. Perhaps he was mad at Cedric blatantly disregarding Captain Callum’s warning from only a moment ago. I’d never witnessed Arthur radiating such intensity. I didn’t need to see his face to know he was glaring holes through Prince Cedric, who stepped back, his face quite a bit paler than before. Did he really think he could get away with stealing a kiss from the firstborn princess of another nation? It wasn’t just rude; in some countries, it was enough to start an international dispute.

“Prince Cedric, I believe you must be tired from your long journey,” Captain Callum cut in. “I think it would be best for you to return to your room and get some rest.”

Prince Cedric never broke eye contact with Arthur, watching him like a frog would a snake. He nodded in response to Captain Callum’s tactful suggestion, stepped away, bid me farewell, and headed for his room accompanied by his guards.

The moment the prince was out of sight, Arthur whipped around to face me. “Are you all right, Your Highness?”

"I'm perfectly fine. Thank you, Arthur."

I smiled ruefully at the urgency in Arthur's face, such a contrast to his stoic, imposing silence of a moment ago. I'd made it through unscathed due to his swift protection.

"You have my sincerest apologies, Princess Pride," Captain Callum said, bowing low. "I never imagined he would do something so..."

"It's all right. I appreciate the way you handled it," I said, turning my smile on the captain. Thank goodness he and Arthur were here with me. With my mind racing, I hadn't had the wherewithal to react to Cedric's sudden aggression.

Jack insisted I should report the incident to the queen and prince consort right away, but I shook my head. I didn't want to create trouble for them. There could be repercussions for the alliance we were so close to forming. But even Captain Callum pushed, insisting I tell someone. I held fast, instructing everyone present to keep this incident to themselves. I couldn't bear the thought of this little blip destroying our potential alliance before it had even begun.

"At the very least, please allow me to share the information with Alan and Eric when we change shifts. I'd like to be absolutely safe," Captain Callum said.

I agreed, since it was only fair. Besides, he was probably right about sharing this information with my guards. Prince Cedric had gone after me this time, but Tiara could very well be his next target. Even if he *was* her future fiancé, he certainly couldn't treat a princess so rudely.

"Big Sister, be sure to yell next time if he tries something like that again!" Tiara squeezed my hand and watched me intently. I smiled to reassure her. While I appreciated her concern, I really hoped she didn't think Cedric was some gross creep already.

I glanced over at Arthur, whose face was still taut. He was probably just as worried about Tiara as I was. When I called his name, he lifted his head and met my eyes.

"Thank you for what you did." My smile widened. "I know that no matter what happens, I'll always be fine, so long as I have you and the knights."

At my trust-laden words, Arthur's face flushed. He pressed the back of his hand to his mouth before saying, "You're...far too kind..."

Though I was grateful for Arthur's steadfast support—especially after I listed him among the senior knights he so dearly respected—I couldn't help thinking back to Prince Cedric. Why had he acted so bizarrely flirtatious with me? If he really *did* have the same motivation he had in the game, then I knew what he was after.

*No, no. That's ridiculous.*

Not even the cocky narcissist could possibly be so simple-minded. He could be childish and even dumb sometimes, but trying to take things to such an extreme was beyond stupid. He had to be desperate, but even so, the plot was unthinkable. Besides, this current Prince Cedric had never experienced *that* incident.

*Nuh-uh. No way! Absolutely not!*

I didn't realize I was shaking my head at all this until Tiara squeezed my hand and asked what was wrong. I smeared on yet another smile and told her it was nothing, but in my head, I was praying Prince Cedric's foolish plan was not what I feared it was.

I could not have known that even as I fretted, Stale had heard about this whole debacle and was marching right to Prince Cedric, emanating palpable rage.

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*All right, then.*

It was long after sunset by the time I headed to Prince Cedric's room. I squinted my almond-shaped eyes, a match for the long, light-blue ponytail I had draped over one shoulder. As Freesia's first-rate prime minister, I worked tirelessly at the prince consort's side, and so it fell to me to confirm the conditions of the alliance Prince Cedric had proposed.

This morning's meeting had given me the impression that Prince Cedric was a bit naive in the realm of negotiations. But why had such an ignorant man been tasked with negotiating this alliance all on his own? Why had he concealed things from us during the meeting? Why had his kingdom approached Freesia about this matter at all?

Why was the second-born prince having an unofficial talk with the Freesian firstborn prince at this very moment?

I gasped as I neared Prince Cedric's room and pressed my back to a nearby wall, holding my breath. Stale stood just ahead of me in the hallway. He was holding a stack of reports that Vest, the seneschal, must have given him to deliver to Princess Pride.

But Stale didn't seem to care one whit about those reports at the moment. He ordered the guards to open Prince Cedric's door. Even from where I stood hidden, I could feel the dark aura surrounding the firstborn prince. When Prince Cedric came to the door, he invited Stale inside, but Stale just started speaking right there in the hall. And though his words started banal enough—greetings and offers of advice—that darkness emanating from him only grew.

"I appreciate the offer," Stale said to Prince Cedric. "Here in Freesia, we have customs that differ from those of many other lands."

"Is that right? How interesting. Can you give some examples?" Prince Cedric replied.

"As you're aware, Prince Cedric, much of our lives is based around the use of special powers. Our royal order is organized differently than most, our kingdom is ruled by queens, and the royal family has certain traditions around adoption, as well as the selection and announcement of fiancés... I could go on, really. I'm still learning them all myself."

Stale forced a mild smile, but it did nothing to ease the ferocious tension coiled in his body. Prince Cedric seemed completely oblivious, but I knew what was happening, especially as Stale's tone shifted.

"But of course, we share some very basic ideas with every other country. For example, there are some common conceptions about how to avoid disrespecting members of foreign royalty. We would never think of resorting to violence, acting overly familiar in a private setting, touching royalty in inappropriate ways, or kissing them anywhere but on the hand without establishing an appropriate relationship beforehand. Something as reckless as trying to force a kiss on the lips would certainly be a grave crime, perhaps one even worthy of death. Surely you already know all this, as it's simply basic good manners."

He grinned at Prince Cedric even as venom dripped off of every word. The news of Prince Cedric's aggressive actions toward Princess Pride had spread quickly; Stale must have heard on his way to deliver the reports in his hands.

From where I stood pressed up against the wall, I couldn't see Prince Cedric, but the expression on Stale's face was more than enough to decipher what was going on here. I'd heard only sketchy rumors about the incident, but Stale's accusations filled in the blanks. Whether it was Princess Tiara, one of the knights, or Princess Pride herself who'd told him, I gleaned plenty from his little display.

Prince Cedric did not dare respond. Either he heard the warning undercutting Stale's words or he was reflecting on the incident.

Regardless, Stale's anger did not abate. "I know you're aware of these principles as the second-born prince of the kingdom of Cercis, which is part of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. I studied the same subjects you must have as a child."

I yearned to lean out and see exactly what Stale was doing. I could tell he was creeping closer to Prince Cedric, crowding into his space to intimidate him. As much as I wanted to watch that unfold, my duty as the prime minister was to protect both our positions. But Stale's rage was contagious.

*How could Prince Cedric do that to a person as wonderful as Princess Pride?*

Unbidden, an image of Prince Cedric forcing himself too close to Princess Pride flashed in my mind and I squinted up at the ceiling.

"I guess I'm not as mature as I'd like to pretend," I muttered to myself before pushing away from the wall. After closing my eyes for a moment to mentally prepare, I opened them up and slid onto the scene with a grin. "Pardon my interruption. Prince Stale, I believe it's time we headed out."

Stale jerked at the sound of my voice. His malicious smile tightened—he seemed annoyed by my intrusion, no doubt seconds away from clicking his tongue.

"Prime Minister Gilbert, how long have you been here?" he said.

I could see how much he yearned to keep lashing out at Prince Cedric, perhaps with far more biting words, but I placed myself in the way. He was at a disadvantage.

"Just a little while now," I said. "I happened to overhear you. Forgive me for saying this, Prince Stale, but I feel that your lecturing the Cercian prince on manners was somewhat discourteous."

Stale tensed, perhaps gearing up to explain the whole situation to me, but I cut him off before he could.

“Any violence, kisses, or inappropriate actions toward a member of the royal family are extreme violations,” I declared, my smile overly friendly. “A foreign member of royalty should have no need for such reminders.”

Faced now with both of us, Prince Cedric gulped and stepped back. Stale beamed at that, and it was genuine. I knew he didn’t like relying on me, even now, but the fear in Prince Cedric’s eyes must have amused him.

“Yes, you’re correct,” Stale said. “I apologize, Prince Cedric. I only listed the most extreme examples, so perhaps my own knowledge is still lacking too.”

“Well, it’s not as if some mannerless individuals don’t exist among royalty,” I said smoothly. “But rest assured they receive the harshest of punishments. Besides, Prince Cedric knows that he holds great responsibility in visiting our kingdom to seek an alliance.”

“Of course,” Stale chimed in. “He’d never do anything so terrible, even by mistake. I apologize, Prince Cedric. It’s hard not to be sensitive to these things, since Elder Sister isn’t yet engaged to anyone.”

“Your fears are only natural, Your Highness. Princess Pride is to become the next queen, and she’s won the hearts of many throughout the country. She’s a very precious person to all of us. If anything happened to that young lady, why, it would be the same as declaring war on the entire kingdom... But perhaps that’s a bit extreme.”

“I wouldn’t say so, Prime Minister Gilbert. Princess Pride is absolutely precious to Tiara, Mother, Father, me—and everyone else in the castle. Most precious indeed.”

We moved in tandem, as though we'd coordinated this. Prince Cedric blanched and nodded firmly when met with our false smiles, a bead of sweat appearing on his brow. Stale and I savored his rigid expression.

"Oh, that's right. Prince Stale, weren't you just on your way to see Princess Pride?" I said.

"Ah! Yes, I was. I've been with Uncle Vest ever since the meeting in the throne room. I need to be on my way to see Elder Sister and help her organize deliveries."

"I see. I spotted the princess on my way here, actually. She was searching for you, since you hadn't yet arrived. I suggest you go and see her now."

"Thank you, I will. I'm in a hurry, so I'm afraid I must take my leave."

Stale bid Prince Cedric farewell and finally turned away. I knew he wasn't really going to Princess Pride, however. He'd already finished reporting to her; he was going right to Vest instead.

As he left, I confirmed Prince Cedric's schedule with him and went over some of the details of the alliance. His tone made it clear he was feeling rattled. Together, Stale and I were a two-pronged attack. I continued what Stale had started, giving the prince no time to catch his breath. Stale would need to go get Princess Pride's permission to tell me exactly what all this was about, but I didn't need the precise details to understand the situation. And I was happy to help Stale in drilling this lesson into Prince Cedric's head.

Even as we talked about the alliance, I could see Prince Cedric churning over that tidbit I'd deliberately dropped about Stale going to see Princess Pride. He had to be wondering what she might relay about the incident and how that news would spread. If he ever tried to lay a hand on Princess Pride again, it would make him the greatest fool in all the world.

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“Hmph. I can’t believe all this.”

I struggled not to sneer as I let my true thoughts slip. That prince was not worthy of my elder sister. The pressure from Prime Minister Gilbert and me had clearly frightened him; I just hoped that would be enough.

At that moment, I remembered something else.

“Oh, right!”

I still hadn’t made my report to Pride. Thanks to Tiara and the knights, I’d been fixated on Prince Cedric’s outlandish actions. I’d forgotten to impart the news from Uncle Vest, so I made a mental note to tell Pride as soon as I could.

Twelve days ago, the kingdom of Copelandii was said to have been granted permission to visit the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

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“Thank you for your help again, Tiara,” I said. “I’m sorry to trouble you with this.”

“It’s no problem at all, Big Sister! I’ve been so excited to cook with you!”

Tiara beamed at me. Despite the late hour, we stood in the kitchen before an array of ingredients. At this time of night, we wouldn’t be in the way of the castle’s chefs, and we had Jack, Mary, Lotte, and the rest of our maids and guards with us. Considering we’d normally be asleep around now, my imperial knights had all returned to the order’s headquarters.

"We're making the pork dish and soup that you cooked before, right?" Tiara asked me.

"That's right. Though this is my first time actually trying to make them..."

I could see them in my mind: ginger pork stir-fry and miso soup. A completely standard, ordinary meal where I came from. Hopefully, our princess duo could actually pull it off. It was supposed to be a present to celebrate Arthur's promotion.

While discussing how to celebrate this milestone in Arthur's life, Captain Alan had suggested a home-cooked meal. Captain Callum even mentioned how much Arthur enjoyed the ginger pork and miso soup from before. With Leon's delivery of ingredients arriving earlier in the day (thanks to Val, my deliveryman), I'd decided this was the perfect time to go for it.

Freesia lacked a lot of the foods and ingredients I was used to from my past life, hence my reliance on Leon and Val for things like what sat before us now. Apparently, my recipes from my past life weren't just catching on in Freesia, though; Leon said they had grown in popularity in Anemone since he'd first shared them last year. That was increasing demand, pushing Anemone to import the ingredients. Thanks to Val's special power, he could get the ingredients from Anemone to Freesia in a flash, so they always arrived fresh. All that was left was to actually cook the meal, meet up with Stale, and have him teleport us and the food into Arthur's room.

"I also thought that maybe we could make some cookies for Stale."

Tiara's eyes lit up. "That sounds wonderful! I bet Big Brother would love that!"

Stale had spent the last year studying hard to become the seneschal. I wanted to thank him for his hard work, and a batch or two of cookies was a really simple and quick recipe. But the first step

was to prepare the ingredients for the ginger pork. Cookies could come right afterward. Plus, we didn't want Stale suddenly appearing and ruining the surprise. I only wished that Tiara and I could divide the work evenly. Unfortunately, without Tiara's cheats as the heroine of an otome game, the only result of me touching any ingredients would be an utter massacre.

Just like the last time we made sweets together, we started by adding each ingredient to a large bowl—this time, it was pork and an assortment of spices. But the most important part of the preparation was having Tiara hold the bowl down for me. Without her help, my cursed hands would ensure total disaster in this endeavor.

I rubbed the spices into the meat and let it sit to marinate, clearing the way for us to start on the cookie dough. Once again, Tiara held the bowl for me while I mixed as hard as I could. Then she got to rolling out the dough for me as well.

"What shape should we make Big Brother's cookies?" she asked, rolling with all the might her tiny hands could muster.

"Hmm, good question. I want it to be something special, since they're supposed to be a present..."

I cocked my head as I pondered the matter. I laid out a few cookie cutters and stood at her side.

"I'm sure Big Brother will love whatever shape you choose."

As much as I appreciated her enthusiasm, it was only ramping up the pressure. Stale was a boy. I couldn't imagine him enjoying anything too cute. On the other hand, since these cookies were also made by Tiara, his adorable little sister, maybe an extremely cute cookie was exactly what he wanted. Perhaps flowers or animals or hearts...or something a bit cornier...

"What about...a cookie that looks like him?" I proposed.

In my past life, a friend and I once made cookies in the shape of our teacher's head as a present. She ended up really loving them.

They didn't exactly look like her, but she appreciated their humble charm. The idea was kind of childish, but we were also working with Tiara's domestic-skill cheats here, so I was betting that these cookies could look exactly like Stale.

Tiara's eyes lit up as I explained my scheme. "I'd love to try that!" Eager to move to the next step, she'd rolled out the dough like a pro. I could hardly believe it was her very first time. "What should we do with the extra dough?"

"Let's bake Stale's portion, and if there's still time once we're finished with the rest of the food, we can make a batch of regular, round cookies. We already have a volunteer who wants the leftovers, after all."

Val had arrived earlier in the day to deliver our ingredients, and I'd told him about the surprise I had planned for Arthur. At the time, Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric had expressed a desire to taste test—Val, however, wanted a whole helping for himself. Tiara and I had a lot of baking ahead of us, but if Stale caught us making the *normal* cookies, at least we could truthfully say we were making them in our boredom.

"Let's make some for the imperial knights, as well as Val, Sefekh, and Khemet," Tiara said.

I smiled awkwardly and nodded. Val and the kids wouldn't be at Arthur's celebration, but they were due in a few days to pick up some letters for delivery. It sounded like Tiara still visited them every time they were around; they must've been on pretty good terms.

Thanks to Tiara's skills, the cookie shaped like Stale's face came together wonderfully. If she'd left it all to me, the dough would probably be a puddle of goop instead. But Tiara rolled out and sculpted all the various shapes for the cookie, and I arranged them. She even made a little frown.

"That's how he always looks around Prime Minister Gilbert and Val," she explained.

I couldn't do much but laugh and agree. The cookie really *did* look like him, frown and all. Still, I reversed the frown as I assembled them. These were a gift, after all. And with a smile, it resembled him more when he was around just me, Tiara, and Arthur.

Thanks to Tiara's incredible skills, we soon had an adorable Stale cookie. It would have been great to have some cocoa powder to add definition to Stale's face and color in his hair, but that wasn't possible in this world. Plus, I didn't actually know how that would taste. My heart therefore skipped a beat when Tiara held up the soy sauce for the ginger pork and proclaimed it the "perfect color" for Stale. Even with all her cheats, she was still very new at cooking. This was only her third time; I couldn't let my guard down so soon. Still, I was pretty pleased with how it came out.

My maids had prepared a stove for us, so I opened the door, carefully set the cookie inside, and closed it up again. All that was left was to ensure it didn't burn.

In the meantime, we started the ginger pork and miso soup. Once again, we could have divided up the work to complete it faster, but I was pretending to teach Tiara how to make the dish to avoid ruining it myself. I added water and Tiara's chopped vegetables to a large pot and brought the whole thing to a simmer before taking it off the heat. Then Tiara and I dissolved the miso to create the broth, just like I did back in home ec classes back in school. The warm scent that wafted up with the steam wrapped me in a cozy blanket of nostalgia. What I would have given in that moment for some plain white rice.

We would cook the pork after Stale arrived, since he was busy with his seneschal training and there was still a while before he would show up. But we had to be ready to deliver the rest of the

meal right away, or Arthur might just go to bed and think nothing of it. Apparently, he had healthy sleeping habits—he went to bed pretty early if he could get away with it.

Sadly, all this meant the food would be a bit cold when it arrived, but that was better than not having it ready at all. I held the frying pan steady as Tiara laid out each strip of pork. Oil popped and spat, and steam billowed up from the hot surface. The scent hit both of us at the same moment. I knew Tiara's stomach was grumbling just as much as mine, but we held strong. Stealing even a single piece would lessen his portion. As we prepared servings for everyone, I started to worry that we should have requested more ingredients from Leon. Arthur could probably inhale this much food in one go.

The final touch was the cookie. We pulled it out of the oven when it was just right and set it on the counter to cool off before wrapping it up. We were still finishing up the pork, cooking the strips in small batches since the pan was a little small. Any strips we finished, we set on a tray to cool. Tiara giggled every time the oil spat at her, and I couldn't help smiling as well.

When we finally finished with everything, a mountain of meat faced us. It was like something out of a manga I'd read in my past life. I smirked with satisfaction. *Now this is a meal fit for a hungry young knight.* Tiara gazed at the heap with delight, enchanted by the aroma.

"Since we still have some time, why don't we make a batch of cookies for the others too?" I said.

We'd whipped up this massive meal in record time thanks to Tiara's quick work. There was more than enough leeway for a second batch of cookies—and maybe something made from all the leftovers too.

"That sounds great!" Tiara said, thrilled about my proposal for another batch. "Let's go get the rest of the ingredients!"

After we grabbed the key, Lotte, Mary, and Jack escorted us to the pantry. The other maids guarded our completed dishes while Tiara and I got to rummaging. We needed some help hauling back the eggs, sugar, flour, butter, and milk. Just as we were hurrying back to the kitchen, we overheard a commotion.

“Excuse me! That’s not—”

“Please don’t do that! Some very important people made that food!”

“So Princess Pride cooked this? Hmm. It’s strange, but I like it.”

My stomach plunged into my feet. The voice responding to the maids’ outraged cries was all too familiar. I exchanged a frantic glance with Tiara, who looked just as apprehensive. We rushed to the kitchen, our escorts struggling to keep up as they carted back the ingredients.

It was already too late. Every single plate of food that Tiara and I had just finished preparing sat empty...and Prince Cedric was standing there red-handed. Despite the maids’ pleas, more than half the meat we’d made was gone. He’d consumed all the miso. Even Stale’s cookie had disappeared. Yet the culprit merely smiled at Tiara and me as we gaped at the scene of the crime.

“Princess Pride. I’m sorry about what happened earlier. It’s impolite to touch a young lady so thoughtlessly, and I—”

“Why are you eating that?” I blurted.

Prince Cedric blinked with surprise before pasting on an elegant smile. “Well, I left my room to go apologize to you, but then I smelled something delicious. I followed the scent and caught sight of you, Your Highness. I’m surprised to see a firstborn princess taking up work in the kitchen. Is this another one of Freesia’s customs that I—”

“But why are you eating it?” I said again, making no effort to keep the snarl out of my voice. The red-faced maids were muttering apologies and studying the floor rather than looking at me.

"Because you made such a wonderful meal for me," Prince Cedric said. "I enjoyed the cookie, but this meat dish was the most—"

Something inside me snapped. "We didn't make any of this for you!" It was like a dam had burst. I hadn't yelled like that in years, but now I couldn't control my volume.

Tiara's eyes flew wide. Prince Cedric flinched away in shock. Even the maids and guards shuffled their feet and looked around, unsure what to do. I dragged in deep breaths through my nose, struggling to breathe normally after my outburst, but I made no attempt not to glare at Prince Cedric. Nor did I attempt to compose myself in front of him.

During the game, there was a scene where Tiara and Cedric fled to the local village, hiding away from Pride's henchmen. There, too, Cedric stole bites of Tiara's cooking. But while it was cute in the game (Tiara even blushed and smiled at Cedric's compliments), the reality here and now was anything but endearing. This meal wasn't meant for him. It was for Arthur's promotion and Stale's hard work. Tiara and I had worked so hard to prepare something for Arthur and Stale. Leon had helped procure the ingredients. Val had delivered them. So many people had collaborated for this perfect, delectable meal meant to surprise Arthur and Stale. I'd been so excited to surprise the boys—so excited to see their reactions!

But in two seconds, Prince Cedric had ruined all of it.

*Why?! Why?! Why?!*

Prince Cedric wasn't moving, and his eyes were wider than before. I was confused at first, but he fixed his gaze on me, hardly blinking. I had to grit my teeth to hold back the tears brimming in my eyes.

*No, I can't do this. I'm too old to cry over someone eating my food without permission! But...but...this was really supposed to be*

*special...and we used up all the ingredients for Arthur's food already, and Stale's cookie was supposed to be the only one in the world!*

"...you."

I didn't even want to wipe my tears away. I clenched my hands into fists and kept on glaring at Prince Cedric. My voice emerged in a hushed rasp, but Prince Cedric hesitated to ask me to repeat myself.

"I'm here, Pride. I managed to finish up earlier than I—"

For a moment, Stale's voice nearly reached me. But it couldn't break through the haze of anger and resentment filling me at that moment.

"*I hate you!*" I screamed right at the prince.

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A sigh slipped from my lips. It had taken a full day for my rage to give way to embarrassment. I slumped over with a sigh, thinking back on the previous day and the disaster in the kitchen. It had been a total failure.

As I cried and screamed at Prince Cedric, Tiara and Stale had kindly suggested we try again some other day. They'd convinced me to go with them back to our rooms. I had no choice but to delay the surprise I'd worked so hard on.

What was wrong with Prince Cedric? No ordinary person would just eat a bunch of food they found in someone else's castle. It wasn't because he was royalty; this was just common decency! Maybe he was raised with different customs, but he was also ignorant and naive. It was like he had the mind of a child instead of a grown man. I knew he'd avoided studying manners and etiquette all his life, along with his other lessons. It would take a specific event in

ORL to correct his bad attitude: the wound the evil Queen Pride inflicted on him.

I was quite certain that Prince Cedric wasn't being intentionally malicious when he ate our food last night. If anything, he might have thought he was being smooth. He probably really thought Tiara and I would be thrilled to receive praise for the food and didn't think past that. I knew he grew up drowned in constant praise by the ladies at his castle. He probably thought we wanted that too and never considered any alternatives.

Even so, I'd lost my temper in a big way. I hadn't even explained why I was so angry. Besides, it wouldn't be Cedric who got in trouble if people found out Tiara and I were cooking in the kitchen. We weren't supposed to be there doing that, so even after the whole incident, I would have to apologize to Prince Cedric and ask him to keep last night a secret.

And yet...

"Are you all right, Big Sister?" Tiara asked, still worried about me.

I assured her I was fine and straightened up.

I'd done nothing but apologize ever since leaving my room this morning. First, to Tiara and Stale, then to my personal maids, Jack the guard, the imperial knights who'd helped me plan my surprise, and finally, to the rest of the maids and guards who'd assisted us in the kitchen. The only thing that made the situation slightly better was the fact that every single one of them forgave me and tried to cheer me up. But that still left Prince Cedric. I had to not only apologize to him, but also beg him for his silence on the matter.

Yet I couldn't find him anywhere. Well, that wasn't entirely true. Whenever I caught a glimpse of Prince Cedric, he always fled before I could call out to him. He was avoiding me—the complete opposite of how he'd been treating me only one night earlier.

When Tiara noticed all this, she told me, “There’s no need for you to apologize,” and tugged on my hand harder than usual. She also held a grudge over that lost meal. “Don’t let a trivial thing like this get you down. I’m exhausted from studying and walking around the castle all day. Let’s go rest in the garden!”

With a dazzling smile, she led me outside. I couldn’t help but cheer up. She was like a perfect angel, the flowers and trees softening the light that fell around her. Even so, that quip about Prince Cedric being a “trivial thing” held an edge of venom.

As we wandered among the verdant trees and colorful flowers, I took in a deep breath. As I exhaled, some of the pent-up tension and turmoil vanished from my heart. Tiara led me around under the canopy of leaves, remarking on this and that as she searched for a place where we could rest undisturbed. Once she found somewhere secluded, Lotte, Mary, and Jack took up their usual stations just apart from us. Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric joined them, but they were all kind enough to leave Tiara and me in relative solitude. Everyone was so kind. As I settled down with Tiara among flowers the same bright yellow as the sun overheard, my shoulders finally relaxed.

“Big Sister, rest your head on my lap.”

Tiara patted her legs once she sat on the grass, eyes sparkling. Ever since that one time when I’d used Tiara’s lap as a pillow, she always seemed to think I could be cheered up by napping on her lap in the garden. But that kind of thing felt a little embarrassing as we got older. Still, I couldn’t turn her down, so I lay on my side on the grass and set my head in her lap. The moment I exhaled, the last bit of stress seeped out of me.

Little by little, my eyelids grew heavy, and before I knew it, I’d drifted off into a deep, deep slumber...

“Knights are... So...”

“...dron, yes?”

The voices drifted to me from somewhere just outside my awareness.

*That sounds like...Captain Alan...and Vice Captain Eric?*

I dragged my heavy eyes open, realizing I must have been asleep far longer than I intended. When I rolled over, I found Tiara slumping over me, fast asleep as well. She must have drifted off right after me.

I blinked the haze from my eyes. Tiara didn’t look very comfortable hunched over me. I lifted my head from her lap and gently lowered her into a better sleeping position, careful not to wake her. She felt heavy. I hated that Pride was written as such a physically weak character despite her last boss cheats—even this could be a challenge.

When I got Tiara to the ground, she mumbled, “Big Sister?” before falling right back asleep. She went limp, as if she’d taken a bite of a poisoned apple. No doubt she was completely exhausted after accompanying me on my apology tour.

Now fully awake, I realized there were more people talking than just the two imperial knights. I picked up scraps of conversation:

“Confirm that the Fourth Squadron has been deployed.”

“The Eighth Squadron will decide its own...”

It sounded like commands. I peered through the bushes and found knights bustling through the gardens, exchanging clips of conversation in their hurry.

“It can’t be! How could this happen?!”

A familiar voice rose from the opposite direction of the knights. Whirling around, I spotted Prince Cedric through a gap in the trees. He held one arm around his stomach, head hanging, face far more pale than usual. He was scanning the garden, looking terribly anxious

as he counted the knights. After letting out his yelp, he scanned the garden like he was searching for something.

“Prince Cedric?” I called out quietly.

When he realized I was near, his head shot up. “Princess Pride!” His red eyes went a bit wider, still uncertain. He rushed closer, but left some space between us when he stopped. Perhaps he could tell I was on my guard around him.

His eyes skittered around, dancing from place to place. He opened his mouth to speak and closed it just as quickly. “I... I’m really... I’m incredibly sorry...for yesterday...”

It took me a moment to realize he was actually attempting to apologize, as hard as it was. Why, then, had he dodged me all day? Perhaps he was waiting for me to be alone? But princesses were almost never alone—this moment was an exception.

“I hope that you can see me...as a friend...and we can move forward with the alliance...”

*This is annoying.* Despite his efforts, my anger hadn’t entirely dissipated. Speaking to him again was reigniting my grudge over the lost food.

Prince Cedric struggled on but never managed to look at me, instead casting his gaze at anything else. I really just wanted to punch him in the stomach and demand he look me in the eyes. *I’m such a child. What’s wrong with me? I’ve never felt this way before.*

But that wasn’t all that was weird. What had made Prince Cedric so nervous? Why did the appearance of the knights matter to him so much?

*It can’t be.*

The thought struck me like a slap. Were Prince Cedric’s true intentions for visiting our kingdom about to be exposed? If so, it

made sense for him to be nervous about the knights running around. It also solidified his reason for apologizing to me out of nowhere.

At the very beginning of the game, Cedric appeared at Tiara's birthday party as her new fiancé. He spent the next three days launching attack after attack at her in order to win her love. But none of it was sincere. He was acting under the orders of Pride, the Freesian queen.

She gave Cedric two orders. First, he was to make Tiara fall in love with him.

Second, he was to take Tiara's life with his own two hands.

Pride used Cedric to bestow the cruelest death imaginable upon Tiara. He was the perfect person to enact that horrible end. He trusted no one except for one person, so Pride's threats easily pushed him to comply with her demands. He approached the innocent Tiara to deceive her, steal her heart, and take her life.

No one but Pride—me—would give him such an order. But perhaps, just like in the game, he was attempting to use his looks to get what he wanted.

“Don’t tell me...” I hissed, shocked and disgusted.

Prince Cedric was still floundering his way through an apology, but he fell silent at my interruption. At last, he looked at me.

“Do you really believe the alliance will go smoothly once you admit your true intentions, as long as you win my favor first?” The thought had crossed my mind yesterday. Now, I put the question before him bluntly. I hoped he’d say I was wrong, so my heart sank when his eyes went wide.

“How do you know that?” he said.

I couldn’t believe it. I was right.

My shock ebbed into anger. I narrowed my already frightening eyes to glower at him. What was he thinking getting us involved in such a silly, simple-minded scheme?

“Are you an idiot?!?” I cried, my irritation boiling over into fury.

But this time, Prince Cedric responded in kind. “What the hell do you know about any of it?!”

His face flushed, and the shock in his eyes gave way to fierce flames. He grabbed my shoulders, baring his teeth at me. I tried to shove him away, but he grabbed my wrists and pushed me up against a tree. I struggled against his hold to no avail. No matter how I squirmed and fought, he never let go. In fact, he got closer—so close, our noses nearly touched.

“Do you have any idea how desperate my brother and I are?!” he shouted in my face. “Do you know how much rides on this alliance?! Or how much Bro is struggling?!”

He squeezed harder, and my wrists ached with pain. This wasn’t good. He was beyond enraged; his princely demeanor had completely gone out the window. His crimson eyes burned as they bore into mine.

“I know you people just want more alliances for your own sake, but it’s different for us! Everything rides on this alliance! Big Brother... Bro... Everything I have in life is riding on this!”

Even when his voice hushed, it only emphasized his fury.

“Let me go!” I tried to yell, but the pain quieted my cry. If I shouted, my knights would arrive immediately. The second they saw this, they would arrest Prince Cedric on the spot. But then our alliance wouldn’t survive, and I couldn’t allow that. I had to handle this myself somehow. The problem was that being on the receiving end of his up-close, violent outburst had my brain lagging behind...

*Swish! Fwish, fwish, fwish!*

Something cut through the air, followed by a series of collisions. Both of us went slack with surprise, minds blanking. Knives now quivered all around me in the tree—knives that would have gone right through Prince Cedric if they'd been even a centimeter closer.

The prince shuddered at the near-miss, and his grip went limp. I pushed myself back against the tree as hard as I could.

“Let me go!”

I kicked up, kneeing him in the stomach. The blow sent him flying backward, and he landed on his backside with a thud.

“How dare you?!”

The glare returned. Gritting his teeth, he leapt back to his feet and moved to close the distance between us. There was nothing I could do to keep him away this time.

*How can I keep him away—*

“Don’t touch her!”

The cry came from directly above us. A white blur landed between Prince Cedric and me. The ground cracked and trembled from the impact, and I gasped.



“Arthur!”

His long silver ponytail settled against his back. Arthur had plunged his sword halfway into the ground as a barrier between us and the prince. He yanked it back out and pointed the tip at Prince Cedric. I gawked at Arthur’s back, now tense with fury, every muscle taut and ready for a fight. Even I stiffened at the intensity of his emanating hatred.

Prince Cedric, now with a sword in his face, stepped backward.

“Insolent fool! How dare you?! Who do you think I am?!” he screeched, panicked.

“I apologize, Prince Cedric,” Arthur said. “But as imperial knights, it’s our duty to protect Princess Pride above all else.”

Two more swords whispered out of their sheaths. Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric flanked Prince Cedric from behind. Jack took up the rear. They all must have rushed here when they heard the commotion. Captain Alan set his blade against Prince Cedric’s throat, while Vice Captain Eric pressed his to Prince Cedric’s back.

“This young lady means everything to our kingdom,” Arthur said.

He moved closer to me, blocking me with his body. I rushed to close the remaining distance between us, pressing myself against his back. Prince Cedric clenched his teeth, seething as the knights blocked him in on every side.

“Considering the incident the other day as well, I’ll have no choice but to report this behavior to Her Majesty. Please return to your room, Prince Cedric,” Vice Captain Eric said.

“You may be a prince, but if you dare disgrace Princess Pride any further, we’ll be forced to arrest you for violating Freesian law.” Captain Alan was unusually forceful and terse. “That may change, depending on what exactly you just did to our crown princess.”

Prince Cedric gulped at the word *arrest*. Sweat dripped from his brow. His face went pale, as though some cloud had passed in front of him. Meanwhile, Arthur twisted to look back at me. He and the other knights were waiting for my verdict on the matter.

"It was just a disagreement," I told them. "Please return to your room, Prince Cedric. Also..."

I trailed off, stopping to glare at the prince from behind Arthur. Surprise replaced the dread on his face. We both knew I was lying.

"You didn't see anything last night. Be sure not to forget that," I said, glaring to get my point across.

I'd shouted at and kneed Prince Cedric, so I couldn't say I was entirely blameless here. I just wanted to forget this whole incident, but not before leveraging it to warn Prince Cedric not to utter a word about last night's cooking fiasco.

Prince Cedric gulped, but eventually nodded. At that signal, the knights stood down and sheathed their swords. Their piercing gazes, however, never left the prince.

Vice Captain Eric called out for the nearby guards and knights to escort Prince Cedric back to his room. I watched him being led away like a criminal. As soon as he disappeared from our sight, the tension broke.

"My apologies, Your Highness!" Vice Captain Eric and Captain Alan said as one. They fell to their knees before me, bowing their heads low.

"We were on duty as your imperial knights, but we still allowed such a thing to happen!" Captain Alan said.

"There can be no greater failure as a knight than to allow you to be exposed to danger!" Vice Captain Eric said.

With their heads bowed, I couldn't see their faces, but I could hear the earnestness in their voices. They explained that they were

distracted by the many knights coming to gather at the royal residence, and thus they hadn't noticed when I slipped away. They'd wanted to give Tiara and me some privacy, so I understood how they could have missed me leaving. It was also probably how they'd overlooked Prince Cedric's arrival. Besides, we were within the castle walls and surrounded by guards. There'd be no reason to expect an attack on a member of the royal family here.

"It's all right!" I assured them. "It's really my fault for leaving the area in the first place. I'm sorry for wandering off. So please, raise your heads."

It seemed I couldn't do anything today but keep apologizing to people. But I needed these two to hear it, at least. Just as they started to lift their eyes, Jack bowed in apology as well. *Right back to square one.*

"Arthur, you did well." Vice Captain Eric said.

"There's our new vice captain for ya. But why are you here in the first place?" Captain Alan asked.

Arthur shifted, uneasy with the praise. Vice Captain Eric patted him on the back, and Captain Alan ruffled his hair, but Arthur just stood there looking down at his feet.

"Orders came in for the Fourth and Eighth Squadrons earlier," Arthur said at last. "We're supposed to guard the royal residence and protect the royal family and Prince Cedric. Those of us in the Eighth Squadron can move independently, so I separated from them as soon as I got here...and that's when I heard Princess Pride scream."

*That's right. I haven't thanked Arthur yet.*

"Arthur!" I called out, breaking off from Jack's side to rush over to him. Arthur whirled to look at me. "Thank you for your help. You really saved me there."

I took his hand and squeezed, hoping to convey my gratitude. Color flooded Arthur's face and he twisted away from me as if seeking escape.

"I-It was nothing... I only did what anyone would have in that situation," he mumbled. I smiled at him, and he fell into a quiet fluster. By the look of it, heaping even more praise on him in front of his seniors was taking a real toll on the guy.

"Um, Your Highness, can I ask you something?" Vice Captain Eric said. I released Arthur to face him instead, giving him permission to continue. He lowered his voice to a whisper. "What exactly happened with you and Prince Cedric?"

Arthur and Captain Alan turned their attention on me as well, looking dead serious. Calling it an "argument" had worked to diffuse the situation, but my imperial knights were too smart to actually believe that was the whole truth. Plus, they knew about the incident yesterday too. I owed them a better explanation.

I chose to divulge the truth: After I woke from my nap, I'd spotted Prince Cedric and called out to him. An argument truly did break out between us, but then he flew into a rage and pinned me against a tree.

When I got to that last part, the knights pressed their lips into thin, hard lines of anger. I even saw their eyes flicker as their pupils dilated. Sensing danger, I hurried on. "But Arthur saved me with his knives! I was able to kick Prince Cedric away from me, and that's when you all came to get between us, so nothing bad happened!" My voice got a bit too loud at the end as I desperately tried to ease their upset.

*This is bad. Even though it's his own fault, Prince Cedric's reputation is taking a turn for the absolute worst!*

Unlike Vice Captain Eric and Captain Alan, who sighed with relief, Arthur wrinkled his brow and cocked his head.

“I didn’t use any knives...”

*Wait, what?*

Everyone faced him. I pointed back at the tree I’d been pinned against, noting the four small knives still jutting from the bark.

Arthur just shrugged. “I only came running when I heard your scream, after you’d already kicked Prince Cedric. I jumped over and landed between you two.”

Thinking back on it, the knives had come from the opposite direction than Arthur. If anyone threw them, it would have been Captain Alan or Vice Captain Eric. But they looked just as confused as Arthur by all this.

“Could an intruder have already made it inside the castle?” I said, a chill rippling up my spine.

If someone really *had* infiltrated the castle...

“No, I don’t believe that’s possible,” Vice Captain Eric said. “The Eighth Squadron is stationed throughout the castle, just like Arthur. It was probably one of those men who threw the knives, Your Highness.”

That was a relief. Those knives had zinged past Prince Cedric with deadly accuracy. An intruder who could do that would surely have been out for blood.

“Arthur, how many people in the Eighth Squadron use knives?” I asked.

“Around half, I think. A lot of new members take up knife training when they see Captain Harrison’s skills.”

“If our knives had the crest of the Freesian order on them, like other weapons, then we’d be able to tell if their owner was an outsider or not, but knife-throwing isn’t part of our official training,” Captain Alan added.

Even so, I knew the knights were allowed to carry certain weapons—knives included—that weren’t part of the required training regimen. But because they were extra, the kingdom didn’t supply them. A knight who wanted to carry knives had to procure them himself.

“Most people who buy throwing knives probably don’t opt for anything special, since they’ll only get one use out of them,” Captain Alan said. “Two people could be using the exact same kind of knife without a second thought...”

Indeed, these knives had no discerning features and a simple design. You could probably find identical knives in any marketplace.

“But if this person saved me, why wouldn’t they make themselves known? I can’t believe they’d just leave without so much as a word.”

*Maybe they’re worried they went too far in throwing knives at the Cercian prince. No, even if this person isn’t an imperial knight, anyone would agree that throwing knives to save the princess without hurting anyone is the right thing to do. Prince Cedric is perfectly fine, so it’s not like anyone would blame them.* There was no reason not to identify themselves. Unless...

“Ahh.”

“Right... The Eighth Squadron...”

“I can imagine any one of them doing this.”

Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric wore strained smiles. Arthur carefully avoided their eyes, which only confirmed they were on the right track.

“Most members of the Eighth Squadron insist on working independently or try to avoid people altogether,” Captain Alan said. “Some really have no interest in anything that isn’t their duties as a knight.”

"I've seen a lot more members like that ever since Harrison became the captain," Vice Captain Eric admitted. "Arthur's not the usual type of man you see in the Eighth Squadron."

*Why does that make them sound like secret characters I haven't met yet?* These guys sounded like "mystery man" characters from anime or manga. If the knights as a whole were like the Power Rangers, the Eighth Squadron were all Black Rangers, sneaking around and working in secret.

"I can report this incident to Captain Harrison for confirmation, but I'm not sure the knight will reveal their identity," Arthur said sheepishly. "Everyone in the squadron likes to avoid attention."

At that, I managed an awkward smile. These knights sounded more than just mysterious—they were downright antisocial.

"Big Sister!"

I whirled at the sound of Tiara, who was leaping out of the bushes. She landed against my chest and wrapped her arms around me.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to fall asleep!" she cried.

When Tiara's face scrunched up with fear, my whole chest ached. I was the one who'd left her sleeping to sneak away. She must have been so worried when she woke up alone.

Shaking my head, I gave her a squeeze. "I'm sorry for scaring you. I shouldn't have left you like that."

Vice Captain Eric told me Tiara was already awake by the time I screamed. Jack, Vice Captain Eric, and Captain Alan left Tiara with the guards and maids before they rushed to my aid. Honestly, this only made me feel worse. I'd managed to vanish, scream, send the knights into a panic, and abandon Tiara all in one afternoon. Plus, Prince Cedric got dragged away at the end of all of it. Tiara had to be rattled terribly from witnessing all that with no explanation.

I stroked her hair and suggested we head back to the royal residence. With the knights serving as lookouts, we were probably safer out of their way and inside the castle. Besides, I was also waiting for Val and the children to arrive with a delivery.

"Let me take you inside," Arthur offered. I nodded gratefully and we all headed for the palace. Tiara was still clinging to me, so I took her hand and walked alongside her.

Just then, I remembered something. "Oh!"

The knights all perked up and asked what was wrong, still on high alert for any danger. My lips quirked up uncomfortably as I turned to the four men guarding me from behind.

"Thank you for earlier," I said, "when you rushed to my side so quickly. Arthur, Captain Alan, Vice Captain Eric, and Jack—you all looked so heroic."

I observed them each in turn with a now-genuine smile, then did the same for Tiara. These people had all been so worried for my sake. I was so lucky to have them with me in this life.

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"Heya, Mistress. What took ya so long?"

When we returned to the palace, a brown-skinned man—darker than most Freesians—was already sitting on the floor of the parlor, looking terribly bored. The guards said he'd arrived just ahead of us.

Val was the personal delivery man for the royal family. His messy, dark-brown hair and eyes, fang-like teeth, and generally sharp features didn't give him the *impression* of being an official worker here at the castle, but he was nonetheless.

"Good afternoon, Mistress," Sefekh said.

"Thank you for seeing us when you're so busy!" Khemet chirped.

The two children hopped out of their chairs to greet me. Khemet was a small boy with messy black hair. He'd turn nine this year while his sister, Sefekh, would be thirteen. She had long brown hair and slightly upturned eyes.

I said hello to the two children, then turned my attention to Val, scolding him for making himself at home in the castle parlor.

"What was I supposed to do? You were takin' too long, Mistress." He smirked at me as though this was my fault. I pursed my lips into a frown.

"There's no way I kept you waiting that long!"

"Whenever I'm waiting to see ya, every minute feels like an eternity," he said. "Girls love lines like that, right?"

*He has a comeback for everything, doesn't he?!* I huffed at his snickering and teasing, which only made him grin more. Recently, he'd been on a kick with these flowery phrases. Perhaps he was spending too much time around Leon. I could only pray Val's personality wouldn't rub off on the prince too.

"Anyway!" I said. "Here are today's letters. Please get them to where they need to go."

I handed Val three letters that Mary and Lotte had retrieved from my room. He pinched them between his fingertips, tucked them into his breast pocket, and stretched out on the floor again.

"Say, Mistress, how'd your cooking turn out?"

*Urk!* A lump clogged up my throat at this reminder of the disastrous kitchen encounter with Prince Cedric. I was glad Arthur wasn't around; the one saving grace in all this was that he still didn't know about his surprise. Plus, I didn't need Arthur to learn of yet another frustrating encounter with Prince Cedric.

Val raised an eyebrow. "What's up?" he pressed.

I was balling my fists with rage, so Tiara spoke up for me. “B-Big Sister’s meal was perfect! It just...was eaten by someone else...”

“The hell?” Val blurted almost comically. “Then who ate it?”

This time, Tiara could only shrug. Vice Captain Eric and Captain Alan shot me sympathetic looks.

“Prince Cedric,” I muttered. I studied the floor, unable to face their reactions head on. They erupted with surprise in perfect sync.

“What the *hell*?!”

“Huh?!”

“Prince Cedric did that?!”

Feeling miserable, I said, “I’m so sorry... After you made such a long trip to deliver the ingredients too...”

Sefekh shook her head. “It’s not your fault!”

“Cheer up, Your Highness!” Khemet chimed in.

Val furrowed his brow in suspicion. “I don’t give a damn about the delivery,” he said, looking from me to Tiara. “So? You also feedin’ this prince to cozy up to him t—”

“Absolutely not!”

*What exactly does Val think of me?*

“If anything, I’ve only worsened our relationship, considering the argument we just had. Please don’t tell anyone about any of this, all right?”

Khemet and Sefekh nodded, but Val was watching me with amusement.

“Hmm... So you’re the one who’s sweet on him this time, Mistress? I guess you never know what’ll happen n—”

“I hate him!”

The idea that I was “sweet on him” deserved a far more forceful response. This whole situation left me feeling like dynamite with an

increasingly short fuse. I shouted so loudly at Val's presumption that the whole room fell silent. Sefekh and Khemet's mouths fell open. Even Val was blinking at me, wide-eyed with surprise. They'd never seen me quite this angry. Tiara, Lotte, and Mary closed in around me, stroking my hair and rubbing my back to calm me down. I took a deep breath.

Bewildered, Val said, "You're not talkin' about me, right? That prince is the one you hate?"

"I was talking about Prince Cedric," I managed. "I'm sorry I shouted."

I let out a long sigh. *I can't act like this. I have to get a grip.* It worried me how my anger burned hotter with each passing year. It was too much like Queen Pride, the evil last boss of ORL, who refused to listen to reason or dissent.

"He made you that angry? Damn. This prince must not have a brain." Val crossed his arms and cocked his head at me, almost looking impressed. Sefekh and Khemet clung to his arms, bobbing their heads in agreement. Val asked Tiara what exactly Prince Cedric had done to upset me so.

"Oh, this and that..." Tiara grimaced and, to my relief, kept things vague.

As for me, I simply couldn't believe Prince Cedric was really trying to seduce me over these three days at the castle, just like he tried to ensnare Tiara in the game.

In ORL, the prince wanted to win Tiara's heart. A year from now, he spent three days in the castle, doing all he could to woo her. By then, his personality was a lot less rough around the edges, though he still pinned his hopes on his looks.

But in this world, I was his target. He must have thought that if I fell in love with him, he could bare his heart and admit his true reason for seeking an alliance. And as the firstborn princess, I would

push that alliance forward. He hadn't actually admitted his true motivations, however. He probably wanted to ensure he had my heart before revealing his secrets. The only thing I knew for sure was that he was a complete and utter fool.

Things might have been different if I were the queen, but a single princess's influence wouldn't be enough to sway Mother—or anyone else, for that matter. *Not to mention, he's insulted me, touched me, and eaten my food! Is he trying to seduce me or piss me off?!*

*"Do you have any idea how desperate my brother and I are?! Do you know how much rides on this alliance?! Or how much Bro is struggling?!"*

I understood his desperation—after all, I knew the truth of his situation. But that desperation wouldn't help if he had to scramble to save face. *Ugh. How did it end up like this?*

In the game, he was so much more frantic and urgent when he came to beg for an alliance. Or was he only acting that way because the other party in the negotiation was Pride, the wicked and terrifying queen? If fear was what sparked his change of attitude, that was pretty disappointing. In the game, I'd really loved Cedric as a character, but here...

"Oh yeah. I saw a whole bunch of knights around when I first got here," Val said, moving things along. "What's goin' on, exactly?" My head snapped up, and I saw that he was scowling with annoyance at the increasing martial presence.

I thought back to Arthur's explanation. "Ah, right... I believe they said they were here to guard and escort Prince Cedric." I looked to Vice Captain Eric for confirmation.

"Yes, that's what Arthur said," he agreed.

"What's the point in guardin' a moronic prince like him?" Val spat.

No one answered, unable to disagree even with such a blatantly disrespectful assessment of the prince.

"Well, we're about to form an alliance with that prince," I said. It was the best answer I could muster, but Val just cracked his neck, letting his body voice his disagreement.

Prince Cedric must have been just as displeased as Val to see so many knights at the castle, albeit for different reasons. If someone uncovered Prince Cedric's true intentions, he'd lose everything. He'd certainly have no chance of winning my love—I'd made that *very* clear when I childishly screamed that I hated him. No wonder he'd tried to apologize the moment he caught sight of me; he wanted us to get back on equal footing. After that argument we had in the garden, he was probably worried that even if Mother approved the alliance, I would disagree just because I was upset with him.

*He's just the rudest person in the whole world.*

I sighed and held my head. Tiara asked for a chair, which the maids brought over, and coaxed me into sitting. Ever since yesterday, the Pride in my head had been louder than ever, saying things like, "I'd like to smack him in the head!" and "I never want to speak to him ever again!" Sadly, those simply weren't viable solutions. After all, Prince Cedric had spent his entire life in his homeland and had only come to our kingdom because—

*Knock knock!*

Everyone flinched at the sudden sound. "Elder Sister, it's me," Stale called through the door before entering with a bundle of documents in one hand.

"What's the matter? Shouldn't you be working with Uncle Vest?" I asked.

I wasn't expecting to see him. I was just here to give my letters to Val. Stale had already checked over the documents yesterday.

"Actually, I've been sent here by Seneschal Vest," Stale said. "Since this concerns the princesses as well, he asked me to come report this to you. I don't think it matters if outsiders are present." He cast a quick glance at Val before reading out a summary of the documents in his hand. "This is about Prince Cedric, the second-born prince of the kingdom of Cercis, half of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, and our negotiations for an alliance..."

I relaxed a little. This was simply about the negotiations. Prince Cedric was probably just requesting a meeting or something.

Then Stale continued.

"For the time being, the kingdom of Freesia has decided not to pursue an alliance."

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"The alliance...is on hold?!"

Prince Cedric jumped to his feet in shock, sending his chair clattering to the floor. Surprise left his face frozen with confusion.

"What's the meaning of this?! Yesterday, you said that the requirements submitted by both sides were acceptable! What is going on, Prime Minister Gilbert?!"

He glared at me in utter disbelief, voice strained with emotion. Red tinged his face as tension tightened his posture.

"Yes, that was true as of yesterday," I said slowly, attempting to calm the enraged prince.

He just shook his head at me, setting his jaw. "Don't tell me Princess Pride did this!"

I paused at how quickly he'd assumed she was to blame. Could this be about the incident Prince Stale confronted him over

yesterday? Did he think Princess Pride was ending the alliance out of pettiness or for revenge?

“The princess?” I said in mock confusion. “Actually, I presume Princess Pride is receiving the same news right about now.”

Prince Cedric’s eyes opened wide, surprise and suspicion written plain on his face. No doubt he’d said something he shouldn’t have. He shrank away from my gaze, studying his feet instead. “Never mind,” he grumbled.

I gestured for him to return to his seat at the table now that he’d calmed down a bit, and he obliged. I took the seat across from him.

“Prince Cedric, is there something you’ve been keeping from us?”

He’d been slouching in his chair, but he straightened up at this question. I saw his throat work as he gulped. Given what I’d seen of him thus far, this young man clearly wasn’t cut out for this sort of back-and-forth.

“We’ve just received some new information,” I went on. “The kingdoms of Copelandii, Alata, and Rafflesiana—I understand that these are all neighbors of the United Hanazuo Kingdom.”

A messenger had brought me Vest’s report on this matter earlier today. Apparently, after spending decades rejecting alliances, Hanazuo had finally let in representatives from a single nation: Copelandii. And they’d done this just two days before Prince Cedric left his homeland to seek the alliance with Freesia.

Coincidentally, a Freesian messenger happened to witness a Copelandii carriage being allowed into Hanazuo territory. Furthermore, a messenger within Copelandii confirmed that a royal carriage had left for a foreign land. The timelines of both reports matched up. And this morning we’d received even more information

about Alata and Rafflesiana, two more kingdoms sitting along Hanazuo's border.

They were preparing for war.

It was too much of a coincidence for both kingdoms to gear up for invasions simultaneously. This had to be coordinated.

"We now know about Copelandii's visit to Hanazuo, as well as Alata and Rafflesiana's preparations for war," I told the prince.

*We also know about the large country they all have ties with too.* I kept that last bit to myself. Prince Cedric was already trembling from what I'd already revealed. Evidently, he'd known all this already and had kept it hidden from us.

"Please explain what exactly is going on, Prince Cedric."

The relationship between Hanazuo and these three kingdoms made little sense. They weren't allies. They didn't trust each other. So just what was going on here?

Prince Cedric clenched his teeth, focusing on nothing in particular. His silence only confirmed that Vest's assumptions were correct. Freesia had to call off the alliance with Hanazuo immediately.

"Does that mean...depending on what I say, the alliance might be canceled altogether?" Prince Cedric said.

Fear and worry distorted the prince's handsome face. He sat stiffly across from me, brow scrunched, pushing out each word with an effort. When I confirmed his supposition, he withered all over again. It was up to me to keep the conversation moving.

"Prince Cedric, you're aware we cannot form an alliance without knowing the truth. We'd like to build a peaceful, friendly relationship between our kingdoms. And we'll do whatever we can to—"

"What 'peace' are you talking about?! You've got all the power, yet you're too proud to use it on the battlefield, you cowards!"

Prince Cedric shouted, slamming his fist on the table. His breaths came in ragged bursts, his eyes ablaze.

“The battlefield, you say?”

So Alata and Rafflesiana really *were* planning to attack Hanazuo. Despite his outburst, I couldn’t get Prince Cedric to definitively confirm it. He just pressed his lips together and grimaced with remorse.

“I’ll choose to ignore your use of the word ‘cowards’ in addressing us,” I said. “Now please explain what’s going on. By ‘battlefield,’ do you mean that the United Hanazuo Kingdom is planning to—”

“That’s *enough!*” Desperate pain twisted his voice as he spoke from where his head hung, his fists still on the table. “I understand that Freesia isn’t interested in an alliance! If there’s no alliance, then I have nothing else to say to you. I’ll be leaving now.”

He jumped out of his chair, turned, and started ordering his maids and guards to prepare for the journey home.

“Please wait a moment, Prince Cedric.”

My orders from Her Majesty had been to either send the prince home or have him prepare for a longer stay. But I worried that sending him home in a rage would hinder all our future talks with his kingdom. I couldn’t let him leave with a grudge, but his maids were already packing his things.

“Freesia still desires an alliance with the kingdom of Cercis.”

That slowed Prince Cedric’s frantic escape, though he still glared at me.

“I can’t say for certain that the information we received is accurate. It appears to me that our side and yours are on different pages in terms of the facts.”

As frustrating as he was to wrangle in his agitated state, this was nothing I hadn't dealt with before. In fact, he reminded me of another fool I knew too well.

"Her Majesty is still investigating this situation," I said. "Since you're aware of the circumstances, I'd like to hear about it from you, if possible."

"But if things are what you suspect, then Freesia doesn't want an alliance with us," Prince Cedric replied. "That's why the negotiations are suspended, right?"

I fell silent, unable to contradict his hypothesis. Still, I needed to get *something* out of him before this fell apart. Queen Rosa was currently with Vest and the prince consort. Her decision rested entirely on what I could glean from the Cercian prince.

But Prince Cedric shut down again, edging away from me and toward the door. His maids followed with his bags.

*Knock knock!*

Before I could call out to stop him, a forceful knock halted us both. "Pardon me," someone called through the door before the guards opened it. Then a young lady stepped inside, composed and regal as ever. At her entrance, the prince and I took a step back.

"Princess Pride," Prince Cedric breathed.

He blinked at her, wide-eyed and frozen. Prince Stale and Princess Tiara filtered in behind her, along with their guards and knights. It was quite the entourage. Shutting the door behind them, they completely blocked the exit and cut off Prince Cedric's escape.

"It looks like I made it in time," Princess Pride said, her gaze serene as she took in the room. Her eyes fell on the maids and guards holding the prince's bags, then flicked back to the prince. "Prince Cedric, you mustn't return to your homeland just yet."

Prince Cedric issued a soft cry of surprise. He narrowed his eyes at Princess Pride, but she didn't back down.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go," he said. "The negotiations between Freesia and my homeland have fallen through, so there's no reason for me to stay. Nor is it my duty to explain the circumstances in our kingdom."

Prince Cedric shot a look toward me at that last bit.

"No, I can't allow you to leave until you reveal the full truth to my mother," Princess Pride told him. When he tried to retort, no sound came out—he was overwhelmed. Fixing him with an uncharacteristically hostile glare, the princess added, "But I'm prepared to handle the situation myself if you absolutely insist on leaving."

At this, Prince Cedric grew alarmed enough to speak again.  
"Handle it how?"

Her Highness nodded, and the two knights at her sides took up a stance as if preparing to defend her. Prince Stale stepped to his sister's side as well.

"I'll be reporting the violence and disrespect you committed against me to my mother, the queen."

Prince Cedric went pale and breathless. His mouth flapped like that of a fish, and his wide, wavering eyes were glued to the princess.

"You've given my kingdom more than enough of a reason to take you into custody. Your actions may even spark an international conflict."

Prince Cedric wasn't the only one tensing with nerves now. Princess Pride was holding him hostage with the threat she'd just issued. But that wasn't all she was doing here. There was something more behind her words.

I'd seen this before—the princess wielding intimidation and the power of royalty to get her way. Every time she did this, the result was the same.

She was going to come to this person's rescue.

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It was the third day after Prince Cedric arrived in our kingdom. I managed to prevent him from returning home yesterday. But after shooing us out of his room, he'd locked himself inside and refused to come out.

"Prince Cedric, it's me. I'd like to speak with you about what happened yesterday."

He'd had the night to cool down, so I decided to visit his room myself. I waited until Arthur could escort me and Tiara and Stale had their breaks. I definitely didn't want to do this alone after what happened in the garden. I still wasn't strong enough to take him myself, and it felt better having my closest companions at my side.

I tried calling out again. According to the guards stationed at his door, he hadn't left at all, but he was refusing to open up.

It took a few minutes of knocking and shouting before we finally got a reply through the door: "There's nothing to talk about."

*He's acting like a stubborn child. He is our guest. The least he can do is talk to us... Actually, you know what? He is a child. He's stuck in the same moment, doing everything he can to keep time frozen as he pleases.*

We weren't going to make any progress like this. Having little other choice, I used the castle's key—my key—to open the door myself. No room was truly locked to royalty.

“Pardon the intrusion,” I called as our group entered. Prince Cedric’s maids and guards tried to block our path, but we pushed past them.

“Don’t you have any manners?!” Prince Cedric shrieked.

I ignored his indignant cries and marched right into the center of the room to face him. As I approached, he settled down on the sofa. His eyes burned hotly at me, narrowed with pure hatred.

I hated him just as much.

“How long do you intend to continue this little charade?” I asked him.

Prince Cedric jerked as if to challenge me, but he stayed in his seat when he noticed Stale and Arthur. He dug his nails into the arm of the sofa, clearly fighting back the rage this time, since I’d arrived with the backup of the firstborn prince and an imperial knight.

“Your Highness,” he said through gritted teeth, “I’m only acting as you demanded. But if Freesia has no plans to form an alliance with us, then I don’t have permission to speak about the situation in my homeland.”

“That’s amusing, coming from the man who came here to negotiate an alliance without permission from his kingdom.”

“What?!”

He sprang to his feet. It wasn’t just Prince Cedric who startled this time—his maids and guards were just as dumbstruck. Even my entourage murmured in surprise.

I didn’t want to keep snapping at him this way, but I couldn’t let up now. I stared him right in the eyes and dared him to cross the line again. He trembled with the effort to hold himself back, a bead of sweat sliding down his cheek.

“How do you know that?” he said, voice low as a growl.

"It doesn't matter. You've done enough, and now it's time for you to tell my mother the truth. Only then will I answer your question."

*Ugh. Whenever I look at his face, I'm mad all over again about that meal he ruined.* When exactly had I become so unforgiving? Or had I always been that way?

"Quit your damn games already!" he shouted, finally breaking.

Arthur and Vice Captain Eric's hands went right to their swords. They stepped in front of me instantly, and Prince Cedric's guards tensed in response. He was obviously in the worse position here.

Prince Cedric's breathing went ragged with emotion. I couldn't believe we were the same age—he was like a child throwing a tantrum. It was so different from the version of him I knew from the game, a version that had a whole year's worth of maturity to temper this attitude.

"You're out of time, aren't you?" I said.

He flinched, but didn't respond.

"Do you understand your position here at my castle?"

This time, his handsome face contorted in terror. "What are you—" he began before cutting himself off with a gasp.

"Don't think that I'll forgive the things you've done to me," I went on. "You kissed me, ate my food, and accosted me in the garden. What's more..."

His face darkened with each infraction I listed. He pulled at his golden hair. When he attempted to look away, I caught his gaze and held it. Escape was not an option.

"You even went as far as using me as a pawn to get Mother's permission for the alliance, as well as your true objective. I don't forgive you for any of it. But none of that has anything to do with why I stopped you from leaving yesterday." It wasn't revenge for the

things he'd done to me. "It was because you still don't understand the position you're in."

At this, he dropped his head. His voice emerged strained. "Of course...I do..." Each word squeezed between gritted teeth, like he was trying desperately not to shout. Seeing him in such a vulnerable state, Tiara took a step back.

"No, you don't," I said flatly.

"Yes, I do!" he snapped, jerking his head up. He couldn't hold back anymore.

"I'm telling you, you're wrong!" I sucked in deep breaths, bending as I prepared to launch into a counterargument. "Do you understand *why* we decided to postpone our alliance negotiations with the kingdom of Cercis?!"

"I sure do! It's because you figured out why I'm here, right?! This damn opportunistic kingdom! You only want an alliance, but not if it means going to war together!"

He was too enraged to listen. This time, I was the one setting my jaw in anger.

"I'm trying to tell you that's not the case!"

I strode right up to him and planted my feet as wide as my dress would allow before grabbing him by the collar. He was too spooked to do anything about it when I yanked him closer. Our noses were nearly touching. Prince Cedric's perfectly shaped eyes went wide as he gaped at me. The moment when we'd almost kissed briefly flickered through my mind.

I gathered my breath and roared right in his face: "*Our kingdom has NO IDEA what your true objective is!*"

The prince shrank from the shrillness of my voice, his face contorting with shock. His eyes bulged at me, catlike, and his contorted features went slack. "What...?"

He blinked repeatedly, searching for confirmation. The look on his face annoyed me, so I shoved him away. Once I'd put some space between us, I dragged in breaths to try to calm down before I responded.

"Yesterday...what was it that Prime Minister Gilbert said to you?"

He simply stood there for a moment, lashes still fluttering. "He said that the kingdom of Copelandii paid a visit to the United Hanazuo Kingdom. He also knew that Alata and Rafflesiana were preparing for war. That's obviously why you called off the negotiation of an alliance."

"And after that, didn't Prime Minister Gilbert ask you to explain the situation your kingdom finds itself in?" I said.

His eyebrows knitted in confusion for a moment. Then he started looking all around the room, muttering to himself in disbelief as he worked through to the obvious conclusion. Having heard straight from the source, I knew all about Prince Cedric's conversation with Prime Minister Gilbert yesterday—and how the prince had tried to head right home for Cercis after it.

"Prince Cedric, let's stop dancing around what we want to say. It will be easier for you that way, won't it? Please address me however you like. I don't mind."

No matter what conclusion we reached here, Prince Cedric and I would never get along, not after all we'd already gone through. But that was fine. The princely love interest and the final boss were never meant to get along.

"Cedric," I said with a glare. When I dropped his title, he faltered and gazed elsewhere, eyes saucer-wide. "My kingdom believes that yours is trying to lure us into a trap by forming an alliance. We fear you've conspired with the kingdom of Copelandii—along with Alata and Rafflesiana, whom it has ties with—to wage war against other

countries. We believe that the negotiation of an alliance is merely a ruse for you to enter our kingdom and allow your coconspirators, the other three kingdoms, to invade us.”

I decided to hit him with the truth head on, leaving no room for his characteristic misinterpretations. His face drained of color as I spoke.

“What?!” he cried. “What the hell are you talking about?! Why would Big Brother—I mean, why would our kingdom do that?!”

*I knew it.*

Prince Cedric stepped closer, growing ever paler in his astonishment. Behind him, his guards and maids shook their heads, trying to deny the claim.

“The United Hanazuo Kingdom has spent decades refusing all outside relationships, and now they suddenly allow a visit from Copelandii?!” I said. “Anyone would see that as a sign you’ve formed an alliance, or at least a friendly relationship.”

“What kind of leap is that?! We would never choose to form an alliance with that slaver kingdom...”

“But you’ve been trading with Anemone, which allows slaves within its borders.”

“They never once promoted slavery,” Prince Cedric argued. “Buying and selling slaves is illegal there too! They’re even trying to eliminate the enslavement of people altogether. We’d never ally ourselves with or befriend those pawns of the Rajah Empire!”

“Then why didn’t you say that when Prime Minister Gilbert asked you?!”

“He didn’t ask!”

“Yes, he did! He asked you to explain your situation!”

“He never asked if we were cozying up to those damn kingdoms. Copelandii’s visit wasn’t for anything like th—”

"That's exactly what Prime Minister Gilbert wanted you to talk about!"

Our argument lost any pretense of formality as we howled back and forth like animals scrapping for territory.

"Besides," I went on, "Alata and Rafflesiana are colonies of the Rajah Empire, just like Copelandii, and they started preparing for war at the same time. Who wouldn't assume that they'd joined Hanazuo in order to invade someone else?!"

Prince Cedric balled his hands into fists, incapable of snapping back. Lips quivering, he muttered, "You really thought...my homeland was going to..."

*"That's why Mother called off the alliance negotiations! She didn't want us to find out you'd partnered with Rajah after we'd allied ourselves with you. It could have forced us into joining an invasion we had no business being part of. Our alliance would have changed the battlefield in any future war, isn't that right?"*

If, after we formed an alliance with Cercis, Hanazuo and the three other kingdoms agreed to invade a country of Rajah's choosing, Freesia would also be forced to provide troops under the conditions of our alliance.

That wasn't an unprecedented situation. In the past, kingdoms had formed alliances with Freesia explicitly to recruit our citizens with special powers into troops for their wars. We had no choice but to fight for our new allies when they ruled in favor of invasions, even though we gained nothing and lost many lives.

An alliance was more than just a vow of friendship. It was a contract. The parties involved could not invade or overpower each other. And if some kind of skirmish arose, allies were duty-bound to assist each other.

“If you’d told us about this from the start, things never would have ended up this way,” I said. “But you were too busy being an idiot and letting your stupid pride get in the way!”

If he’d just asked for help like he did in the game’s flashback scenes, we could have avoided all of this. Instead, I faced a stubborn and immature version of the prince who insisted on going about this in a roundabout way that put us all in a worse position. He was totally different from the Cedric I knew from ORL, and his attempts to keep this hidden from the start had resulted in a terrible misunderstanding for our kingdoms.

Prince Cedric’s lips trembled violently. Arthur and Vice Captain Eric stepped up defensively as we awaited his reaction.

“You dare call me an idiot? And mock my pride?!”

He squeezed his fists until his knuckles went white, unable to direct them anywhere. Even Stale and Tiara edged in a little closer at that, but I pushed past my valiant protectors to walk toward the prince. Only a direct approach would work here—*very* direct. When he brought his face up to mine again, I took a deep breath and steadied myself.

“It *is* stupid,” I said. “You’re a complete idiot! Why did you come here on your own?! It wasn’t to make the two of us fall in love, and it wasn’t to get the upper hand over Freesia, so what was it?!”

I grabbed him by the collar and slammed our foreheads together before he could do more than squeak with surprise. Holding him in place, I met his burning gaze. The inferno in his eyes was no greater than mine.

“Think about what you came here for! Behind your shame and your concern for your reputation, you had something you wanted to protect, and that’s why you came here, right?! You should have focused on that from the very start!”

My face was hot from all the yelling, and surely red. But Prince Cedric—stunned as he was—never once backed down or looked away.

“You clung to that ridiculous, naive plan and ruined your position in this negotiation! And that means you might not be able to protect the people you care about! If you can’t manage that, what’s the point of any of this? That’s why I’m calling you an idiot!”

I panted to catch my breath now that I’d said my piece. Prince Cedric’s mouth was hanging open. He stood frozen. I could’ve hurled him backward, but instead I gently let go of him and stepped back. Arthur and Vice Captain Eric swooped in between us, and my siblings came to my side.

Silence filled the room. Prince Cedric was still hunched over where I’d left him, motionless and completely dumbfounded.

Once I’d gathered myself, I finally broke the stalemate. “I’m going to see Mother now. If you want to come with me, that’s your decision. If you don’t, then you’ll probably never have the opportunity again.”

No, that was too subtle. I had to hammer this home if he was really going to get it. I stood up straighter, stuck my chest out, looked straight at Prince Cedric, and tried again.

“If you want one last chance to fix things, then this is your only opportunity, Cedric. If you don’t want to live a life filled with shame over your actions, then you had better come with me.”

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“Please allow me to enter, Mother.”

With her permission, I stepped into the throne room. Uncle Vest, Father, and Prime Minister Gilbert were with her, presumably

deliberating how to proceed. They all stood in their designated positions upon our arrival.

“What is it, Pride?” Mother asked with a tilt of her head.

Stale and Tiara clung close to me, and Arthur and Vice Captain Eric flanked them. Prince Cedric lingered behind the rest of us. I breathed a sigh of relief when I turned and found he hadn’t run away yet. He was looking at his feet, so I couldn’t read his face, but at least he was still here.

“Prince Cedric has an earnest matter he wishes to discuss with you,” I said.

We left Cedric and stepped off to the side, standing in the same arrangement we had the day Cedric first came to visit us. Now that he was alone, Cedric hung there frozen, his head drooping. My heart raced at the possibility that he might back out. Mother and Father simply waited for him to speak as the seconds dragged on.

“There are things I withheld before we began our alliance negotiations,” Cedric began weakly. “First of all, I must sincerely apologize for that.” He slowly lowered himself to one knee and bowed, clearly battling to humble himself.

“I must ask you, Prince Cedric. What exactly is the current state of the kingdom of Cercis and the United Hanazuo Kingdom as a whole?”

Even when she spoke quietly, lips hardly parting, Mother commanded attention. Cedric squeezed his fists, then fully prostrated himself on the floor. The second-born prince of Cercis was humbling himself before the Freesian royal family—and he looked ready to come clean.

Shock rippled through the room. Even Mother’s eyes were wide. Princes did not bow like this to foreign royalty, as Cedric well knew. But he remained on the floor even when he finally spoke again.

“Please...I’m begging for your help!”

The sincere plea he'd been holding back from us this whole time finally burst free. Cedric trembled against the carpet. He kept his forehead pressed to the floor, hiding his face. The strain in his voice made it clear that his handsome features were twisted with pain, however.

"The kingdom of Chinensis, who forms half the United Hanazuo Kingdom along with Cercis, is under threat of invasion!"

Even as his voice trembled, Cedric refused to lift his head. His usually kempt golden hair was splayed out on the ground.

"Two weeks ago, a messenger from Copelandii came to tell us...that they were planning to absorb or invade Chinensis!"

To "absorb" Chinensis meant that the country would become a Copelandian colony. If they refused, Copelandii would respond with force. Cedric shivered as he relayed all this, fingers digging into the carpet.

"They're waiting a month to make their move, but there's no time to waste! Cercis intends to join up with Chinensis to resist the aggression, but the United Hanazuo Kingdom isn't strong enough on our own. We don't have the military or manpower to stand up to Copelandii."

Cedric said only half a month remained. Then the great empire of Rajah would join the invasion of Hanazuo as well via Alata and Rafflesiana. That would be more than enough to tip the scales in Copelandii's favor. Hanazuo was a sizable kingdom, but it couldn't repel three neighboring countries combined—especially with the backing of the vast Rajah Empire. The enemy forces had already narrowed down their target. Hanazuo would put up minimal resistance at best in the face of such overwhelming force.

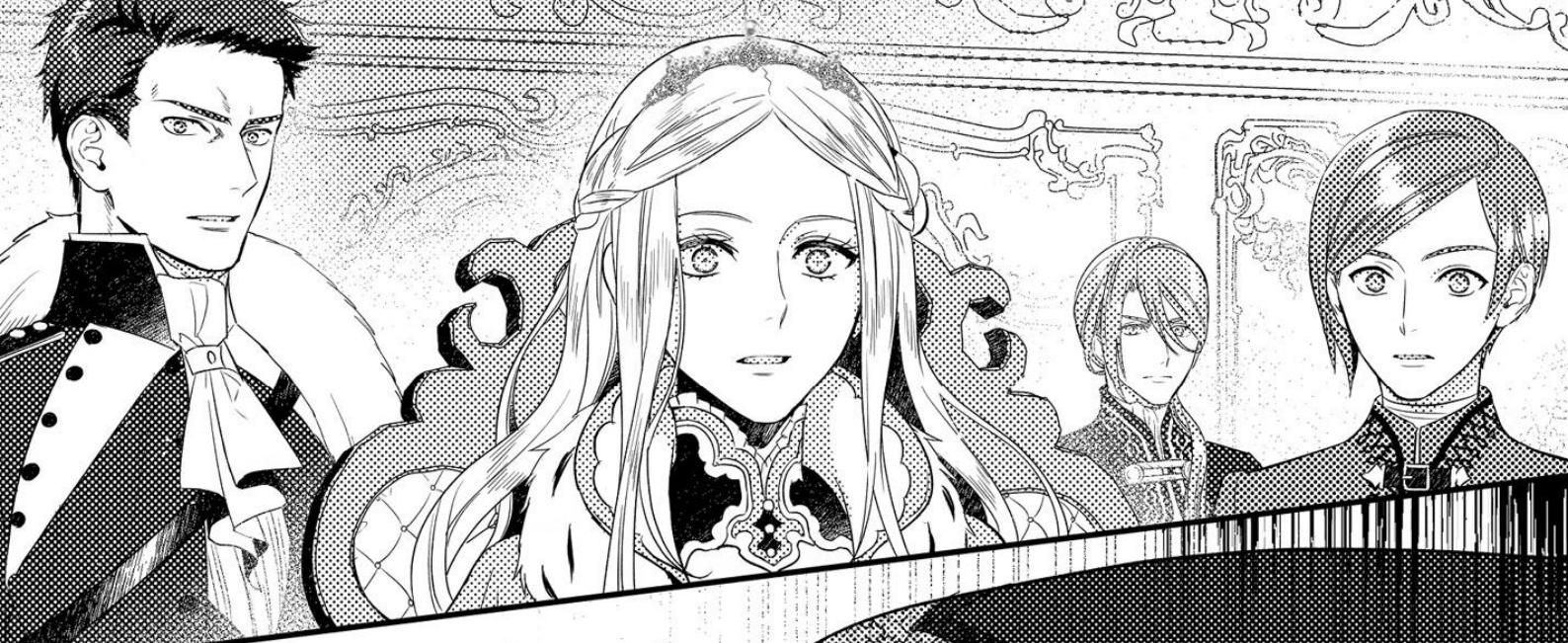
"You're all we have left!" Cedric cried. "Freesia is the only kingdom without a slave trade and with the power and army to stand up to Rajah!"

Countries that actively enslaved people had to tread lightly when it came to Rajah, the primary source of slave labor. Any disruption to Rajah was a disruption to the slave trade as a whole.

“Please, please help us!”

Cedric hunched in on himself, begging between gritted teeth. His pleas echoed through the throne room as the prince diminished into a feeble, forlorn shadow of the man who’d first arrived here.

*“Please!”*



At last, Cedric looked up again. He choked out ragged breaths, his expression grim.

"I understand the situation," Mother said evenly.

Cedric watched the queen, eyes never straying from her impassive face. Everyone held their breath as we awaited her judgment.

"However, we still have no proof as to the validity of your claims," she went on. "I'll ask you to wait a bit longer for a response."

"No!"

Cedric cried out in despair, but I couldn't blame Mother. If Cedric had told the truth from the very start, she might have had time to process his request, but his web of lies and deceptions forced her to consider whether what he said now was true.

The fire in the prince's gaze gradually burned away, leaving him speechless. His response to Mother's apparent rejection made me want to sigh, but I had to keep my annoyance under wraps.

"Mother, I've had a premonition," I announced, keeping my tone level.

She immediately turned her attention to me, eyes wide.

"I saw the kingdom of Chinensis being invaded in my vision," I said. "I believe what Prince Cedric speaks of is true this time."

There was more I wanted to tell her, but too much of this scenario was different from how I remembered it in the game. My premonitions held weight in Freesia, and I didn't want to speak unless I was absolutely sure.

Mother mulled over my words for a moment. "If that's the case, then we'll have to be sure that future never comes."

Cedric's eyes lit up. "I can't believe it..."

This was a delicate situation, to say the least. Normally, we'd accept Cedric's conditions right from the start. We were the ones who'd sought an alliance, after all. Plus, if we rejected his request while knowing Hanazuo was under threat of invasion, it could shake our other allies' faith in us. They might doubt we'd come to their aid if they were in the same situation someday, and that was really the basis of any alliance. It wasn't just a pact of friendship; it was a pact of strength and stability in the face of outside aggression. If only Cedric had told us the truth from the beginning, we might have been able to proceed without issue. Instead, he was acting like he was negotiating with the evil Pride from the game and not Mother, the ideal queen.

"Freesia will be conducting an investigation before moving forward with the negotiations," Mother said. "What we discover from that will shape our decision, though I do understand why your king can't leave his country at the present moment."

Tensions were high in the United Hanazuo Kingdom. A king couldn't easily travel to foreign lands in times like these. He had to have Cedric sign an alliance agreement as an official proxy, or Mother had to go to Cercis herself for the signing. Normally, we could easily accept a proxy like Cedric, but...

"I recall that you wished for me to travel to the kingdom of Cercis instead of acting as a proxy yourself," Mother said. She shot a glance at Prime Minister Gilbert and Uncle Vest for confirmation.

Cedric rushed to apologize. "Forgive me, but unfortunately, I don't have permission to act as his proxy."

This was only natural, since he'd left his homeland to come here without permission in the first place.

"We'll need time to find out the truth," Mother continued. "Will you give us three more days? If what you say about the state of

Cercis and Chinensis is true, we'll agree to the alliance and do whatever we can to help."

"Of course!" Cedric said. His eyes were sparkling with hope.

*This is precisely why Mother asked for more time in the first place. Ugh, I can't believe he's this dense.*

Cedric bowed low all over again. Then he dipped reverently toward the rest of us as well. For an instant, I could've sworn our eyes locked. Surely it was difficult for him to pay *me* such respect.

Still, this was the best conclusion he could have hoped for considering the circumstances. Once Uncle Vest confirmed the truth, Freesia and Cercis could finalize their alliance. The United Hanazuo Kingdom would receive the aid they needed to repel Rajah and stay out of the slave trade.

I remembered the Rajah Empire from ORL. In the first game, they supported Queen Pride after she took power. However, in comparison to mid-tier bosses like Stale, Arthur, Cedric, and Leon—who tried to stop Tiara and her love interest from carrying out their plans—Rajah was honestly more like a low-tier boss or shady background figure. Even when they did attempt to get in the heroine's way, they did not put up much of a fight. Usually, they ended up fleeing with their tails between their legs or got wiped out entirely. And once Pride was out of the picture, they retreated in fear.

While they played a small role in the main story, their presence wasn't particularly memorable. After all, the biggest menace in the game was Freesia—the land controlled by the evil last boss, Queen Pride.

Even here and now, Freesia would easily overwhelm Rajah and the rest. The empire had been expanding in order to evade other countries and enslave more people, but they were also trying to cozy

up to Freesia. Our opposing stances on slavery would make that extremely difficult even in the best of times.

And these were far from the best of times.

Rajah had even traded Freesians as slaves before. And while countries were free to implement their own terms when it came to slavery, it did not build comfortable alliances when Rajah hauled our people away. Prime Minister Gilbert was working on laws and systems that enabled us to take back our citizens from slave traders, but there was still more to be done there. In the meantime, our alliance with Rajah was fragile at best. Once we allied with the United Hanazuo Kingdom, Rajah would have to back off if they had any hope left of keeping Freesia in their good graces.

“We’ll send troops as soon as the alliance is finalized,” Mother said. “I’ll also personally make the request for peace between Rajah and Hanazuo and seek communication with them.”

Mother shot Uncle Vest a look, and he nodded his agreement. She went on to explain that, due to the distance between our country and Rajah, it would take some time to enact these diplomatic talks.

“That’s more than enough!” Cedric cried, once again lowering his head close to the floor. Just then, I saw a few droplets fall to the carpet.

Mother seemed satisfied with his display, and I breathed a sigh of relief. Three days from now, we would be allies of Hanazuo and act in accordance with that to protect them.

When Mother gave Cedric permission to return to his room, he bowed even as he turned to leave. From underneath his golden hair, I caught a glimpse of puffy, red-rimmed eyes shimmering with tears.

During the first installment of ORL, Cedric recounted his painful past to Tiara—a past that was playing out right before my eyes. In the game, this was when Copelandii suddenly threatened Hanazuo.

Submitting would mean becoming a Rajah colony, but resistance would result in a full-scale invasion and potentially cost them their name and culture as well. Either option would put Chinensis under Rajah's control, their people condemned to slavery. The king in Cercis grappled with this choice before making a two-fold decision.

Upon hearing the king's judgment, Cedric fled to Freesia, where he begged for the United Hanazuo Kingdom's salvation. But Queen Pride tricked him into cooperating, and in the end, the people Cedric wanted to protect ended up even worse off due to his recklessness.

The pain and regret hardened Cedric into a better prince for his kingdom. Plagued by the ache in his heart, he vowed to never trust anyone again. But a year later, Pride would once again treat his life like her toy.

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"Pri—Your Highness."

After I said my goodbyes to Mother and excused myself from the throne room, I found Cedric in front of my bedroom. He must have been waiting for me to return. Turning to face me, he straightened up as I approached.

"I'm guessing you have no desire to address me respectfully. You can just call me 'Pride.'"

Cedric furrowed his brow. He probably didn't like me giving him an order, but it would be easier for both of us if we just did away with the formalities.

"Pride...I'm sorry. I know I haven't made things easy for you."

He still refused to look me in the eye, keeping his gaze on the floor, but Tiara and Stale moved closer to my sides anyway. I even heard Arthur and Vice Captain Eric ready their weapons behind me.

“I don’t care about any of that,” I said flatly.

I knew it was wrong, but I couldn’t resist the temptation to antagonize him. *Can someone smack some sense into me, please?!* His brows shot up in surprise, but he remained silent, so I continued on.

“I don’t care what hoops I have to jump through if it means saving those citizens you wish to protect. I’m only angry that those hoops arose to protect your pride.”

He’d really come into this thinking he could use his looks to seduce me and force the alliance through. I couldn’t believe him. *“My dearest Prince Cedric’s homeland is in trouble?! I have to save them!”* That was probably how he imagined this going, embarrassingly enough. Still, I endeavored to keep the hostility out of my voice.

Cedric gulped, eyes still downcast. “I’m sorry,” he muttered at his feet.

“You also—”

I cut myself off. The mere memory had my blood boiling. I had to stay calm, though, no matter how badly I wanted to punch him for this.

“What can I do?” Cedric asked quietly. “How can I earn your forgiveness?”

He resembled a little boy receiving his first scolding. At first, I thought the sadness was just part of the act, but his expression was too raw and unguarded when he finally met my gaze. This had nothing to do with the alliance or any half-baked machinations.

“I won’t touch you without permission ever again,” he said, “or your cooking, or your belongings. I’ll apologize for everything I did to you, as many times as it takes. But will that even be enough?”

*Why is he looking at me like a kicked puppy?*

His haughty expression was gone, replaced with something feeble and soft. In fact, his eyes were brimming with tears. Even when he was in a vulnerable state in the game, he held on to his dignity better than...whatever *this* was. It deflated my anger, even over that meal I still held a grudge about. Then guilt swooped in and took its place. I let out a grumbly sound, and my shoulders slouched.

"I don't know all the details, but the ways you've disrespected my sister aren't things I can simply forgive," Stale said, stepping forward despite the absence of any hostility. "She only put in a good word for you with Mother because she's a merciful person. I hope you don't forget that."

I flinched at Stale's words. I might have started feeling sorry for Cedric, but Stale certainly hadn't. This was even worse than when he'd faced down Prime Minister Gilbert. *Is he upset about Cedric eating the food we made for Arthur?*

"I see..." Cedric responded, his gaze dropping. "I'm sorry to stop you in front of your room."

With that, he moved out of my way, and Tiara and Stale urged me past Cedric and inside my room. But even as I retreated to safety, I couldn't help sparing a glance for the prince, who stood there staring at the floor again, utterly forlorn.

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No one left their rooms the day after Cedric revealed the truth of his situation to Mother. It was too dangerous while everything was still so delicate and uncertain.

By afternoon, however, I broke my confinement. I rushed from my room with my imperial knights and guards at my sides, urgent sweeping through the castle halls. When we reached the parlor, I

hurriedly explained myself to the guards at the doors until they opened them for me.

“Leon! I’m so sorry. You didn’t want to stay in the main castle with everything going on, did you?” I said as I burst into the room.

“Hello, Pride,” he said smoothly. “No, it wasn’t a problem...but what exactly is going on?”

Leon had come to visit the castle, just as he’d previously promised. Even with all that was going on, the guards at the gate knew better than to turn away the firstborn prince of our ally Anemone. Once he had the queen’s permission to enter, a cohort of brawny knights had escorted Leon inside. Now, he stood surrounded by members of the Fourth Squadron in addition to his own Anemonian guards. At first glance, it almost looked like he was getting mugged.

I rushed through an explanation of the last few days. As I spoke, Leon’s jade eyes grew wide.

“Don’t tell me that’s why the Cercian prince came to visit Freesia...”

“Indeed it is,” I said. “We’re still deciding what to do, but we’re all under strict guard until then. I’m sorry, Leon. I wish I could just relax and chat with you like usual.”

He’d come all this way only to visit a castle in chaos. He probably wouldn’t get to stay long either. But though I went on apologizing, Leon simply smiled and said, “No, I’m sorry for visiting you when you have so much on your plate.” He then greeted Arthur and the other knights as lightly as though nothing was amiss here.

“Congratulations on your promotion, Arthur,” he said, beaming. “Pride told me about it when it happened.”

Arthur shyly bowed and said, “Thank you very much!”

"You're quite the brilliant knight, aren't you? I see why Pride, Tiara, and Prince Stale boast of your skills."

At Leon's blunt praise, Arthur looked away, face flushing with heat.

Then the prince appeared to have remembered something. "Oh, speaking of your promotion..."

Vice Captain Eric and I gasped and turned to each other. *Oh no! He's going to mention that meal!*

"How did you enjoy Pride's foo—"

"Aiiieeeee!"

I shrieked like a beast to cut Leon off, then clapped my hands over his mouth. He let out a befuddled noise. At my side, Arthur was blinking in confusion.

Vice Captain Eric sputtered out an excuse for them to leave. "It's not right for us to be here when the prince and princess could be discussing important secrets about their kingdoms. Let's take our posts outside the room!" With that, he pasted on a strained smile, grabbed Arthur and the guards, and dragged them outside by force. "Call for us if you need anything!"

The door slammed shut behind them.

"Forgive me, Leon," I said once the room was clear. "That surprise meal for Arthur didn't actually work out..."

I released Leon's mouth and moved my hands to his cheeks, which were now slightly red—probably from my hands making it harder for him to breathe.

"Th—that's...that's all right..." he answered quietly, eyes round.

"Well, it's more than that... It was actually a complete failure."

"A failure?!" Leon cocked his head. I smiled awkwardly, but that did nothing to allay his concerns. "Was something wrong with the ingredients?"

"No, that wasn't it. The food turned out great. But then...someone else ended up eating it."

I couldn't bring myself to say his name. I rubbed my cheek, trying to brush off the whole thing, but Leon wasn't done yet.

"You mean someone ate the crown princess's cooking without permission?! Who could do such a thing?!"

*Oh, you know. Just the second-born prince of the kingdom of Cercis.* I couldn't tell him that. Leon's shock was genuine, but when I refused to name the culprit, he simply smiled and told me he would send more ingredients as soon as he could. *He's so kind. How do I stop myself from crying right now?*

"Anyway, now that no one's around, there's something I'd like to ask you, Pride. Er, is that second-born prince of Cercis nearby?"

Leon's eyes swept the room, and he lowered his voice to a hush. This time, I was the one cocking my head in puzzlement. Cedric was in the palace, certainly, but he was in his guest room.

"He is. He'll be staying here for two more days at the least. Do you need something from him? If so, I can ask Mother for permission to call him here."

"No, that's all right. You're the only one I wanted to see, Pride."

A flutter tickled my stomach. The guy was so straightforward! I stuffed down the reaction, but Leon was smiling that charming, seductive smile of his. He reached out and ran his fingers through my hair. The gesture felt utterly intimate.

"Did that prince do something he shouldn't have?" he asked.

I jolted. How was Leon so perceptive? I knew he was acquainted with Cedric, so perhaps he had some idea of his flaws. When I floundered for an answer, Leon's smile melted off. He leaned close, his lips at my ear.

"Did something happen?"

The quiet question came in a slightly deeper tone than usual. A strange, sudden chill washed over me. Maybe it was because he was whispering directly into my ear. Leon pulled away as I stuttered a response. He gazed down at me, eyes glinting.

“Did he *do* something to you?”

My face grew hot, and I had to look away. *What should I do?* I didn’t want to say anything about Cedric that would make Leon, the crown prince of Anemone, think poorly of him.

“Pride.”

I instinctively looked up at him when he called my name. Worry shot through his piercing gaze.

“Are you all right?”

This time, I couldn’t look away from those jade-green eyes. *Oh no. I’ve scared him.* My inability and unwillingness to describe the incidents had all but confirmed Leon’s worst fears about Cedric.

“I’m fine,” I assured him. “Things were difficult between us at first, but they’re much better now. I’m sorry for scaring you.” I managed to smile at him, and Leon responded in kind.

“I told you to use me as an intermediary if there was trouble,” he said.

Melancholy mellowed his voice. That glint in his eyes held suspicion and not just allure. His powerful aura was stealing my breath away.

“Pride, I’m worried about you.”

My whole body went warm when he turned his attention to me like this. I stood before him in a daze, nearly crushed by his magnetism, and Leon took my hand in his.

“Unfortunately, I can’t be with you all the time.”

He was biting his lower lip and squeezing my hand, perhaps trying to reassure himself as much as me. Sorrow rolled off of him in waves.

"I'm sorry. I know you're worried, but I can't allow the crown prince of an allied kingdom to be an intermediary for us. Besides—"

"I didn't mean I'd do it as the crown prince," he said firmly.  
"We're 'sworn friends,' aren't we?"

All my excuses evaporated.

"I'm the one who's sorry," Leon said, as though any of this was his fault.

Silence fell between us, and I heard him gulp. Resolve hardened Leon's expression, though he still wore his perpetual, charming smile. I was surprised by the sudden transformation, but he spoke the same way he always did.

"Pride... If this happens again, will you please reach out to me for help?"

Although a weight seemed to have lifted from him, I felt compelled to nod in response. "Of course."

Pleased, Leon extended his pinky finger toward me. "All right, then promise me."

He grinned like a kid as he held it out. I linked my pinky with his, and our interlocked fingers highlighted how much paler than me he was.

"It's a promise," I said.

I squeezed his pinky. For some reason, he started to flush, his cheeks taking on a pink tinge as a smile spread across his lips. He must have been embarrassed to make a promise in such a childish way. He kept staring down at our linked fingers, and I started to feel bashful as well.



"Where did you learn that?" I asked him.

"The children in my local village taught me. I did this same thing with them...when I promised I'd make Anemone a kingdom they could be proud of."

Leon spoke shyly, but the memory had him grinning. I relaxed at the sight and slid my pinky free of his. Leon held his finger before his face, staring at it like it was something new and precious he'd only just discovered.

"A promise," he murmured.

When Leon smiled at me, I no longer found any tension in his face. It was a gesture of relief, and some kind of satisfaction too.

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"Your Highness, what shall I do with today's letters?"

Lotte was holding two bundles of letters addressed to me. Including the ones that had just been delivered, it was a few days' worth of mail.

Mother was finally going to deliver her decision tomorrow. The castle had been on edge for the past two days, so I'd been ordered to spend the day in my room again. Stale was with Uncle Vest, busy going through information about foreign kingdoms, but Tiara and I were confined to our bedrooms. The only people with me were Lotte, Mary, Jack, and my imperial knights—Arthur and Captain Callum.

"Thank you," I said. "I'll read them at once."

I took the bundles from Lotte and glanced at the senders: Ackroyd, Beaglee, Nepenthes, Corkhone... Most were letters from princes or noblemen from foreign countries. There were also a few whose origins I couldn't discern, even by looking at the name of the

sender. Some letters didn't include a sender or country of origin, yet they still made their way to me as long as the content wasn't too problematic. They were almost always one-sided declarations of love that I quickly discarded.

At first, receiving letters from so many powerful people left me quite dumbfounded, but I'd grown numb to it over time. Stale suggested I throw them all out without reading them, but some letters contained important information and stories about foreign lands. Most of all, I simply felt awkward throwing them away. My past life left me accustomed to things like email and social media, so it felt wrong to toss aside something a person had taken the time to write by hand. I couldn't send any responses, of course, but I still wanted to glance over them at least. Reading all these letters had become a regular custom. It was likely the first and only time in my life where I would experience such popularity, so I wanted to appreciate it while I could.

"Um, Princess Pride?"

As soon as I opened the first envelope, Arthur called out to me. He shifted from foot to foot, lips pursed as he struggled to find his words.

"When you're reading those letters...do you ever find anyone you like?"

"Huh?!"

I cried out in shock at Arthur's sudden interest in my love life. His cheeks reddened, as did Captain Callum's the second he processed the exchange.

"Uh, no, it's just... You always get those huge stacks of letters, and you take the time to read 'em all... I just wondered if anyone stood out or anything. Sorry for asking."

With that quiet apology, Arthur broke eye contact. I softened, sensing the sympathy in his words. He was probably worried that I wasn't having much luck finding a husband.

"Well..." I trailed off, studying the letter in my hands. Inside were the usual tender words of love. I assumed Prime Minister Gilbert or Stale would dispose of it later, as per usual. "I wouldn't say I've found anyone yet." My response sounded ambiguous even to my ears.

"I see," Arthur said quietly.

I turned to look at my two imperial knights, who watched me avidly. "I mean, it's just that I'm plenty happy with the people I already have in my life."

I smiled shyly, trying to stuff down my embarrassment at such an earnest statement. But Arthur and Captain Callum were turning even more red. My own face heated in sympathy. Then both knights covered their mouths with their hands and looked away in sync.

*Wait, they totally think I'm just a princess with her head in the clouds! They're wondering how I could even say something so embarrassing!*

"Erm, please pretend you never heard that..."

I used the letter in my hands to seal my lips. *Who am I to judge these people for their romantic letters? Maybe these amorous ramblings would work on princely characters like Leon or Cedric, but it's honestly hard to swallow for a last boss queen like myself.*

Whirling away from them, I returned to the letters in order to escape the awkwardness of the situation. Just then, a commotion rose outside the room.

"I implore you to return to your room at once!"

"Prince Cedric! You mustn't leave yet!"

*Did they say "Cedric"? What's going on?*

Jack went out to check with the other guards. When he returned, he wore a puzzled look. “It appears that Prince Cedric has been stopped by the guards stationed outside his room.”

*But he's supposed to be confined to his bedroom! What is he thinking?! Cedric was more at risk than any of us. Why did he suddenly want to leave his room—and at a time when it was crucial not to upset Mother by acting against her orders?*

“Don’t tell me he wanted to visit Princess Pride...” Captain Callum said.

Arthur’s face grew pale at Captain Callum’s quiet suggestion. *No, that can’t be. I may have rejected his apology, sure, but he’d never try to escape the guards for something like that. ...Or so I hope.*

“Well...” Jack trailed off, a complicated look on his face.

We were all on the edge of our seats. Lotte gently set her hands on my shoulders to support me as we waited for him to continue.

“It seems Prince Cedric said he needed to return home immediately.”

“What?!” I cried. *This doesn’t make any sense!*

Mother hadn’t agreed to the alliance yet. Returning home now would be the same as calling off the negotiations altogether. *We’ve come so far! Why would he do something so stupid all of a sudden?!*

I rushed toward the door, but Jack, Captain Callum, and Arthur swept in to stop me. I was also confined to my room, but the voices were coming from just outside it. Plus, Cedric was the second-born prince of Cercis. If he really wanted to go, the guards couldn’t force him to stay.

*Ugh, I’ve had it! This happens after only two days?! After Stale told him he couldn’t be forgiven, I was determined to not interact with him anymore! I was finally starting to like him after how he pleaded with Mother. His apology actually made me want to forgive him!*

I just couldn't get a handle on this guy. The moment I thought I'd judged him correctly, he did something like this. *Fine, then! Cedric leaves his room and I'm stuck in mine! There's only one thing left to do.*

**"Cedric Silva Lowell!"**

I screamed with all the force I could muster. My voice came out so shrill that it rang in my ears. Arthur and Captain Callum's eyes shot wide open, while Mary and Lotte covered their ears. While I tried to catch my breath, I strained to hear any noise from the other side of the door. All of the previous voices I'd heard had fallen silent.

"Please...bring Prince Cedric...to my room," I said.

If he'd already left his room, then it didn't matter if he came here, so Jack left to convey my orders to the other guards.

*"There's no need for you to forgive him, Pride."*

*"I...can't forgive the things he's done to Her Highness."*

*"I'm upset with Prince Cedric too!"*

*"The ways he's mistreated you aren't things that can simply be forgiven, Your Highness."*

*I'm so sorry, everyone.*

Stale, Arthur, Tiara, and Vice Captain Eric had all said their piece when it came to Cedric. While I appreciated their anger on my behalf, I just couldn't abandon Cedric when he was about to foolishly throw away his best chance of securing the alliance his kingdom so desperately needed.

I spun toward Arthur, who clearly had something he wanted to say. It was only natural—he'd protected me from Cedric only two days ago, and now I was trying to save that arrogant prince. But that was all the more reason why I had to go through with this.

I rushed to Arthur and Captain Callum, taking both their hands in mine.

"Captain Callum, I'm sure you've heard from Vice Captain Eric about what happened the other day," I said. "So please, if the need arises, don't hesitate to stop me."

Even Stale respected Captain Callum for his intellect. If anyone here could see something negative coming and intercede, it would be him. I was counting on Captain Callum to stop me if I made some misstep or said something naive.

Captain Callum's cheeks flushed at the sudden request, but he nodded. "Understood."

"Arthur."

I squeezed his hand this time. He was staring down at my hand, but he looked up at me with wide, deep-blue eyes when I called his name. He'd protected me from Cedric many times. He'd even joined Stale in scolding me over it.

"Please stay by my side."

His mouth parted with shock, but he squeezed my hand.

"Of course..." His face was turning a deeper shade of red with each passing moment. I took it as a sign that he was remaining vigilant when it came to Cedric—although it may have had something to do with how the prince had treated me.

I thanked Captain Callum and Arthur and let go of their hands. Several pairs of footsteps were already heading our way.

"Excuse the intrusion," Cedric said as he knocked.

I granted him permission to enter. The guards opened the door and there stood Cedric gripping an envelope. Pain twisted his handsome face. His jaw was taut from the way he gritted his teeth.

"What's going on? Why do you want to return home all of a sudden?" I asked him.

"I'm sorry," he said. "But, please, let me return to Hanazuo just once!"

"You can't. You know that if you go home now, we can't guarantee how the alliance will turn out."

The letter in Cedric's hands crinkled as he clenched it tighter "Still, I...I *have* to go back!" Cedric shook his head, his eyes lighting with an inner fire as he narrowed them at me and held fast.

"What happened?" I asked with a gulp. I could tell he was hiding something again. When he didn't respond, I tried a different question: "What about our alliance?" No matter the issue, it couldn't possibly be enough to jeopardize our agreement.

Cedric ground his perfectly straight, white teeth and squeezed his eyes shut. After a few seconds of silence, he forced his mouth open. "I don't care...if you have to call off the alliance. Please give my apologies to Her Majesty."

"Are you a complete idiot?!"

The words burst out before I could stop them. *Oh no, I went and insulted him again. But I'm so sick of this man! Whatever reason he might have, how can he ask to call it off?! He knows exactly what outcome that might bring!*

But Cedric didn't react to my insults. He kept his eyes shut and simply said, "I'm sorry..."

That wasn't good enough for me. This problem was bigger than him—the fate of his kingdom and his people hung in the balance.

Enraged, I grabbed his shoulders and shook him. "Will you give it a rest already?! This isn't something you can decide on your own! Don't you want to save Hanazuo?!"

Cedric's ears must have been ringing, but he just stood limp and still as I jostled him.

"Please! Just let me go home... If I don't get there soon..."

"You broke out of your room for this?! If there's trouble in your homeland, then your older brother will—"

“It’s about my brother!”

His shout brought me back to my senses. Cedric’s shoulders quivered under my hands. Even though he faced the floor, I could see how flushed he was and the sharp outline of his hardened jaw. With that single cry, his whole body started shaking harder. I heard him swallow hard.

*Just what exactly have I been doing?*

Shame washed over me. No matter what Cedric had done here, I knew him through the game from my past life. I knew his true nature. I should have been able to understand his heart better than this. He wouldn’t abandon this alliance for purely selfish reasons.

“What happened?” I pressed.

Cedric merely shook his head, unable to tell me. “Just...just let me go...”

His fingers squeezed the letter in his hands, which no doubt contained the answer. I understood that he couldn’t share his homeland’s secrets with Freesia, but that didn’t make any of this right. Losing the alliance now would be a misstep he couldn’t recover from.

“You have to tell me what’s going on,” I said.

Cedric made a choked noise when I pushed him again. He reached out for me, grabbing for my shoulders.

And then he froze.

His hands hovered above my body. Arthur and Captain Callum had leapt forward the moment Cedric moved. They now stood directly behind me, tense and ready.

The way Cedric had abruptly halted was like someone bound by a fealty contract. He made a fist with one hand, squeezed, then brought it slowly down to his side.

His words from two days ago replayed in my mind: "*I won't touch you without permission ever again.*"

*He made that promise...and he just kept it.* My heart ached as Cedric studied the floor, clearly struggling with the weight of what he carried alone. This was the Cedric I knew from the game.

"I hate you, Cedric. I haven't forgiven you yet...and I don't think I ever will." I gently released his shoulders.

"Yeah..."

"But I can still help you."

He lifted his head just a fraction, and his throat bobbed.

"I promise I won't tell anyone if you don't want me to. The people in this room will be the only ones who know, and they'll never tell another soul either. Just explain it to me, please."

This time, Cedric held very still, mulling over my words. Perhaps he would finally give in. To that end, I pressed one last time.

"I want to save Hanazuo... I want to save Chinensis too—"

"There's no time!" he snapped, voice racked with pain.

Tears shimmered in Cedric's eyes. His face went red as he tried to hold back his sobs.

"My brother...and Bro... I can't...stop him..." The tears broke free as he stuttered through this pronouncement. "I can't...wait anymore... Big Brother... It's my fault...and now even Bro is...!"

In his panic, Cedric only managed clipped phrases. He was still trembling, his rambling incoherent. Beneath it all, I swore I heard a soft cry: "*Help me.*"

"You have to talk to me," I said, taking him by the arm to calm him down. He groaned, too choked up to continue. Then he thrust the letter he held toward me. He was giving me permission to read it.

I took the wrinkled letter from his grasp and opened it, careful not to tear the parchment. Cedric cradled his head, hunched and

looking like he might collapse any moment. As the dam of emotion inside him finally broke, he held himself and muttered miserably, “It’s all my fault... Big Brother...”

The crumpled letter must have arrived very recently. It was dated ten days earlier and bore the name of the Cercian seneschal. I assumed the letter had come from Cedric’s older brother, the Cercian king.

I scanned the message, written neatly but with obvious urgency. It laid out the situation in Cercis ten days ago in brief, broad strokes. I could barely believe what I was reading. In short, Copelandii moved up their deadline for invasion by nine days.

To make matters worse, two days *before* the letter, madness had overcome King Lance Silva Lowell. The kingdom of Chinensis dissolved their alliance with Cercis and prepared for total surrender to Copelandii.

I blinked at the words before me, reading them over and over. This was a disaster on an unprecedented scale.

“How did this...?”

I couldn’t even form a full thought. How did everything fall apart? Cedric had come here seeking our aid *because* Chinensis had already dissolved their alliance. At least, that was how this went in the game. I stood there in a daze, unable to process it all.

“What’s going on?”

Captain Callum and Arthur called out to me from behind, but I wasn’t sure if I should share the contents of the letter with them.

I suddenly understood why Cedric felt like he couldn’t share any of this. Each pronouncement in the letter shook the very foundations of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Cedric couldn’t divulge that information to someone who was only a *potential* ally, especially the bit about the king’s descent into madness. He must have been

extremely desperate to even show me the letter. The missive could ruin the king's reputation and dash any hope of an alliance.

"I won't make it in time!" Cedric cried. "There's only six days left! Even if I took a boat from Anemone...I still might not make it, let alone be able to send reinforcements..."

The letter also asked Cedric to return to Cercis immediately. The seneschal must have wanted Cedric home quickly due to his elder brother's deterioration.

Given that the letter was sent ten days ago, that meant the king went mad two days after Cedric fled the kingdom. Two days after that, their alliance crumbled, and the Cercian seneschal sent off this letter. If the deadline for invasion was moved forward nine days, then that did indeed leave six more days, as Cedric said.

The trip to Hanazuo from Freesia would take ten days, even by royal carriage. Cedric's best chance of making it in time was to take a ship from our neighbor, Anemone. If the voyage went perfectly, he might arrive in five days at the quickest. But he had no way of knowing if any ships from Anemone were scheduled to leave on time, and depending on sea conditions and weather, a ship could take even longer than a trip by carriage. He'd also need a skilled captain and crew, which weren't so easy to find on short notice.

Still, going by ship represented Cedric's one slim hope of making it back in time. That was why he was so desperate to leave immediately. He needed to get back to his homeland to be with his older brother before the invasion began.

"It's my fault..." Cedric said. "Because I...went and left home..."

Tears streamed from the gaps in his trembling fingers as he covered his eyes. He slumped over, wailing each word.

*No, Cedric. This isn't your fault.* I gripped both sides of the letter and kept those words buried inside me.

This same thing had happened in the game, with the Cercian king slipping into insanity. But the king hadn't been sent into that state because Cedric fled the kingdom without warning.

None of this made any sense. Copelandii never sped up their invasion in ORL. I also couldn't believe that the alliance between Chinensis and Cercis remained in place this long.

This must have been what Cedric was holding back when he begged Mother for help in the throne room. *I should have known, since Cedric mentions Chinensis's annulment of the alliance to Pride during a flashback scene in the game.*

It was no use. My past life memories weren't any help here. I was as lost and confused as anyone else.

"Please... Please let me go!" Cedric said, choking on tears.  
"I won't make it in time! I have to...talk to Big Brother!"

*No, I can't be focusing on the game's story right now. There's a person suffering right here in front of me.*

"Listen to me, Cedric," I said. "I think you should tell Mother whatever you can. I understand that you don't want to share this for the sake of your kingdom and your older brother, but Mother won't be able to trust you if you keep hiding things from her. Your kingdom's safety is more important than pride right now."

"I can't," Cedric said. "Big Brother's gone mad... His reputation as king can't survive that! The messenger told me. Big Brother can't even speak anymore."

He shook his head, tears still streaming down his face. Sweat beaded on his brow. He trembled with the weight of the dire news he carried and went on pleading for me to let him return home.

But I couldn't let him go yet. If the Cercian king was in a state of madness, then Cedric was the only proxy they had left. I held his arm tighter. First off, he needed to come to terms with the situation.

"It's okay," I said. "It'll be all right."

"No. It's no use. I won't make it! It's all my fault... It was too much for him to take!"

Cedric just kept on repeating himself, shouting the same words over and over in his panic. Drowning in self-blame as he fixated on his elder brother, he could think of nothing else. He gripped his own hair like he meant to tear out the beautiful golden locks.

"Cedric, it's okay. Just calm down. You'll make it in time."

Seeing the prince hunched over and trembling, I struggled to hold my composure. He just kept on repeating his dire mantra: "I can't... I won't make it... Big Brother... It's my fault."

"Listen to me," I went on. "Why don't you start by consulting with Mother? I'm sure she'll—"

*"Enough already!"*

His rage echoed through the room. The scream had to have strained his throat after so much crying. I stumbled away from the force of that shout. Tears poured from his wide and wavering eyes. His ragged, bestial breaths heated the air between us. Cedric gritted his teeth and glared at me, all shame forgotten.

"Stop trying to make it better! It's too late!" he howled.

The tears were dripping off his chin now, soaking into the collar of his shirt and the rug beneath our feet. He sniffed and a sob escaped.

"I know how it ends now. It's too late..." Cedric dragged in a deep breath. "I can't save them!" Yet another, bigger wave of tears crashed over his cheeks.

"...ive you," I murmured, my thoughts slipping out.

I approached the prince slowly. Once I drew near, I grabbed his shoulders and swept his legs out from under him to knock him down. The prince lost his balance and collapsed with a thump. I fell on top of him and pressed him into the floor.

It all happened so quickly that neither Cedric nor his servants could react in time. They tried to drag me off, but Cedric raised his hand to shoo them away. I squeezed his shoulders, staring down at his wide-eyed, dumbfounded expression.

"I'll never forgive you if you give up now!" I declared, my voice booming so loud it surprised even me. "How dare you say that you can't save them. You must fight until the very end!"

His wet, red face began to pale.

I wouldn't let him give up before the invasion had even begun. Despite the pain and anxiety of the situation, he had to get back on his feet and face this. It was the duty of any member of a royal family.

"We're going to Mother together, Cedric. You need to come clean about all of this. Once you have her permission..."

I moved my hands from his shoulders to grab the front of his shirt. In that moment, I could feel his heart thumping in his chest.

"...I, the one who hates you most in this world, will be there to help you."

Cedric met my gaze. His river of tears ceased. I faced him stonily, and he didn't back down for a moment. I delivered my words with frigidity, hoping they would pierce his heart and cool his head.

"I'll say it again and again until you truly understand. You can still make it in time. Cercis, and even Chinensis..."

His throat worked as he swallowed nervously. His golden hair fanned out under him, but his eyes still burned with passion. I stuck out my chest and spoke with purpose.

"They can both be saved."

The second those words left my lips, his eyes grew hazy with tears all over again.

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I had no idea what I was going to do.

“Very well, then.”

This morning, a messenger had brought me the letter. Now I stood in the throne room divulging my kingdom’s secrets to the queen of Freesia. She simply listened to my report on the state of Cercis and nodded.

I only lied about one thing, just as Pride had advised.

“*You can still make it in time,*” she’d said. Then she got permission for an audience with her mother and dragged me to the throne room by the hand. The queen’s usual retinue surrounded her—Prince Albert, Prime Minister Gilbert, Seneschal Vest, and Prince Stale. Princess Pride remained at my side, patting me on the back to encourage me to speak.

Frankly, I could hardly believe my own words. Everything had happened so fast. First, the messenger from Cercis arrived in a rush. I thought he meant to drag me home, but I was so far off.

Twelve days ago, the Copelandian messengers returned to our kingdom. It was only two days after I’d left for Freesia. The messengers told my countrymen that the deadline had moved up by nine days. After that, Chinensis would have to choose between submission or invasion.

Just after this development, as he tried to board a carriage back to Cercis from Chinensis, my brother—King Lance Silva Lowell—suddenly went mad. I’d never once seen his mental health in dire straits, so it came out of nowhere. And he’d only been on the throne for a year. I was sure his sudden break was due to the anguish I’d caused him by leaving.

When two days passed with no improvement to Big Brother's mental state, Yohan Linne Dwight, the king of Chinensis, dissolved the treaty between our countries. They no longer wanted us—a kingdom with a defective king. Most of all, they didn't want Cercis to get dragged into war with them. Apparently, Chinensis was preparing to surrender to Copelandii. There were only six days left.

It took ten days to go from Freesia to Cercis by horse, and eight to nine hours to reach Anemone. From there, I could sail to Cercis in five at the very fastest. I had no time to waste. Even standing here in the throne room pleading my case felt like wasting seconds I could not spare.

But I had to do this. I was the one who'd hurt my kingdom's credibility with the way I'd acted when I first got to Freesia. I'd been a fool, and Freesia was right to request more time to weigh their decision. Yet I could not linger long. If I waited for them before leaving from Anemone by ship, I wouldn't make it home in time. Plus, if Freesia sent reinforcements right this minute, Anemone would have to prepare large ships and whatever else to transport them. Even if the plan went perfectly, we might not make it there until everything was already over.

"It sounds like the situation has become more urgent," the queen said. "But as I explained before, we still need more time to determine the validity of your claims. Vest and Stale are doing a wonderful job of sorting through information. However, it will likely be too difficult to move the deadline up any earlier."

I clenched my fists. I really couldn't regain the trust I'd already lost. Just what had I been so prideful for?

"Which is why, unfortunately, I must ask you to wait until tomorrow for an answer."

*Wait, what?*

I couldn't believe my ears. *Waiting?! What good will that do?* By tomorrow, it would be too late for me to make it home before the invasion. Or did the queen mean to negotiate with Copelandii or Rajah after they'd already taken Chinensis? But why would they give up land they'd just conquered? If anything, it could lead to a war between Freesia and Rajah.

All my objections caught in my throat. I was too lost to speak.

The queen continued, "You stated earlier that the Cercian king suddenly 'fell ill' and is currently unable to speak."

This was the one lie Pride had encouraged me to tell. I softened Big Brother's condition to an "illness" and nothing more, but it was only a matter of time before the queen found out. Perhaps Pride, seeing how distraught I was, had offered this advice out of pity. It didn't lessen my shame, however. I was the one who'd fled his homeland without permission and exposed our secrets to a foreign land. At the very least, I wanted to keep my brother's misfortunes hidden.

"If King Lance does not recover during our visit to Cercis, I would be signing the alliance with you, the heir to the throne, in his stead," Her Majesty said.

"What?!"

All words escaped me. *Me? Instead of Big Brother?! That's impossible. I'm the one who pursued this alliance without permission. I can't force it through without Big Brother's approval!*

"However, one problem remains."

Everyone around Her Majesty nodded as she spoke. I didn't understand why no one was contradicting her. And what other problem was there? Time was running out, but the obstacles just kept piling up.

"Last night, I received a letter from the Rajah Empire."

“Rajah?!” I stood up straighter, stiffening with tension. *Why the hell did they do this now?!*

Pride looked just as taken aback by this. It was the first time she spoke up. “Rajah sent a letter?”

“That’s right,” the queen told us. “Rajah has been requesting a deeper relationship between us for some time, but now, for some reason, they’re seeking a visit here with the royal family. The date they listed for the visit is six days from now.”

At the queen’s signal, Seneschal Vest retrieved a letter—the one sent from Rajah.

“First, the deadline was shortened by nine days, and now it’s as if they’ve been told about our—or rather, the United Hanazuo Kingdom’s—plans.”

“That’s not possible!” I shouted. “We’re a closed kingdom! The messengers from Copelandii were the only people allowed inside our borders, and their carriage was thoroughly inspected by all the guards at the gates. We even kept them under constant observation until they returned home!”

There was no chance that someone managed to infiltrate our borders, but even if they had, the spy would never manage to uncover the royal family’s every secret. This could only mean that there was a traitor in my kingdom...but that wasn’t possible! I refused to believe it. Even if that rotten former palace official wanted to betray us, he shouldn’t have had any means of getting the information out of the kingdom.

“It’s the only possible conclusion that fits these developments, Prince Cedric.”

Prime Minister Gilbert spoke up as though reading my thoughts. He held up a set of documents and waved them as he started to explain.

"You left your homeland to visit ours roughly two weeks ago. Hypothetically speaking, if someone knew that you had left the castle and sent word to Copelandii by carrier bird, it would take them two days at the earliest for their messengers to return to Hanazuo by carriage and report the shortening of the deadline. A two-day trip by horse is a much shorter trip for a carrier bird. We also believe that it's likely Rajah leaders are currently located inside Copelandii due to the upcoming invasion. If a Rajah authority learned of your trip to Freesia at the same time Copelandii did, it would take thirteen days for them to reach us by carriage—which places them here on the same date listed in the letter. But this is all hypothetical, of course."

My stomach dropped into my feet. I swooned where I stood. *But why...? And how did they know my destination?!*

"Let's set that aside for now," the prime minister continued. "What matters most is their visit six days from now."

Her Majesty nodded at this. Six days from now. The day of my kingdom's invasion was the same day Rajah was coming to visit Freesia.

"The Rajah Empire has provinces and colonies all throughout the world, but its mainland is quite distant from ours," Her Majesty said. "We have our own negotiations to advance, so we must take advantage of this opportunity. I planned on meeting with them six days from now, but if the invasion is to take place on that same date, I won't be able to lead reinforcements to the United Hanazuo Kingdom. It's as if they planned it this way so we could not interfere to aid you."

I didn't know how to respond. Even if Freesia sent reinforcements, the queen couldn't accompany them anymore—which meant we couldn't sign an alliance. If she stayed here and brokered a peace with Rajah, word wouldn't reach Copelandii until Chinensis had already surrendered. The best option would be to

have the queen go to Hanazuo herself with reinforcements and command her troops alongside us. But the timing didn't add up.

"Mother, I have a suggestion," Pride spoke up at my side. Her voice echoed with dignity and betrayed no hesitation.

I turned to her, daring to hope. She stared directly at the queen, standing tall while she waited for permission to speak.

The queen granted it, and Pride went on, "I can act as the queen's proxy and travel to the United Hanazuo Kingdom with Prince Cedric to command our troops."

*Huh?!*

"While we're away, you can broker peace between Rajah and our kingdom. Our knights and I will prevent the invasion alongside Cercis and Chinensis under my orders."

I started to question Pride's sanity.

*What the hell is she thinking? She's a princess, not the queen. She may be the heir to the throne, but if anything, that just makes it more dangerous for her to come to Hanazuo with me.*

I wasn't alone. Seneschal Vest, Prince Albert, Prime Minister Gilbert, and even Prince Stale gaped with shock at Pride's suggestion. Only the queen remained composed.

"That means you would travel to a battlefield in my place," the queen mused. "You'll be surrounded by danger. You understand this, don't you?"

"I do, Mother. But as the future queen, I'll have to walk this path myself one day. We can't assume that our homeland will know peace forever."

"I certainly hope you never have to experience war as queen..." Her Majesty said with a sigh. A very human moment of grief broke the queen's facade. "I had a feeling you'd suggest this. Very well. I'll

allow it. However, Stale will be joining you. You understand what I mean by this, don't you?"

The queen looked back and forth between Pride and Stale, hinting at something unsaid.

"Of course," Prince Stale replied. Pride nodded as well.

I couldn't hold back my objections any longer. "Please wait just a moment!"

*Why are they agreeing to this so easily?! The deadline is getting closer with every passing second!*

Everyone turned their attention to me. I struggled not to hunch under the weight of their appraising eyes.

"I sincerely appreciate all the decisions you've made for the sake of my kingdom," I said. "But there's no time! Please, just allow me to return and—"

"Very well," Her Majesty cut in. "However, it will be much faster for you to wait here until tomorrow than it would be to go by ship and carriage."

At that, my mind blanked. *How could it possibly be faster to wait?*

The queen smiled to herself as I tried to puzzle it out. "Prince Cedric, we haven't finished negotiating our alliance yet. I can't reveal all the details to you. However, if we agree to ally with one another..."

She stood without a sound. Her majestic presence filled the throne room, her face youthful and sublime.

"For our new ally's sake, Freesia will do everything in our power to help you. We'll use every resource to support the United Hanazuo Kingdom."

Then the queen smiled boldly at me. Around her, everyone nodded, bowing deeply. At this point, I didn't yet know the truth.

Until a few years ago, the kingdom of Freesia was feared by its surrounding countries, yet none of them ever once attempted invasion or subjugation. The land I stood in was home to a massive amount of territory and resources, but until recently, it had very few alliances to its name.

So why were they promising this? And how did such a large kingdom manage to survive so long without a single threat from elsewhere?

"Please, stay here and wait, Prince Cedric," the queen said. "By tomorrow, Freesia will be fighting on your side."

Overwhelmed by the queen's words, the only thing I could do was nod.

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"Very well. I understand the situation. We're to immediately head out for the United Hanazuo Kingdom for defensive measures under your command."

Roderick, commander of the Freesian royal order, nodded solemnly as I explained the situation.

After my audience with Mother, I received permission to visit the order training grounds and explain the support mission to the United Hanazuo Kingdom. I arrived with Arthur and Captain Callum, as well as imperial guard Jack, Stale, and finally...Cedric, who begged to join us.

I explained how the Cercian king had gone mad, that Chinensis had dissolved their alliance, and Copelandii's plan to invade. This was all so different from the game I remembered from my past life, but I couldn't yet figure out why things had diverged here. No matter how

I dug through Cedric's route and tragic past in ORL, I couldn't find the branching point.

Just like in the game, the Cedric here had two important people in his past. The first was his older brother and king of Cercis, Lance Silva Lowell. The other was the king of Chinensis, Yohan Linne Dwight. Both men were four years older than Cedric and the best of friends. Cedric saw Yohan like another brother. He called Lance "Big Brother" and Yohan simply "Bro." I knew from the game that Cedric absolutely adored both of them.

However, a year before the start of the game, it all came crashing down. Copelandii approached Chinensis and offered two choices: submission or colonization. With no hope of defeating Copelandii, Yohan wanted to surrender in an attempt to preserve his kingdom's culture, even if it did become a colony. Lance and Cedric convinced Yohan they could find a way to win a war, however. With the deadline fast approaching, Yohan—wanting to separate Cercis from the crisis—surprised them by dissolving their alliance.

Only then did Cedric flee his kingdom for the first time in his life, heading to the vast, famous kingdom of Freesia to plead for aid. He cast all his shame aside to beg Queen Pride for help, insisting that Hanazuo would do whatever they could in return.

Pride agreed to the alliance immediately, sending Cedric and an army of troops back to Hanazuo. As soon as the enemy tried to invade Chinensis, Freesia—who was stationed there defensively—jumped into the fray on Copelandii's side.

The betrayal was all part of Pride's scheme.

When Cedric first explained his kingdom's situation to Pride, she'd used Stale's power of teleportation to secretly meet with officials from Copelandii and Rajah, and the three countries had formed an agreement.

Chinensis was used, betrayed, and invaded by Queen Pride and Freesia, leaving it with no possible outcome but utter defeat. Rajah took over the kingdom and wiped out its name and culture. Lance, the king of Cercis, descended into madness upon learning of the treachery. His destroyed mental state left his country in a position where it could do nothing but sit and watch helplessly as Rajah dominated Chinensis.

The result was Cedric losing the two people he most cared about all at once. Lance was bedridden after this. He never recovered. Worst of all, when Cedric recounted this tragic incident, he blamed himself.

With his brother suffering from madness, Cedric had to rule the kingdom on his own. He could never forgive himself, nor could he ever trust others again. He pressed on for his kingdom's sake, just as his brother would've wanted, but his heart was irreparably damaged.

But then, only one year later, Pride once again manipulated Cedric by using his self-hatred and love for his brother against him.

"That's correct. Mother will be having a meeting with the Rajah Empire here at the castle on the same day, so we'll need to leave some knights behind. We can probably split our forces down the middle."

I described the plan to Commander Roderick, trying to stay focused on the task before me and not what I knew from ORL. We couldn't let our guard down around Rajah, so leaving knights behind for Mother's protection was absolutely crucial. If not, Freesia wouldn't stand a chance in the event of an attack.

"So half of our knights will travel with you to the battlefield, yes?" Commander Roderick said, letting out a sigh.

He was probably worried about having a young girl in charge of his precious knights, even if I was the princess. This wasn't a mere

escort mission; this was a real battlefield with life-or-death stakes. Casualties were likely.

"The selection process is going to be a nightmare," the commander muttered. Vice Commander Clark chuckled to himself and slapped him on the back.

I understood Commander Roderick's exhaustion. When the choice was either having a seventeen-year-old commander on a battlefield or protecting a queen inside her own castle, it was clear which was safer. The knights would dedicate themselves to their duty either way, but having to follow me into battle was certainly the more daunting assignment. Then again, Mother's impending meeting with a representative from Rajah had its own dangers. Despite the way anxiety tied my stomach in knots, I stood my ground. We had to do this.

"Is that so? I apologize for the request," I said remorsefully.

"No, Your Highness, there's nothing for you to apologize for."

Still, my shoulders slumped. I hadn't seen the commander look so reluctant in a long time. As leader of the order, he would accompany me to Hanazuo—especially since I was a total amateur when it came to war and tactics. Commander Roderick would be the one on the front lines, meaning this whole mission would take the heaviest toll on him in particular. My heart was heavy with guilt.

Regardless, we couldn't refuse this mission. The order came from the queen herself.

"We'll finalize the selection by the end of the day," Commander Roderick told me.

The weight of the request was evident even in his tone of voice. I couldn't bear to look at Arthur and Captain Callum, my dutiful knights. They probably looked as disheartened as Commander Roderick.

"Popular folks sure do have it rough," Vice Commander Clark said with a laugh. His gaze flicked down to my clenched fists.

I blinked at his light tone. Was this just sarcasm? What did he mean? Before I could press him, he smiled and added, "I'll be sure to lend a hand in troop selection, so don't worry." Then he patted his good friend's shoulder.

Commander Roderick nodded, rising to his feet. "Please come with me."

He escorted me to a tower that overlooked the whole of the Freesian order. As we walked, he smiled over his shoulder at me.

"Your Highness," he said, "I'm incredibly grateful that you've requested the help of us knights on your mission."

I swallowed, prepared for the "but" that had to be coming. Commander Roderick seemed so calm in this moment, however. He looked so much like Arthur that it left me dizzy.

"I've been waiting for this day."

The commander led the way up the tower staircase, offering me a hand. Stale and Cedric remained outside at the base, while Arthur, Captain Callum, and Vice Commander Clark followed behind me and the commander.

I could feel Arthur's eyes on us as we climbed up the stairs. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw him clutching his chest as if to stay a thrumming heart, his steps almost wobbly. He'd idolized his father for years. What did he think of his dad accepting my request? Seeing the commander walk side by side with his nation's crown princess, was Arthur concerned for his father's safety, or did he consider us Freesia's heroes? And how many more times would this happen in the future?

As we ascended, the wind picked up, whipping all the scents of the season past us. I squinted reflexively against the gust, and Commander Roderick gripped my hand a little tighter.

"Please, stand tall and proud," he whispered into my ear.

My heart skipped a beat. My hand trembled with nervousness, but strangely, I wasn't afraid. I couldn't help remembering the last time I'd come to this tower. Back then, it was simply to observe training exercises; my mission was very different this time around.

"Our knights are gathered here for you, the royal family, and the Freesian people," Commander Roderick said.

His deep, grand voice filled my chest. I tucked a crimson lock behind my ear as the wind tried to whip it forward, then joined the commander at the very top of the tower. I fixed my hair and smoothed the wrinkles in my clothing...and then my eyes went wide as I gazed out at the order beneath us.

Rows of knights filled the training grounds, their perfectly white uniforms glowing under the light of the sun. Every single one was looking up at me.

I'd visited the training grounds many times, but I'd never seen the order quite like this. Their perfect rows formed a sea of white that seemed to stretch on forever.

*The pride of our kingdom—our knights.*

Goosebumps rippled over my skin. All this time, these knights had been protecting this kingdom tirelessly. I swallowed as I prepared to address them.

"We've been waiting for you, Princess Pride Royal Ivy." Commander Roderick said, his eyes as blue as the sky when he looked at me.

Down below, Arthur shivered, his eyes glittering as if he were moved to tears. He must have been waiting anxiously for this moment.

His father stepped before me and addressed his knights. "Her Majesty has bestowed us the following orders!"

At his reverberating shout, a quiver went through *all* the knights, not just Arthur.

“Six days from now,” Commander Roderick said, “we will head to the United Hanazuo Kingdom for a defensive operation under Princess Pride’s command! Any knights selected for this mission, prepare for deployment at once.”

Arthur was watching his father like he was the only person in the entire world. I could feel his ever-present admiration as he gaped at Commander Roderick. No doubt he yearned to step into his father’s shoes.

*“I guess I’ll stop pressing him once he’s something like the commander of the whole order.”*

Stale had said that to Arthur once. To most, it would seem like a goal that was impossibly out of reach—he couldn’t even bear to say it out loud. Even Arthur still lacked the skills and achievements for such a title. But that was only true right now.

Someday. Someday Arthur would become the commander, just like his father. He would be a knight others were proud to follow. I could see it in him now as he pressed his fist to his chest and watched his father.

Commander Roderick finished addressing his troops, then motioned for me to step up and take his place. My wavy crimson hair blew around me like billowing flames in the light of the sun. I thought of the way Arthur had watched his father and tried to light that same fire in those listening when I spoke.

“I am Pride Royal Ivy, the firstborn princess.”

I tried to keep my voice from trembling, but my nerves were too intense. I braced my feet and held my head high, hoping my purpose and passion reached the knights more clearly than any little stutters of anxiety.

"The United Hanazuo Kingdom, a land that will soon become our ally, is in need of our help," I said.

"*Our*" ally. I chose that word deliberately to let the knights know that they were no different than me, even if I was royalty. This was our shared battle, not some decree from on high.

"I will be leaving for Hanazuo soon. Please, lend me your incredible power to protect their people! I need..."

I paused to drag in a deep breath, drawing strength as it filled my body. I tilted my chin up and puffed myself up, trying to embody the strong princess who'd stood here six years ago. All the while, Freesia's sea of knights watched me with unwavering eyes. When I spoke next, my words burst forth, burning with willpower:

*"I need your help!"*

The knights responded instantly, their battle cry erupting into the air. Every knight raised their arms and howled at the sky. The whole castle must have been able to hear that roar.

*"Hurraaaaah!"*

But they weren't simply shouting. There was a feeling inside that war cry, a sentiment that went beyond mere words.

*"We've been waiting for this!"*

I felt their conviction in their cry. Six years ago, I'd done everything I could to save them; now it was their turn. They seemed united by this desire as they shouted below me. Even Arthur, behind me, had eyes red-rimmed with emotion.

I staggered under the overwhelming passion of their cry before I straightened back up. I waved at all the knights, trying to make sure I turned so I didn't miss anyone in the vast array.

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“How is she able to transform like that?”

From where I stood at the bottom of the tower, I furrowed my brow. I’d been listening to Elder Sister’s speech, soaking up the utter power of her words. I considered just ignoring Prince Cedric’s illogical question. Then I glanced over at the prince and found his eyes wide and mouth hanging open. My heart stirred a little. I understood how he felt, how overwhelming Pride could be at times, despite her being a young woman no older than him. He ought to have surrendered to and respected her, but there was more than that in his eyes.

“Because she’s Princess Pride,” I told him. “She’s proud, noble, and virtuous, like royalty should be. All of those sides of her are why she’s the beloved crown princess of Freesia and the person most suited to become the next queen.”

*That’s why I’ll never forgive you for trying to defile her.*

I left my resentment unspoken. I was just as determined as Pride to rescue the United Hanazuo Kingdom, but I would never totally forgive Cedric for trying to steal a kiss from her, ruining Arthur’s food, and making her cry. Pride was far too kind for her own good; it was my responsibility to never forgive Cedric, same as with Val and Gilbert. Someone had to remember their misdeeds.

But Cedric didn’t notice the cold glare I shot from behind my glasses. He stared up at the tower breathlessly, as if gazing at the heavens themselves. The ignorant prince took my words at face value.

“She’s really beautiful,” he murmured.

He spoke too quietly for anyone but me to hear. The words twisted my gut, turning my mouth sour, although I didn’t know why.

“We exist so that no one can ever sully that beauty,” was all I could say in response.

Forgiving someone wasn’t as simple as just letting your anger go. However, holding on to the resentment could prove a heavy

burden. I knew that, but I'd made up my mind a long time ago to do it if it meant protecting Pride, just as I'd promised Arthur I would six years ago. Arthur fulfilled roles I couldn't; in the same way, I had to do things Arthur couldn't, like holding on to grudges for Pride's safety.

If it protected Pride's purity, I would become as corrupt as necessary. She could forgive, have faith in, and reach out to whomever she wanted. But I alone would never forgive those who wronged her.

*Where Pride chooses kindness, I choose severity.*

The cheers from the knights continued for a while. Eventually, Commander Roderick dismissed them, but they just started gathering at the base of the tower, eager to be selected for the mission. It made it impossible for me to speak with Cedric any longer, but it didn't matter. We both knew the score wasn't settled between us.

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"All right, the candidates are about to start swarming in," Vice Commander Clark said, chuckling to himself. He set his hands on my and Captain Callum's shoulders.

"I just hope the selection process doesn't turn into another brawl," Captain Callum grumbled.

"Only' half of them will be able to travel with Princess Pride. Unfortunately, I'm sure I'll have to remain here, but Callum, Arthur—be sure to take care of Her Highness...and Roderick too."

"Yes sir!" we responded in unison.

The vice commander reached out to ruffle my hair in spite of Captain Callum's presence, but I stopped him with a glare.

“Arthur!”

I turned toward the sound of my name to find Pride approaching with Dad guarding her back.

“Well done,” I said before noticing she was sweating.

“Did I do all right? Was I speaking clearly?” Pride asked me.

She fanned herself. Her shy smile made my heart skip a beat, and I swallowed hard. *How does she always look so beautiful?*

“Yes,” I managed. “You did really well. We were all so moved.”

My chest swirled with emotion. I wanted to say more, to tell her how truly inspiring her speech was, but I couldn’t manage it at the moment. Still, Pride seemed relieved by my response.

“Thank goodness,” she said with a sigh, her smile widening.

“I hope I convinced at least one person to help me.”

*Uh, if anything, Dad and Clark are gonna have a hard time convincing a single person not to go,* I thought. When Dad and Clark first heard about Pride’s plan, they’d racked their brains to figure out how to pare down the eligible troops. Dad grimaced even now, and Captain Callum and I had to stuff down our laughter.

“Oh! That’s right, Arthur, there’s one more thing. Come here...”

She braced against my shoulders and leaned in close. *Very* close. My heart jumped into my throat, and I held perfectly still.

“I need your help with something. Tomorrow night...”

I should have been listening to Pride’s hasty plan, but I was too distracted by the way her breath tickled my ear. Then, something she said finally snapped me out of my stupor.

“What do you think?” she asked, stepping back to peer up at me. She was still very close, so all I could do was nod and hope the wind cooled the heat in my cheeks. A dazzling smile broke across her face. My heart stuttered to have her so near, let alone to have her coming to me for help.

"Shall we get going, Your Highness?" Captain Callum said.

He offered Pride his hand and I nearly sighed with relief, grateful for Captain Callum's smooth social grace. He took Pride's hand so calmly and casually. I would never be able to manage that.

*Maybe someday.*

## Chapter 2: The Wicked Princess and the Second-Born Prince

**M**ORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, I was desperate to go back to the only time in my life when I felt fulfilled.

“Cedric! You ran away from your tutor again, didn’t you?!”

Lance Silva Lowell was my older brother. He took my kingdom’s throne a year earlier. He stood below me and scolded me while I tried to nap in a tree in the garden. Big Brother had hair the same golden color as mine. He wore it tied back, which left his stern, fiery gaze unimpeded as he glared up at me.

“Hmph! I don’t need any of that stuff,” I said with a snort, my voice coming out in mocking sing-song. “I’m just as amazing and impressive with or *without* my studies!”

Big Brother kicked the tree I rested in, causing it to lurch and sway. I clung to the branch I reclined on.

“What the heck are you doing?! What if I fell and hurt myself?!”

“I wish you *did* get hurt if it would keep you in your room, idiot!” Big Brother snapped back. “Then I wouldn’t have to worry about my grown brother, a prince, running away from his tutor!”

“And what would you do if I scarred this beautiful face of mine?!”

“Who cares?! Just get down here!”

I had no choice but to return to the ground. Even Dario, the prime minister, had come to see what all the commotion was about. I used to hold a deep grudge against the man, but after all the times he’d apologized to me, I decided he was a kind person. His seemingly thousands of apologies hadn’t made it easier for me to open up to him, but at the very least, I did forgive him for his wrongdoings.

I could have just jumped right out of the tree, but I knew if Big Brother grabbed me, he'd drag me right back to that tutor. I stood up on the branch and reached for a high window on the castle wall. It wasn't exactly close, but I was sure I'd reach it.

"Don't you dare run!" Big Brother called out from below.

*Uh-huh. I'll do whatever it takes to get out of here.*

"Here, grab on. You can't be that reckless."

Someone offered me their hand through the window. I looked up to find a man with fluttering white hair and golden eyes hidden behind thin-framed glasses. Yohan Linne Dwight was the same age as Big Brother, but Yohan's face was delicate and soft. It gave him a gentle-hearted look, even though he was the king of Chinensis—the other half of the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

"You get me, Bro," I said. "Not like Big Brother."

I accepted Yohan's hand and let him pull me into the castle.

"Yohan! Don't spoil Cedric!" Big Brother shouted.

Yohan closed the window to muffle Big Brother's voice, not at all unsettled by this state of affairs.

"Cedric, you can't tick off Lance all the time. He's only just getting familiar with the work required of a king." Even as he chastised me, Yohan was smiling.

I shrugged in response and dropped into a nearby chair. "Big Brother's just exaggerating. I don't need to study. I'll get by just fine with these looks."

"You're almost seventeen now, though. Besides, you have no reason to avoid studying anymore, do you?"

The reminder was gentle, but I fell silent. For a long time now, Yohan had known the real reason I didn't study.

Since I wasn't raised by my mother and father, Yohan and Big Brother were the only two people in the world who really

understood me. They were my family. After Big Brother inherited the throne, my mother and father—the previous rulers—disappeared from the public eye, as was customary. I didn't care what happened to them at all. Why should I? They'd never interacted with me, much less raised me.

They still lived within the kingdom, their identities hidden, but only Big Brother, the new king, knew their location. We would probably never see them again. Our parents wouldn't attend our funerals, much less our marriages. All they cared about was their duty. We shared blood, but in every other way we were total strangers.

Thirteen years had passed since Big Brother started to look after me. Nine years ago, Yohan had befriended him and joined up as my second guardian. I would never forget the care they afforded me. They were the only reason I was still here today.

All of us were pretty satisfied with the way things were now. We wouldn't have minded if they simply stayed the same forever.

"Why don't you try studying manners and culture, at least?" Yohan suggested. "You're staying here in Cercis for now, but if Lance opens up the kingdom, you'll have opportunities to join different kinds of social circles. You don't want to embarrass yourself if—"

"I don't need it. When I walk by, everyone looks at me and kneels. My looks are enough to get by, whatever I do."

Big Brother and Yohan were both working hard to boost Hanazuo's international relations. My older brother had spent years telling us that we couldn't keep the kingdom closed forever. The outside world was changing, and sooner or later, it was going to catch up to us.

"That's because you know nothing outside of Hanazuo," Yohan said. "Once you leave the kingdom, you'll be sure to find people you

have to treat politely. Even more important people than Lance and me.”

“But you’re both kings, aren’t you? Anyone I meet would be your rank or less. What’re you so worried about? If I ever meet someone really important, I’ll be sure to give ’em a nice smile.”

Everyone loved my smiles. They always made the ladies blush. Besides, manners only mattered if you were speaking to someone of a higher rank, which I was unlikely to do.

Yohan heaved a sigh. “Why do you always say that?” His brow crinkled in resignation as he looked at the door.

Pounding footsteps interrupted us.

“I guess you *do* need a blunter explanation,” he added. Then he backed up toward the door and opened it to let the stomper in.

“There you are!” someone cried as the hinges squeaked in protest. “Cedric! I swear, I’m gonna tie you to your desk today!”

*Slam!* Big Brother shoved his way into the room. I considered running when he rushed toward me, his breathing ragged. He planted himself before the window as though he could read my mind and wanted to cut off my escape.

“Why do you do this?!” Big Brother said. “I’m always the one who chases you down, while Yohan’s the one who lectures you! But we can’t watch out for you all the time.”

“I never asked you to! Don’t you have work to do, Big Brother?! Or is it easy bein’ king?!”

“If you would just shut up and study, I wouldn’t have to do all this! If you know I’m busy, then stop making more work for me, idiot!”

He grabbed me by the head.

“Stop! You’re messing up my hair!” I yelled. As soon as I put up a struggle, Big Brother only rustled my hair more, the pendant inside

his shirt slipping out in the scuffle. Yohan swiftly tucked it back inside for him.

Despite all the commotion I was causing for him...I truly loved Big Brother.

“Cedric, Lance is just worried about you,” Yohan said. “If you don’t study, you won’t be able to be appointed prime minister or seneschal someday.”

“I don’t wanna be!” I said. “We already have Fargus and Dario as seneschal and prime minister, don’t we?! I just need to be me, and that’s more than—”

“Stop thinking like a child,” Yohan said. “Do you think you’ll still be a young, handsome boy fifty years from now?”

“I’ll still be beautiful in fifty years, obviously!”

“People age with time! Did you know that?!”

“Of course I know!”

When I shouted back, Yohan sighed. He nodded at Big Brother, who immediately swept behind me and wrapped his arm around my neck in a choke hold. I squeaked as he cut off my air, finally conceding defeat and promising to return to my tutor so he’d let me go.

“Do you swear to God?” Yohan asked. I could tell he was trying not to chuckle at our chaotic display. He leaned against a table and held up the cross around his neck for me to see.

“If God’s more beautiful than me, then sure, I swear!” I said.

Yohan just shook his head and pinched my cheek. “Enough with the blasphemy, okay?” Only once I’d nodded did he finally let me go.

Unlike our kingdom, Yohan’s kingdom of Chinensis was a deeply religious country. Their people prayed to God, sang hymns, and had church meetings. Despite unifying under one name, our cultures

were still distinct. The merger couldn't smooth over all of our differences.

Even so, when our kingdoms, with all their differences in culture and beliefs, were invaded by Copelandii long ago, we joined forces. Our unlikely alliance had managed to repel the Copelandiian invasion. That was 106 years ago now.

Yohan, the king of Chinensis, was devout in his beliefs. Big Brother and I traveled to Chinensis many times, ever since we were children, and every time we'd find Yohan praying and practicing his faith. Big Brother and I didn't believe in gods or prayer...but I didn't hate seeing how Yohan always prayed for his kingdom's peace. There was something comforting about it.

"Cedric, everything's all right now," Yohan said.

The smile on his face was strained, but his golden eyes remained gentle.

"I know," I said.

I looked away from his soft gaze and dutifully returned to my room. Yohan may have been my "Bro" and not truly my brother, but I loved him just as much as I loved my blood-related sibling.

As long as they were both happy, then so was I. They were the only two people who'd stayed with me and protected me since I was a little boy. I wanted things to stay like this forever. Our kingdoms could continue to improve, and I could continue to stay by their sides. I'd really believed that.

At least, until messengers from the kingdom of Copelandii set foot in our country.

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"Big Brother! Bro!"

It was late at night, well after the hours when I returned from the training grounds with Pride and the others. I dismissed all the maids and guards from my room so I could be alone.

I should have been trying to sleep, but there was no chance of that now. I sank onto the sofa and ran my hands through my hair, but it wasn't enough to soothe my troubled thoughts. I cradled my head in my hands, squeezing my eyes shut as though that could block out the unpleasant memories—and in fact, all of them were unpleasant.

*"We'll say it as many times as it takes. Chinensis will surrender to the Rajah Empire...or rather, to us, the kingdom of Copelandii."*

This was the announcement we received from the three Copelandian messengers who arrived suddenly in our kingdom. The guards at the front gates tried to send them away, at which point the messengers said, "Very well. We'll leave if you're prepared for the disaster that will befall your kingdom."

During their Golden Age, 106 years ago, Copelandii tried to invade our kingdom, but now they were a colony of the Rajah Empire. In other words, Rajah was the one really pulling the strings. Yohan was suspicious of the messengers' threatening statement, and allowed them into the castle. It was such an unusual situation that Big Brother and I rushed to join.

The Copelandian messengers spoke as if they were in charge, even though they were just doing Rajah's bidding. Rajah was eager to gain more territory, and Chinensis would be left under Copelandii's control. Those were the terms they laid out for us. No negotiation or bartering. Just a statement of aggression.

"Consider this an act of mercy," they said. "Currently, we only desire Chinensis, not the United Hanazuo Kingdom as a whole. We're even allowing you to choose between becoming a province or a colony."

Mercy? Could this really be called mercy? They just wanted to take over Chinensis. If Copelandii and therefore Rajah managed this, Yohan's country would become part of the slave trade. He'd have to turn over his own people.

"We'll give you a month," the messengers said. "You're welcome to resist us, but the kingdoms of Alata and Rafflesiana are also preparing for war. A small, solitary kingdom—or even two—will be no match for us."

It was utter humiliation. Big Brother, Yohan, and I could do nothing but grind our teeth. By unifying, our two small kingdoms had been able to survive for years. All the while, Rajah was conquering the lands around us one by one. We'd hoped to avoid it all by shutting ourselves off to outsiders and maintaining neutrality. Yet these messengers didn't seem to care one whit. They'd made up their minds to steal away half of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, and nothing was going to stop them.

To top it all off, Copelandii would be the one ruling Chinensis, not Rajah itself. It was like we were some bottom-of-the-barrel country for conquest. Despite having a month to ponder the problem, we knew there was nothing we could do.

Yohan was prepared to surrender. He felt it was hopeless. If he would be forced to enslave his people either way, then at the very least, he needed to preserve the name and culture of his kingdom.

"Let's dissolve the alliance between Cercis and Chinensis too," he said. "We don't know when Rajah will ask Cercis to surrender if it remains part of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. My people are entirely in favor of this plan as well."

When Yohan said this to Big Brother, he wore the same smile as always. But Big Brother still wanted to fight alongside Chinensis. He swore he'd never dissolve their alliance.

The exclusive alliance had forged a bond between our people over the years. Just as the Chinensians didn't want to involve Cercis in the dispute, Cercians wanted to fight alongside Chinensis as the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Even with the widening gap between the kingdoms' royal families and governmental officers, Yohan and Big Brother had brought their people closer together than ever. They cared about one another, even if we were technically separate countries within one united kingdom.

Big Brother and Yohan hit a standstill, both sides refusing to back down.

They needed help. The moment I realized this, my mind went to a kingdom whose advances we'd rejected over and over, a kingdom who'd already reached out to us when we were preparing to open our borders in the hopes of forming a partnership:

Freesia.

Freesia had sent us many letters requesting talks for an alliance over the past year, possibly because they were trying to expand their alliances in general. I knew I had to seize this opportunity.

I headed for the harbor the next day. Big Brother had been preparing to form relationships with other countries for some time now. As a starting point, he'd been arranging a trade relationship with Anemone even before he became king. That relationship successfully started about a year ago.

On the day I fled, I quickly found a ship arriving from Anemone. As though the gods themselves were on my side, someone absolutely crucial to my plan was among the merchants on board: Leon Adonis Coronaria, crown prince of Anemone.

Prince Leon spoke of Princess Pride from Freesia and how she wanted to form a relationship or even an alliance with our kingdom. I'd heard this from Big Brother before. Freesia was a vast country that had been expanding its alliances in recent years, even forming

joint policies between allied countries to strengthen their ties. Everything was falling miraculously into place: all the letters, Freesia seeking allies, and Prince Leon right there on the ship.

"You want me...to tell Pride you're ready to form an alliance?" Prince Leon said.

"That's right," I told him. "I'll arrive in Freesia eleven days from now. I'd like to become acquainted with Princess Pride in particular. I'd appreciate it if you could tell her as much."

Not only was Prince Leon's relationship with Freesia amenable, but he was also planning to visit the kingdom as soon as he returned home. It was a perfect opportunity for him to put in a good word for me.

And I would desperately need that good word to aid me.

Freesia had tons of land and a powerful military. They rejected the practice of slavery, a sentiment my kingdom shared. Besides their many foreign connections, their people had fearsome special powers seen nowhere else in the world. With their help, we might just save the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

Big Brother thought going to countries we'd already rejected and begging for an alliance would be fruitless. They certainly wouldn't want to make an enemy of Rajah. Plus, Yohan didn't want Cercis prostrating itself for the sake of his kingdom. Going around begging would make all of Hanazuo look pathetic...but I didn't care.

What greater shame could there be than losing Chinensis? Freesia was a land ruled by queens and princesses. Surely they would kneel before a prince. Once I'd captured them with my charm, I could lobby for my homeland. They'd be sure to go along with it, even if it meant fighting Rajah in the process. Once I seduced the right person and made Freesia our ally, I could return home with an army. Then Big Brother and Yohan would stand up and fight to protect the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

After giving Prince Leon my request, I left for Freesia first thing the next morning. I took only my guards and maids with me, leaving behind two letters for Big Brother and Yohan that said I was going to Freesia to bring back reinforcements, and that I wouldn't be home for some time.

It was so simple. Anyone who saw me fell captive to my looks. All I needed to do was postpone the negotiations long enough to make Princess Pride fall for me. She wasn't even engaged. If I had to, I'd propose myself. I didn't care, as long as it would help prioritize my country in the negotiations. My temporary absence also meant little, given that my two guardians were still back in the kingdom. I remembered my tutor telling me that most alliance negotiations only took three days, which should have been plenty of time.

Three days to enrapture the princess and convince her to push the alliance through. Three days to ensure Freesia would help my kingdom. I would still make it back in time... I was so sure of it.

“Ngh.”

I rested my elbows on the table, cradling my head in my hands. How did it turn out like this? Three days should have been enough. My plan should have worked. But now everything was in total disarray. Had Copelandii and Rajah figured out what I was planning? Why and how had everything changed? All the time I thought I had to pull this off had evaporated. The enemy was ready to invade. And Big Brother was...

“Mph!”

Pain stabbed through my chest and radiated through my body. My brother couldn't have gone mad. I wanted to believe it was a mistake, but in reality, I'd caused this by heaping too many burdens on him.

Big Brother always worried about me. He was the only one who came to save me when I needed help. Yohan was the only one who

bothered trying to understand me. I didn't trust anyone but them, and they stuck by me, despite all the trouble I caused. They never once abandoned me.

I finally thought I was going to be able to help them, and it all fell apart. Why did this always happen? Why couldn't I do anything but drag them down with me?

Yohan wanted to protect Big Brother, me, and the kingdom of Cercis. He dissolved our alliance so being under Rajah control wouldn't affect us too. But neither me nor Big Brother nor our people wanted that!

My jaw ached from stifling my sobs. I hunched over, hugging myself as I trembled.

*Knock knock.*

A dull sound echoed in the room. I had to take a deep breath before I managed to call out, "What do you want?"

*Did something happen back home again? Or is it an assassin from Rajah or Copelandii?*

I tensed as I awaited a response, but it never came. The person just kept knocking. Unsettled, I approached the door. My guards should have been stationed outside it. So why wasn't the person who was knocking responding?

"Who's there? Tell me your name," I said, pointing my sword at the door.

"It's Pride Royal Ivy. Good evening."

*Pride?! Why is she here?!*

I stumbled back in shock, but just as quickly, I realized I was keeping the crown princess waiting.

"I don't mind if you keep the door closed," she went on. "I've sent the guards away, so please keep it like this. Neither of us want any unsavory rumors popping up."

“Do you...need something? Haven’t I apologized enough?”

My head was spinning as I tried to sort out just what she was doing here. I left the door shut between us and pressed my ear against the wood.

“I don’t ‘need’ anything, and you can apologize as many times as you want, but it still won’t be enough,” Pride said.

My chest clenched at her dry response. I gripped the pendant hanging around my neck. She still hadn’t forgiven me for the things I did to her.

I couldn’t blame her. The things I’d done while trying to win her favor were blatant displays of disrespect. I was so used to women throwing themselves at me, but Pride wasn’t like that at all. And those knights of hers were just as mad at me as she was.

The incident in the kitchen had to be the worst one. I was so sure that she wanted me to taste her food and praise it, but instead, she’d cried and screamed and said she hated me.

Then I’d taken that stroll in the garden. I’d needed to get out after staying locked up in my room for so long. But I’d panicked when I saw that large group of knights entering the royal residence. That was how Pride found me. Though I attempted to apologize, she saw right through me and flung insults at me instead.

*“Are you an idiot?! ”*

In that moment, it felt like she was demeaning all the effort I was putting into saving Big Brother and Yohan.

But Big Brother and Yohan were right. When it came to the outside world, I had zero common sense. That was where most of the troubles between the princess and I had originated. The more effort I put into wooing her, the more it backfired.

It wasn’t just with Pride either. Arthur, that knight of hers, had glared at me like I was his greatest enemy. Prince Stale—her

steward—and Prime Minister Gilbert also looked at me with complete disdain. I was endangering my entire purpose in coming here, as well as the alliance itself, thanks to impatience and fear.

Back in the garden, it had all hit me in a rush. Before I even realized what I was doing, I'd pushed Pride up against a tree. Even I knew that was unacceptable behavior. But I couldn't quench the fury raging inside me. When the imperial knights stepped in to separate us, I figured the whole ordeal was over. Not only would the alliance fall through, but I would also have no way of saving Chinensis. In the end, I was no use to Big Brother or Yohan at all.

"Don't worry," came Pride's voice from the other side of the door. My head snapped up. It was like she was reading my mind. "Mother is still moving forward with the alliance. I'm sure it will all work out."

The door rattled gently, and then her voice came from closer to the floor. She must have sat down right outside my room.

"I just know that your Big Brother will be all right too," she said. "What happened to him isn't your fault."

"What makes you say that?"

She spoke so softly it was like she was mumbling to herself. Feeling I should respond in kind, I slid down to the floor as well. Only the door separated us as we leaned back to back against the wood.

"I just know it," Pride replied, her words clear and curt. "I have precognition, after all. I knew your true motivation and the fact that Chinensis was being targeted, didn't I?"

"Does that mean...Chinensis really *is* going to be invaded?"

Pride had seen the invasion of Chinensis in a premonition. That meant that no matter what I did, Copelandii's attack was inevitable.

“Yes, but it doesn’t mean they’ll lose the war. Mother and I are trying to ensure that doesn’t happen. I believe the future is already changing.”

“You don’t have proof of that.”

I couldn’t accept her reassurances so easily. Here was the firstborn princess taking pity on me. Maybe I should have been appreciative, but her condolences grated against my skin like sand.

She didn’t seem to mind, though. “It’s all right. You’ve done terrible things, and you should have been honest from the beginning, but you weren’t wrong to come to Freesia. You did this for your older brother, didn’t you?”

My heart ached at the mere mention of Big Brother. He’d been driven past his breaking point, and now Yohan had to witness the downfall of his friend and his kingdom from up close. How was he dealing with all this? How much was Big Brother suffering while I was here making an even bigger mess of things? Yes, suffering—they both must have been in terrible pain.

My breath caught in my throat. I hugged my knees into my chest, incapable of responding.

“Cedric?”

Though Pride called out to me, I couldn’t summon any words. It was like something had lodged itself in my throat. I tapped twice on the door instead, hoping that conveyed that I was at least still listening.

“It’ll be okay,” Pride assured me. “We’ll make it in time. I promise.”

Her voice was so gentle, it was almost like she could see me through the door. No doubt she was choosing the right words to assuage my worries.

“I’m here for you. Freesia is with you. Everything will work out.”

I gritted my teeth against the pang in my gullet, keeping the sobs and grunts from leaking out.

"It's not just a deadline of six days. It will all be *over* in six days. Six short days from now, you'll be back to your normal life."

At that, I brushed my bangs out of my eyes and bit my trembling lip.

*Why does she always... Why, even though my flirting meant nothing to her...even though I treated her badly over and over again...even though she says she hates me, and she'll never forgive me... Why?*

"Why?!" I asked aloud. "Why do you...keep trying to help me?!"

My voice broke, sounding strange and weak even to my ears. The moment I finished with my outburst, my throat closed up.

I just couldn't understand this girl. Why did she keep meddling in my life? She seemed to hate me, yet she was still fighting on my behalf. She wouldn't forgive me, yet she was trying to console me. It didn't add up.

"Just stop!" I told her. "Don't get my hopes up... It was all...my fault..."

Every one of my efforts had backfired, and it was all on me for refusing to truly learn. I couldn't face the prospect of failing again, of getting my hopes up just to see them dashed. Her encouragement sank me deeper into despair. I could get carried away again. I could make even worse mistakes.

I covered my face with both hands and groaned into my palms. I wanted to scream at her that she was wrong, but I also hung on her every word.

"It's not your fault," she said matter-of-factly. "Not really. This is just...atonement. You'll see what I mean soon enough. I've met a lot of people like you. They see their family and the people they care

about suffering, but there's nothing they can do about it. So many people."

"*So many people.*" Those words sat heavy between us. I slumped even more against the door. She was the same age as me, but her voice carried the weight of years. I couldn't begin to imagine the things she'd seen.

"That's why I came here," she added. "Although, since you hate me, I'm sure it's just an annoyance."

*No, I'm not the one who hates you. You're the one who hates me. I'm sure of it. But I never once said that I hate you!*

My throat was too dry to speak. I locked the spasms behind clenched teeth, unable to deny it before she spoke again.

"Besides...the night is too long to spend it crying alone."

Those words struck me like a punch to the gut. Everything clicked. I lowered my hands and gazed at them through blurred vision. Tears pooled on the skin and ran down my wrists and arms in a sudden outpouring. When I touched my cheeks, I felt a wet trail that led all the way down to my neck.

*I was trying my best to hide it so she couldn't hear me.*

How did she know? I yearned to ask her, but I chose silence instead. I didn't want to have to admit it.

"It's okay to cry," she said. "Remember what I said? I'm on your side now."

I gave up and sniffled, hugging both knees into my chest this time. Only Big Brother and Yohan had ever seen me like this.

I pressed my face against my knees, hoping that would stop the tears, but it was no use. "I can't let you see me like this," I rasped, even though she'd already seen me act shamefully twice. If I humiliated myself even further, even I would never forgive myself.

"But I can't see you through the door," she retorted. "Besides, there's no need to put on a show for someone you hate. I don't care if you want to act weak. It's just proof of how much you've been struggling."

It was as if she knew every piece of my soul.

Just who *was* this girl? Her soft words left me in a state of total disarray. I hitched at a sob as more tears carved paths down my cheeks. My throat was so tight, I could hardly squeeze air through it. My whole body quivered as I attempted to speak.

"Big Brother...went insane... But that's not possible!"

I didn't want to believe it. I knew it was my doing, but still...he was such a strong person, and I could only pray that his mind hadn't really been broken.

"It's my fault! I made him suffer for so long! But he never backed down... He worked so hard...and never held any of it against me... How could this happen to him?!"

It had to be a lie. I yearned to rush home and find him smiling like always, yearned to have him tease me like he always did. "*That's what you get for running away,*" he would scold me.

"Bro... Why did you...? You swore our kingdoms would stay together! That's...that's what Big Brother wanted! So why? Why...won't you let us fight together?!"

I wanted to help him too. His resigned smile should have been nothing but a bad dream. No matter what it took, I wanted us to stay together as the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

But it didn't matter what I wanted. Whatever my desires, I was just a burden to them. I despised myself for that.

Somewhere along the way, my complaints against Pride had turned into complaints against myself. And still the words poured out of me, bursting forth now that the dam had broken.

“Why?! Why our kingdom?! Of all the countries... It’s not like Big Brother or Bro...ever did anything to cause this!”

*Save them! It doesn’t matter who. Just save Big Brother, Bro, our kingdom, and our people!*

“It’s all right.”

Pride’s voice drifted to me from the other side of the door, ringing clearly over my desperate sobs. Although they were empty consolations, I couldn’t help clinging to them.

“We’ll protect everything you care about,” she declared.

Her voice sounded as pure as water. My trembling subsided somewhat in the face of the strength in her words. Setting my jaw, I covered my messy, dripping face and bangs once more. I didn’t understand why she’d make such a claim, but part of me couldn’t help but believe her.

“Right!” I said.

I would protect them without fail. I would protect Big Brother and Yohan, no matter what. That was my whole reason for being here.

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“What’s the meaning of this, Your Majesty?”

The man’s eyes glinted. His whole body exuded rage and hatred. Beneath the disbelief in his voice was pure dread. He must have seen this coming.

He took a step closer to the queen, and the accessories that adorned his body jingled.

“Do I really have to explain it over and over again?” the queen replied with a huff, crossing her legs. She sat above him on a throne

and looked as relaxed as if she were discussing the weather. “Cercis is going to be our colony now. We’re invading it. Does that make it easier for you to understand?”

Her lips pulled up into a horrifying smile. The man’s handsome face contorted in panic, fear, and hatred all at once.

*There’s Cedric. This is a flashback from the game... Ah, I hate this. This is the part where he...*

“How can you do this?!” Cedric shouted. “It’s been a year! We’ve done everything you—everything Freesia wanted! We’ve been sending you constant shipments of gold!”

He bared his teeth as he yelled at the queen. The guards gripped their weapons tighter and edged closer to him.

“You can keep doing that even after you become our colony,” the queen said, twirling her crimson hair around her finger. “Feel free to resist if you like. Not that an extremely minor kingdom with nothing but gold could ever beat us.”

Cedric clenched his teeth with a clack. He glared like he wanted to burn the queen—burn me—to ashes.

“You said you’d keep us safe. We opened our gates for you, kept our mouths shut, sent Freesia gold without compensation this entire time. A year ago, you set me up. You set my kingdom up.”

He tried to suppress his flaring emotions, but his rising voice bounced off the walls of the throne room. Pride smiled with amusement, and her eyes sparkled as she beheld the prince’s handsome face.

“What choice did I have?” she said. “I’m not the one you should be mad at. Our countries never even had a relationship, much less an alliance, but you marched right in here and told me your kingdom was in danger. It’s really your own fault. Besides...”

Queen Pride rested her head in her hand, watching him. Then her wide smile twitched.

"I decided that I want it. It's the biggest treasure chest in the world."

Chinensis contained bountiful minerals—and Pride wanted them. It was as simple as that.

Cedric's face twisted with rage at this revelation, but Pride's creepy smile only grew. His dark anger fed her, captivated her. She couldn't hold back her glee.

"If you agree to my demands, then maybe I'll change my mind," she said then.

"Demands? What demands?" Cedric's eyes went wide, and Pride took her time in continuing.

"My pitiful sister, the second-born princess, Tiara, will turn sixteen this year. What do you say?"

The wicked queen spoke as if she'd just thought of a fun new game, but all the color drained out of Cedric's face.

"Is that really what you want me to do?!" he said, pursing his lips in disbelief.

Her eyes narrowed with satisfaction, and she chuckled. "Well, don't you want to see what her face looks like, overcome with despair and hatred, when she's killed by the man she loves?"

Pride broke into laughter, rocking like a child expecting a treat. Her mad cackling ricocheted off the high ceiling of the throne room. It made her seem far older and more corrupt than the young woman she was.

"Feel free to refuse, if you want," she went on. "But it's really not such a bad deal when the alternative is watching your kingdom get wiped off the map."

Anguished, Cedric cast his eyes at the floor while the queen grinned wickedly at him. She was clearly savoring his reactions, as if watching a flower bloom in real time.

“All you have to do is trick and murder one little girl to save your homeland,” Pride said lightly. “It’s not like you don’t already have blood on your hands.”

Cedric was still studying the floor, but the whites of his eyes were showing, and his whole body clenched tight. The humiliation and corruption burned in his gaze. He seemed desperate to swallow his words, but he opened his mouth to speak.

“I understand. It will be easy to seduce the princess with my looks, since she’s spent her life confined to her tower. So please, keep Cercis safe.”

Pride beamed. This was exactly what she was waiting for.

“Shall I release your neighboring kingdoms while I’m at it?”

Cedric raised his head with a jerk, mouth falling open as he gasped. “Do you really mean that?” The flames in his eyes burned even brighter.

“Yes, I do,” Pride told him, swinging her legs playfully on her throne. Her smile was eerily calm. “It would be easy enough for me.”

Suspicious, Cedric bit his lip and watched Pride carefully. Was he being deceived again? “But the former kingdom of Chinensis belongs to the Rajah Empire now. Not even Your Majesty and the entire kingdom of Freesia could free them.”

“Sure we can. Rajah has no reason to defy me.”

Cedric gaped at the cool confidence in Pride’s words. Even though he didn’t trust anyone by this point, it was clear that he was starting to believe Pride’s boast.

“If you meet all my requirements, then you’ll be able to protect your homeland, and you’ll even regain that kingdom you lost thanks

to your foolishness a year ago. What do you think? Is that motivation enough for you?"

She snickered while Cedric trembled. Hope, doubt, hesitation, and panic flickered through his eyes. Just as he began to settle down, she took that as her cue to move things along.

Her purple irises shone with glee. "But if you fail to carry out a single one of my requests...then I'll take all the gold and people of Cercis and sell them off as my commodities. Cercis will become a slave-producing kingdom like no other."

Sweat beaded on Cedric's brow as the blood drained from his face. Dread shook his whole body. He turned his gaze away from the look of pure madness on Pride's face.

"Fine," he said. "As for my engagement to Princess Tiara—"

"Oh, do you really think it will be that easy?" she interjected, sneering. "That's still *my* younger sister you're getting engaged to. It's not as simple as you seem to think."

"All right, then in that case..." Cedric began, but he trailed off. He was at a loss for how to describe his plan to make Tiara fall in love with him.

Pride saw right through him. "Uh-huh. I suppose I'll think of something for you. Why don't you show me how dedicated you are to my requests? Like, for example..."

She pretended to muse over her options for a moment before smiling at Cedric.

"What if you licked my shoes?"

Cedric just blinked at the queen in disbelief, the fire in his eyes going out at once. His brow furrowed as he tried to determine whether she was joking, but she never wavered. Pride crossed and uncrossed her legs, supremely confident as she waited for his response.

"Hurry along now," Pride urged him, jutting out her chin as she looked down at him in a show of power.

She stuck a polished shoe out toward Cedric. The bejeweled slipper contained not a smudge or trace of dirt, but that wasn't the real issue here. Pride was ordering a prince from another kingdom to lick her shoe. Kissing her bare foot would have represented a vow, but this was pure servitude, an act of total debasement. Nothing was as disgraceful and humiliating as this.

The queen tapped her foot with impatience, as though it were a simple ask. "What's the matter? Aren't you going to do it?"

Cedric dragged himself forward, his whole body quivering with shame. His teeth were locked together so tight, he thought they might shatter. Step by tortured step, he paced up to the queen. He lowered slowly to one knee, his movements muffled by the carpet. Every moment was stiff and rigid as he reached out with quaking hands for the queen's shoe.

This woman was the demon who'd betrayed Hanazuo, lured Cedric into a trap, crushed his brother's heart, stole the name and culture of Chinensis, enslaved their people, and took the Cercian people hostage. And now he bowed before this demon, trembling on the cusp of humiliating himself for her.

*This is terrible. That's right, this scene was only shown in silhouette form during the game. I didn't have to witness all the horrible details.*

Cedric's face warped into utter despair as he raised Pride's shoe to his mouth. He flung aside his pride, shame, and dignity, visibly steeling himself for what he had to do.

At this point in the game, Cedric's trust was utterly broken. He had no faith in anyone anymore. It didn't even seem like he believed this horrible act would actually save his kingdom and Chinensis. Yet

he had no choice but to comply. Only by throwing away everything he had could he find any hope of saving his brothers and his people.

*No, please. Stop this.*

The prince's lips parted. His beautiful golden hair grazed Pride's shoe before his tongue did.

*This won't help. Pride was never going to help you!*

Slowly, carefully, Cedric closed his eyes, his face going still, as though he was hardening his heart for this task. Meanwhile, Pride blushed with excitement. Watching the beautiful prince lower himself for her must have been a sick thrill. Her eyes glittered as the tip of Cedric's tongue approached her shoe.

*I don't want this. I never want to see him in this position. This proud, kind man who cares about his brothers so much... He can't end up like this!*

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"Thank you for waiting these past three days."

The next morning, we all met in the throne room, and Mother quickly turned her attention to Cedric.

"Of course," he replied. His lips pressed in a thin line as he anxiously awaited her next words. I could see him doing his best to not overreact or say anything disrespectful.

Stale and Uncle Vest stood at both sides of Mother, along with Father and Prime Minister Gilbert. Tiara and I had arrived at our appointed time. We were about to join them near the throne, only to have Mother smile and tell us we could stay where we were, which likely meant she had things to say to us as well.

"I'll get straight to the point," Mother said. "Our kingdom of Freesia would like to formally seek an alliance with the United Hanazuo Kingdom. We believe the things you've told us are true."

Cedric drew in a ragged breath. "Do you truly mean that?!" Although his voice was disbelieving, his eyes glimmered with hope.

Mother nodded. "Vest, Stale, and Gilbert were able to obtain proof."

The pronouncement lifted a weight off my chest as well. I was so fortunate to have such intelligent and capable people around me. I didn't even know Prime Minister Gilbert was also helping before now.

"And Pride..."

My heart skipped a beat, and I turned toward her. "Yes?" I asked as calmly as I could manage.

Smiling, Mother said, "I have news for you too. It's regarding your defensive mission. Another country has volunteered to join Freesia in its peacekeeping efforts."

Cedric and I both blinked at that. Neither of us had ever expected another country to throw itself into this mess. Who would dare make an enemy of the Rajah Empire for the sake of isolated Hanazuo? A large country like Freesia could take this risk, but who would possibly join us?

Mother shot a look back at Stale. He bowed his head and stepped forward.

"The kingdom of Anemone has volunteered to provide our knights with the necessary supplies."

*Leon?!*

My jaw dropped. I knew Anemone and Cercis were trading partners, and obviously Anemone was our ally as well, but they were

such a small kingdom. With everything just starting to turn around for them, war seemed like the last thing they could want.

There were so many things I wanted to say, but none of the words would come out. I was left speechless at Stale's statement.

Stale smirked in mild amusement before he continued. "Two days ago, Leon approached me for a consultation. He wanted me to know his kingdom was ready to provide us with weapons and supplies. Yesterday evening, an Anemonian messenger arrived to present the official offer from their king. We sent a messenger in return first thing this morning, so I believe that by tomorrow morning at the latest, we'll receive a large shipment of supplies."

Stale went on to say that if the battle took place five days from now, then they would be leaving by tomorrow afternoon. It was all so sudden. This had to be difficult for Anemone.

Evidently sensing my concerns, he said, "When they sent their first letter, they were already preparing supplies, so I believe it will work out."

I should have expected nothing less from such an active trade hub. They probably had most of the supplies on hand before we even asked, especially since they had little use for weapons of war themselves.

"I mentioned that it will be Princess Pride's very first time on the battlefield, so I imagine we'll have quite the delivery to look forward to," Stale added. The corners of his smile twitched upward.

*Please don't put so much pressure on me! I get that telling my ex-fiancé that I need supplies for battle will probably mean both he and the king send us everything they possibly can, since our kingdoms are allies, but still!*

Stale said Leon had approached him two days ago. That must have been after Leon met with me. Stale and Leon rarely met during

Leon's regular visits to Freesia, but somewhere along the way, the two must have become close without my knowledge.

"Pride, I'll leave the coordination between Anemone and control of the campaign to you," Mother said. "Is this something you can handle?" Her smile was almost mischievous.

Brushing off my hesitation, I nodded. "Coordinating" the two kingdoms would mean little more than accepting the shipment from Anemone. More pressing, in my mind, was the question of why Leon had suddenly made such an offer. When we met two days ago, we didn't discuss the defensive mission at all.

"Stale and Vest have found the United Hanazuo Kingdom to be free of wrongdoing," Mother said to Cedric. "I truly apologize for harboring doubts before."

"That's perfectly fine. I'll never forget how you've chosen to stand and fight for my kingdom!"

Cedric dropped to one knee and bowed his head as Mother beamed at him.

"It's all for the sake of our alliance." Mother then asked him to raise his head. "From here on out, our kingdom will support yours with every resource we have available. Now, I'd like to move on to a very important conversation that concerns both Freesia and Hanazuo."

She motioned Prime Minister Gilbert forward, and he did so with a head-dip of assent.

"Between yesterday and this morning, we've arrested seven separate criminals," he told us. "Each of them used different means, but we're certain that they're all spies from hostile nations."

Despite the calm tone of Prime Minister Gilbert's words, shock rippled through me. Tiara clasped her hands over her mouth, while Cedric cried out, "Seven of them?!"

Prime Minister Gilbert nodded to confirm the stunning statement and continued. “The first two were caught attempting to ignite a cart of gunpowder at the order training grounds. After that, we found another pair attempting to slip through the castle gates. Another posed as a palace guard, and yet another went as far as attempting to impersonate a nobleman who normally would have access to the castle. The final criminal attempted to threaten a maid into helping him get inside. We lured him out and arrested him.”

My mouth couldn’t seem to close. The royal capital was supposed to be safe, guarded at every entry point, but this many people had still attempted to infiltrate us. It was even more terrifying to consider how deep into the castle complex some had gotten before being stopped and exposed.

In the past few years, we’d strengthened security throughout the entire country—especially around the capital. Freesia was currently home to one of the most robust defensive systems in the entire world. And still seven people managed to slip through.

We stood there, dumbfounded, until Prime Minister Gilbert spoke again. “By the way, between today and yesterday, a far greater number of people were arrested attempting to infiltrate the local village and royal capital. I imagine with each one we capture, another one attempts to break in.”

Cedric squeezed his fists tighter as the scale of the trouble he’d brought to our kingdom sank in.

“Our knights helped interrogate the captured criminals,” Prime Minister Gilbert said, “but no one broke and revealed who they were working for. They claimed they were unaffiliated mercenaries getting paid for the work. Some put up a fight, but eventually gave us the same story. However...”

The prime minister's smile was anything but reassuring when he paused. His frightening aura suggested one of the captives had been "persuaded" to cough up something worthwhile.

"We did learn that they were hired by someone in Copelandii."

I swallowed hard. So Copelandii *did* know Cedric had come here for help after all. These spies had probably intended to interfere with this process and keep Freesia out of the conflict—or at least sabotage our campaign—so they could win control of Chinensis once and for all.

That also meant Rajah was involved. Their allegedly neutral letter to Mother was no coincidence. They were just as keen as Copelandii to block our defensive efforts on behalf of Cedric's homeland.

"Therefore, our castle and our kingdom at large is now under the protection of the royal order," Prime Minister Gilbert concluded. The glint in his eyes and the turn to his smile told me the prime minister wasn't letting a single one of these spies escape. He may even have had a hand in their interrogations.

"The kingdom of Copelandii has given us a real reason to go to war with them," Mother said.

Those words hung heavy in the air. There would be no going back once we acknowledged this aggression.

"Pride, I've granted you full powers to serve as the queen's proxy. What shall your first move be?" She smiled as though she already knew what I was going to say. Cedric watched me, confused and tense.

With a nod, I cleared my throat. I'd already made up my mind about this, and my answer would be as much for Cedric as it was for her.

“The order will form a vanguard unit. Once we secure tomorrow’s delivery from Anemone, the vanguard will lead us into battle. Three days later, we’ll meet up with them in Cercis.”

Everyone in the room bobbed their heads at my plan, completely unsurprised. Only Cedric still gaped at me. I would have to explain it to him later.

“Very well. I’ll leave it in your hands,” Mother said with a smile.

I was about to thank her and set to work enacting the plan when someone else spoke up.

“E-excuse me!”

Tiara clasped her hands at her chest as everyone turned to look at her. Mother cocked a brow and gestured for Tiara to continue. My little sister gathered herself with a gulp before she spoke again.

“May I...may I join Big Sister on her trip to the United Hanazuo Kingdom?!”

*She wants to do what?!*

“What are you saying, Tiara?!” I cried, unable to stop myself.

She held firm, lifting her chin as she waited for Mother’s verdict. Though her face flushed with heat, Tiara didn’t back down under the scrutiny. No one else spoke. Even Stale was wide-eyed and slack-jawed.

“Does that mean you’re prepared to stand on the battlefield as well, Tiara?” Mother asked her.

“Yes!”

Mother traded glances with Father, Uncle Vest, and Prime Minister Gilbert. This was no casual sojourn down to the local village. This was a real battlefield, and thus far, Tiara hadn’t shown any interest in or ability to venture into such dangerous territory. She was still the second-born princess, but she wasn’t yet an adult, so the decision lay with our mother.

“The United Hanazuo Kingdom is about to become a very precious ally of ours,” Tiara said. “If Big Sister and Big Brother are going to the battlefield, I don’t want to be the only one left behind. I want to see it with my own eyes and experience it for myself!”

Tiara clearly understood the gravity of this request. Mother rubbed at her forehead and sighed as she considered it.

At last, she said, “I’ve left the matter of Hanazuo to Pride. The decision is hers to make.”

*Whaaaaat?! Mother! Wait, really?! Me?! I’m allowed to be in charge of adorable little Tiara?! Wait, Mother knows I can never say no to Tiara!*

My mouth dropped open. I was helpless to close it as my mind warred over this decision. I heard a soft plea of “Big Sister” at my side, but I was too scared to face Tiara. I couldn’t really let her go through with something so dangerous, could I?

When I peeked over at Tiara, I found her blinking up at me with teary eyes. Thus far, she’d always stayed behind whenever I went off to do something dangerous. And while neither of us officially had experience on a battlefield, I’d been in plenty of perilous situations before now. She hadn’t.

Still, I understood how important this was for the second-born princess. *Wait, no! This isn’t some field trip!* It was way more dangerous than that. Everyone else would hound me relentlessly if I actually brought Tiara along, regardless of whether she could use the experience.

*Still, being in line for the throne is basically the reason Mother let me travel to the battlefield as her proxy. Would this really be all that different?*

Up to this point, Tiara had spent a lot of time waiting for us to come home when we left on some dangerous adventure. This time, at least, I was just commanding troops. We’d have knights there

protecting us, so I probably wouldn't be jumping into the fray. That didn't mean this wasn't dangerous, but it wasn't like the cave-in or the ambush where I had to get directly involved. There was no guarantee I could protect Tiara if something happened, though.

"I promise I'll never get in your way. As the second-born princess, I swear I'll follow all your orders. So please let me share your destiny."

Tiara kept her beautiful eyes on me while my mind raced. I was cracking under her sweet gaze.

I groaned and swallowed my apprehension. "All right. Fine." I gave in with a long sigh, despite the complications this presented. "During the defensive battles, I want you to stay in Cercis," I added.

Chinensis would be the stage for the actual fighting. While I led the troops into battle, Tiara would wait for us in Cercis. Even though the battle would eventually make its way there, it would reassure me a little to keep her away from the heart of the fight.

Tiara seemed like she wanted to protest, but her little throat bobbed before she muttered, "All right." As much as she wanted to accompany me to Chinensis, it was simply too dangerous.

"Also, with permission, I'd like Prime Minister Gilbert to join us as well," I said.

A chorus of gulps rose at my words, and Stale's eyes went wide. Prime Minister Gilbert cocked his head. "Me?" he asked. "Is that so?"

I nodded. "Yes. I know that Mother, Father, and Uncle Vest can't join me in Cercis, as they must attend the meeting with Rajah. But just as I'll have Stale, Tiara will need a steward for herself."

Someone I trusted absolutely had to stay with Tiara. If I wasn't around, or something happened, there was no guarantee that I could tell Tiara what to do. Prime Minister Gilbert was strong and intelligent. I had faith he could react to any situation that arose.

Mother appeared convinced by this explanation. "You don't object, do you, Gilbert?" she asked.

"Your Majesty, Your Highness—if those are your orders, then I would be happy to oblige."

The prime minister bowed deeply to Mother, then smiled warmly at Tiara and me. Guilt gnawed at my gut. I was dragging a man with a wife and child out to a battlefield. But what choice did I have? Perhaps being a father helped him understand my concern for Tiara, since he'd accepted this proposition with such grace. In times like these, I was deeply glad that Tiara had her natural magnetism.

"Please be prepared to leave by tomorrow," Mother said. "I know it's sudden, but I'll be praying for your good fortune. Prince Cedric, I'll explain the details to you at a later date."

Cedric nodded, and Mother gracefully gestured toward the doors with her long, pale arm. "Very well, then. Go on."

At her signal, the guards opened the doors once more. This wasn't a signal for us to leave—it was to clear the room. All the guards filed out.

Once they had left, Commander Roderick, Vice Commander Clark, Captain Callum, and his unit—the Third Squadron—took their place. They approached us in a perfect, single-file line as the guards outside sealed the doors again. Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric stood a bit straighter at their approach, gulping audibly.

The knights halted a few steps from where we stood, then dropped to their knees, armor thudding against the carpet as they moved in concert.

Mother spoke up once more. "Normally, I would be going to Cercis with the vanguard unit, but I must stay here and meet with Rajah that day. This is a most unusual situation. The formation of our alliance is a race against time. As queen, I should be the one traveling to Cercis to observe the situation myself."

She tucked her long golden hair behind one ear, then smiled elegantly at Cedric. He practically stumbled backward in the face of a ruler with such grace and poise.

"That's why, just this once, I've decided to rely on the power of my son, Stale."

On cue, Stale stepped forward. He bowed, offering Cedric the slightest of smiles. Mother motioned for him to speak.

"As a general rule, I keep my special power a secret from others," Stale told the Cercian prince. "Only a few people know its true nature. It's my choice to keep it hidden."

He snuck a quick glance at me. I knew how much Stale preferred keeping his special power to himself. He also tended to only use it when I needed it, and he even hid aspects of his ability from Mother and Father. Arthur, Tiara, and I had always respected his desire for privacy and kept mum about his power around others. If they did happen to learn of it for whatever reason, we requested their silence.

"I'd like to ask that you keep it hidden from the United Hanazuo Kingdom once you learn of it," Stale said calmly.

Cedric agreed, though he looked as confused as ever.

"This is all for the sake of our alliance, as well as for our ally. I won't hesitate to use my power if it means helping Mother or my elder sister."

Stale wasn't the only one who would reveal his power soon. As our ally, the United Hanazuo Kingdom would learn about many of the special powers belonging to our knights and royal family. Stale revealed all this with the quiet dignity befitting the firstborn prince of our kingdom. I got the impression his kind smile had been curated for this moment.

"I've already confirmed the 'coordinates' of the United Hanazuo Kingdom and Cercis."

At Stale's signal, Captain Callum and the Third Squadron gathered around him. Cedric's own maids and guards clustered around him as well, carrying all his belongings.

"I possess the special power of teleportation," Stale revealed without further fanfare. "If I know the coordinates, I can instantly transport myself or anything I touch there."

The first time Stale had ever used this power in front of witnesses was six years ago. This was only the second time he'd displayed his ability in a formal setting. He'd only grown stronger over the years: At first, he could only teleport himself. Now he was transporting himself and six adults to locations of his choosing every time.

Stale's subsequent explanation of his plan was quite smooth. "I'd like to start by accompanying Prince Cedric to his castle, with our knights as escorts. Once we confirm the king's condition, I'll teleport back to retrieve Mother. If His Majesty is well, they can sign the alliance right then and there, but if that's not possible, would you be willing to sign the alliance as his proxy, Prince Cedric?"

Swallowing hard, Cedric assented. Frankly, I was impressed by his ability to keep up.

Then Stale turned to face me. "All right. I'll be on my way now, Elder Sister." Thanks to the contract between us, he needed my approval to go so far.

"Right. Please take care."

"I hope you don't mind that we'll be traveling without a carriage or proper entry procedures," Stale said. "We'll return your carriage when we travel back to your kingdom ourselves."

Without further ado, Stale started teleporting the knights of the Third Squadron, starting with Captain Callum. Cedric and his guards were flabbergasted by the sight of man after man vanishing into thin

air. Stale ignored their surprise and relocated Cedric's servants next. Finally, he stretched out his hand to the prince himself.

"Prince Cedric, it's time to experience the fastest transportation our kingdom—or rather, the world—has to offer."

Cedric blanched, raising a trembling hand toward Stale. He shot me one final glance, his wide eyes lit by a fire within. I offered him a nod of reassurance. After that, Cedric steeled himself, pursed his lips, and took Stale's hand. The next moment, the two princes were gone.

They were headed for a country that had long remained closed to the outside world: Cercis, of the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

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Prince Cedric and I teleported in a blink. The familiar scenery of Freesia's castle vanished, replaced by a whole new landscape. This was Cercis—part of the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Little brick houses lined the streets, each a slightly different color. I thought I was taking us to the royal capital, but this area was rather quiet for the heart of a kingdom. Considering Prince Cedric and his array of garish accessories came from a land of gold, I'd been expecting something far flashier than a drab, sleepy city.

"Prince Cedric!"

Cercis's seneschal and prime minister awaited us at the castle gates as our group approached. They swept suspicious eyes over us foreigners, but their alarm waned to pure relief as they rushed to Prince Cedric.

"I'm sorry," Prince Cedric said. "You've done well taking care of the kingdom in these trying times. How is Big Brother?"

He hugged his prime minister and seneschal, then set his hands on their shoulders to await their responses. The seneschal responded

vaguely in deep tones while the prime minister merely looked at the ground. The Cercian king was still ill, then.

When the prime minister raised his head, he nodded toward us. “Who are they?”

“These are knights from Freesia, and this is their firstborn prince, Stale Royal Ivy,” Prince Cedric replied.

I stepped forward when Prince Cedric introduced me. All the representatives from Cercis swallowed at the name “Freesia,” greeting me with wide eyes and raised eyebrows.

“Thank you for the introduction,” I said. “As your prince tells you, I am Stale Royal Ivy. I came here with Prince Cedric under the orders of my mother, Queen Rosa. We intend to ally with Cercis and fight together to defend Chinensis from invasion.”

“Are you serious?!”

“Prince Cedric did this?!”

The prime minister and seneschal both cried out in shock at what their prince had achieved.

“We wish to finalize the alliance immediately, if possible,” I went on. “I have the contract here with me, so all we need is a location and permission to sign it. Mother will be here shortly.”

The seneschal nodded and sent servants off to find a suitable location. Then he whispered to Prince Cedric, “Let’s go see King Lance.”

If the king wasn’t currently capable of signing the alliance with Mother, Prince Cedric would have to sign it as next in line for the throne. He didn’t seem thrilled by the idea. I just had to hope he wouldn’t lose his nerve if it came to that.

“If you’ll excuse me,” Prince Cedric said.

The seneschal led the prince away while the prime minister took the rest of us to a parlor. I pushed up the frames of my glasses as I

watched him leave, trying not to worry too much over whether he'd be able to rise to the occasion.

Part of me wanted to teleport back to Mother so we could have her and Prince Cedric sign the treaty right away, but it wasn't worth the risk. If Prince Cedric backed down when he witnessed the king's sorry state, it could bring everything to a standstill. In such a scenario, I might need to employ some unsavory means of getting Prince Cedric to sign the alliance. Mother didn't need to witness that.

We waited in the parlor for a while before the door quietly opened again. I jerked to my feet as Prince Cedric returned. His head hung low, and his face was paler than usual. His eyes were dark and dull.

"The king...is still very ill." Prince Cedric's lifeless voice carried far in the otherwise silent chamber. "I don't think he'll be able to handle the alliance."

So he really *was* going to back out. "I'm sorry to hear that," I told him. "However—"

Just as I was about to insist that he step up and handle the alliance himself, Prince Cedric cut in, "Instead..."

I blinked twice as he raised his head, drawing a deep breath so his voice emerged strong and steady the next time he spoke.

"As the king's proxy, I, His Highness Cedric Silva Lowell, second-born prince of Cercis, make my official request: please bring Queen Rosa to the castle."

There stood a true prince. His resolute words rang through the room. He stood up straight and pounded his fist against his chest. All the gloom had vanished from his features, replaced with hard resolution. His eyes burned with determination befitting a prince.

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“The alliance is officially in place. Four days from now, our knights will arrive as reinforcements. May our kingdoms experience a long-lasting friendship.”

As soon as I teleported Mother to Cercis, Freesia and Cercis finalized their alliance. Tomorrow, our knights would be leaving Freesia, and I would return to this country with Elder Sister and the others.

“You have my gratitude!”

Prince Cedric dipped his head to Mother, shaking her hand with a firm grip. When he bowed, all the officials around him followed suit in a display of proper courtly manners. It made me think that Prince Cedric’s penchant for outrageous behavior was just a glaring character flaw, not a trait of his people.

I sighed through my nose. Prince Cedric’s many bracelets jingled when he shook Mother’s hand. His necklace fell out of his shirt as he bowed his head. He was like a diamond among pebbles in this city, much gaudier than anything around him. Yet the moment he’d decided to take on the mantle of royalty and act as the king’s proxy, he’d comported himself in a manner worthy of his title.

“It’s time for us to return home. I’ll be praying for your good luck in battle, and for the recovery of your king,” Mother told him.

Uncle Vest had wrapped up his discussion with the Cercian prime minister and seneschal as well. There was nothing left for us to do but return home. Commander Roderick bid farewell to the officials, and then I took him and Vice Commander Clark by the hands and teleported them away.

One by one, I whisked the members of the Third Squadron home. When only five remained—Captain Callum included—I stopped. Pasting on a smile, I addressed Prince Cedric. “By the

way... I apologize, Prince Cedric, but may I have a moment to speak with you? It won't take long."

Perplexed, Prince Cedric tilted his head but agreed nonetheless. I asked a knight to tell Mother that I would return after my conversation with the prince, then teleported the remaining knights away, only keeping Captain Callum around for protection.

"Would you mind escorting us for a bit, Captain Callum?" I asked.

"As you wish." Of course the most outstanding knights in the order displayed zero hesitation at the unexpected request.

I thanked him, then locked eyes with Prince Cedric. "Please, show us to His Majesty's room at once."

"What?!"

I spoke quietly, but Prince Cedric's surprise burst right out of him. He probably didn't expect anyone to want to go visit a completely bedridden monarch. It wasn't the politest request either. I knew I was pushing things a little. Still, I had a promise to keep.

Earlier, on our way to give the knights their orders, I had a brief moment alone with Pride while waiting for our carriage. Working quickly, she had pulled me close to whisper an urgent request into my ear: "*Stale, there's something I'd like to ask of you, but it's a secret. It's about Cercis...*"

I'd agreed, and now it was time to set things in motion.

"I only want to confirm his condition," I told the prince. "If you'll show me to His Majesty's room, I'll only be there for a second or two."

"You need to confirm his condition?" Prince Cedric asked, dubious.

He wasn't the only one eyeing me with suspicion now—so were his servants. I had to just keep pushing forward, however, especially if I wanted to get this over with.

Like Pride had for me, I whispered directly in Prince Cedric's ear. "Princess Pride insisted that I confirm the state of the bedridden king with my own eyes. I'm sorry. I know it's in poor taste."

Prince Cedric backed away from me with a look of bewilderment. He opened his mouth as though to say something to me, but closed it just as quickly. His head drooped for a moment before lifting back up.

"Follow me," he said softly, putting on a mask of calm for his servants. He turned, accessories clinking as he led us toward the king.

*So mentioning Pride gets him to do what I want. Interesting.*

I felt bad for dragging Pride's name into this, but it wasn't exactly a lie. Plus, it was clear Prince Cedric would spring into action if I mentioned her. Maybe he was still feeling guilty for what he'd done to her while staying in Freesia. Or he was just trying to repay her for supporting his cause in front of Mother. Either way, it got me the result I wanted.

His guards and maids eyed me up the entire time I walked behind him, but I just looked straight ahead and kept a neutral smile on my face. We didn't have far to travel to get from the signing room to the king's bedchamber; the castle itself wasn't very large compared to ours. According to Prince Cedric, the whole place consisted of an older southern wing seldom used anymore, with a central structure and a northern wing as well. We headed for the northern wing now, stopping before a door while Prince Cedric spoke with the guards outside it.

When the guards opened the door, we stepped into a large room full of ornate furniture adorned with gold and gems. The

curtains were drawn shut, leaving even those glittering treasures dull in the darkness. Maids and guards surrounded the Cercian king in his bed. When Prince Cedric approached, they all bowed and stepped aside.

The casual way Prince Cedric dismissed the guards, his taking command of the situation to act as his brother's proxy, even the way he'd led us through the castle—they were all so different from the Prince Cedric I'd experienced in Freesia. What had spurred such a dramatic transformation in this man? It didn't strike me as an act either. Plus, Arthur hadn't noticed any falsehood, and he was far better than me at picking out that sort of thing. Could both versions of Prince Cedric somehow be authentic?

We followed the prince to the king's bedside. King Lance had allegedly suffered a "sudden illness," but that was not what I found when I glimpsed the man in person.

"What is he...?" The half question slipped out of me, going nowhere. Captain Callum covered his mouth in shock. I flinched backward.

*Is this really just an illness?*

The king stared up at nothing, his eyes wide and glassy. Ragged breaths and groans emerged from his lips in shifts, as though some invisible force were strangling him right before our eyes. Every so often, he muttered feebly, "Stop it... No..." A film of sweat soaked his brow and neck. Even as he lay in the bed, he twitched and trembled. The king was in so much pain, and he wasn't even doing anything. It hurt me to look at him.

On top of it all, he was emaciated. His cheeks were sunken and his limbs were frail. His bony hands reached out at something unseen. This wasn't some bodily illness—this was pure madness. I wondered if Captain Callum thought the same.

Just what could have put the king in such a state? There was the invasion of Copelandii, his brother's disappearance, Rajah's threat... But even with all that, this witless and sickly state was a shock. All Prince Cedric had told Mother was that his brother was sick. I saw now that that was a lie. Pride must have known the whole time that it was more than an illness, however. That was why Prince Cedric had agreed when I mentioned her.

The last person exited the room and closed the door with a thud. With just the three of us remaining, Prince Cedric slowly opened his mouth.

"He's been like this for the past thirteen days. Even when his eyes are open, nothing else changes." He gently wiped his brother's brow with a cloth the maids left behind. "They're giving him as much food and water as they can, but it's still not enough. His body's too damn big." As his lips tugged up just a little, the fire in Prince Cedric's eyes flickered. His speech got less formal as anger and then grief overtook him.

It reminded me of the first time he'd returned after checking up on the king. I finally understood why he couldn't hide being shaken up by the sight. And yet, he'd still managed to steel himself and face me. When he first arrived in Freesia, I thought he was nothing more than a fool, but it appeared that wasn't the whole story.

"I'm very sorry," I said before I realized it.

I'd been planning on seeing the king and then heading right back to Freesia. Now, however, I felt compelled to witness the truth, even if I was just rubbing salt in the prince's wounds. I bowed my head in apology for pushing him to show us this, but Prince Cedric shook his head.

"No, I'm sorry you had to see something so awful," he told me. "I'm actually grateful to you, Prince Stale. Thanks to you, I was able

to see my brother much faster than I thought I would.” He spoke stiffly, obviously distressed to have outsiders see his family like this.

I bowed my head to him. “All right. I’ll be taking my leave now.”

“Four days from now, I’ll be praying for your success,” the prince said, returning the gesture.

When I drew closer to Prince Cedric’s ear this time, he leaned in right away. “I’d also like to ask that you please conceal this visit, as well as my special power,” I whispered so Captain Callum wouldn’t hear.

I hoped he understood that I wasn’t just asking him to maintain my secrecy. I was also apologizing for the way I’d pushed him into this by invoking Pride’s name. As her steward, I had a duty to act in good faith.

“Elder Sister and I will return this evening,” I added. “If you’d like to speak to His Majesty again soon, then please come here alone.”

Prince Cedric went perfectly still at the implication of my words. He blinked at me, face stiff with confusion. I slipped into my natural expression and studied his reaction.

“It is the least we owe you for the trust you’ve put in us,” I said. “Both myself...and Elder Sister.”

With that, I reached my hand back for Captain Callum, preparing to teleport us both back home.

“Mm! Ngh! Mm! Mmph!”

Suddenly, the king groaned out incoherent sounds. Among them were a few scratchy, desperate words.

“Hanazuo... Chinensis... Protect them... Protect them! Yohan...”

Captain Callum and I watched in silence as Prince Cedric tried to reassure the king. “I know,” he murmured. The tender way he doted on his brother revealed all I needed to know about his intentions.

“Until next time.”

With a bow, I finally teleported us home, never once looking away from the prince. Something in his fiery eyes was still burning with things left unsaid.

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“When are we going back to Freesia, Val?”

“Hunh?”

I looked over at Khemet, who’d piped up just as I was reaching for one of my last two bottles of booze. He, Sefekh, and I were sitting around a prairie campfire in some no-man’s-land. I’d grunted around a hunk of sizzling meat in order to respond.

Sefekh perked up. Now that she was done eating, she was using her special power to make a stream of water to wash her hands.

“Bout a week or so,” I said.

We’d just finished delivering the three letters Pride had sent us off with. The responses would take a while, so we’d be returning to these countries eventually. Sometimes we could collect the answer right away; other times, like now, it would take a week or even longer.

I didn’t mind spending our waiting periods wherever we found ourselves, but this time, our destination wasn’t very friendly. Apparently, they relied on slaves even though they were supposed to be Freesia’s allies. Like Anemone, they’d outlawed trading human lives for cash, but slave trading and human trafficking still ran rampant there. They bordered a Rajah colony, so the nasty practice had seeped in anyway. Keen on avoiding all that, I’d decided to stock up on food and booze and take us all out here to camp instead.

When Khemet said he wanted to go back to Freesia sooner, I asked, “Why’s it matter?”

Khemet cast his eyes down at the dinner still in his hands. “Well, the last time we saw Mistress, it seemed like she was dealing with a lot. I’m kind of worried...”

I grimaced. The last time we’d been at the castle, Pride had said something about hating Prince Cedric. Then she’d rushed out of the parlor right when Stale got there. She was clearly upset.

But I just shrugged and said, “Who cares? I bet she’s just stickin’ her nose in other people’s business again.”

“Whose business?” Sefekh demanded. “The prince from Hanazuo?! Even though she said she hated him?”

“Yeah, that little brat. Blegh!”

I spit out a bone hidden in my meat and popped open my next bottle of liquor. Sefekh’s eyes went wide. Pride wasn’t the type to go around saying she hated people, so it was a big deal. That prince had to be a pretty useless jerk to piss her off like that. I could still picture the way her face had gone pale before she’d rushed out of the parlor.

None of this was my problem, though, and I wasn’t going to rush to Freesia just to check on the princess. These days, it felt like I saw her face less and less. I didn’t want to chase her down only to have to wait around for her to finish up some task or other.

I leaned back against a boulder, guzzling down the booze. Despite the warming temperatures, it was shaping up to be a cold, windy night. We’d have to huddle up close for warmth. Despite the roaring campfire, all the dirt around us, our sand-covered blankets, and our bulky jackets, camping outside in the cold always meant that Sefekh and Khemet would cling to me to keep the chill away. Sefekh was already taking out her sandy blanket and inching closer.

With a sigh, I turned to Khemet and capped off the conversation. “I’m puttin’ out that fire when you’re done eating.”

Flustered, Khemet tore at his dinner ravenously.

“Knock it off or you’ll choke again,” I warned him.

“It’s your fault for rushing him, Vall!” Sefekh cried. She was gearing up to use her power and blast me in the face with water. But before she could, I narrowed my eyes at the dark around us.

“What d’ya want?” I snarled.

A shadow approached. I raised an eyebrow, grinning wickedly at the interloper. Sefekh and Khemet instantly realized my hostility wasn’t directed at them, and they gulped loudly. Their little eyes looked to see what I was glaring at.

I cracked my neck, gave an annoyed click of the tongue, and pushed onto my feet. Then I bared my teeth, preparing to fight whatever was attempting to sneak up on us.

Little did I know that this would be the moment our deliveries got interrupted...and we disappeared.

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After returning Cedric to Cercis, Stale and Mother came home to begin preparations for tomorrow. The entire castle was embroiled in the effort to ensure our defensive mission succeeded.

It was past my bedtime, but I sat awake in my room, still wearing a dress instead of pajamas. I watched the window, searching the scant moonlight for any sign of my visitors. The moment they teleported into my room, I was overcome with guilt.

"Stale, Arthur, I'm sorry to bother you so late," I told the two of them, knowing full well they had to head out on the mission tomorrow.

"It's perfectly fine. I'm sorry I took so long," Stale said, a warm expression on his face.

Arthur—clad in a heavy cloak—firmly shook his head. "No, it's my fault we're late! So we're going now, right?"

"Yes, we are," I said. "I feel bad for springing this request on you out of nowhere, though."

I bowed my head to them, insisting on the apology. I'd arranged all this in hurried whispers, yet they'd leapt to help without even a flicker of hesitation. Even now, they smiled as they awaited my request.

"If anything, I was really happy that you came to us right away," Stale told me.

Arthur nodded in vigorous agreement, and I couldn't help but return their smiles.

"I promised, didn't I?" I said.

*"Promise me that you'll rely on us next time, whether you need us or not."*

I'd made that promise to Stale a year ago after inadvertently scaring him with my rashness. I swore I'd come to him the next time I needed help.

Even though she wasn't here with us, I'd told Tiara about tonight's plan too. I thought she would want to come with us, just like on the defensive mission, but she simply warned me to be careful around Cedric and to stay with Stale and Arthur.

"Shall we go now, Elder Sister?"

At Stale's suggestion, Arthur threw his hood up. I'd never seen him wearing a cloak before. He said he'd borrowed it from Vice Captain Eric so that we could hide Arthur's special power.

I nodded at Stale, and he took our hands. "Let's start by going to the Cercian castle, where we can search for Cedric and have him lead us to—"

"No," Stale cut in. "He already showed me to the king's bedroom, so I can teleport there directly. I'm sure Prince Cedric will be present."

"He did?!" I cried out without thinking.

"Yes. Since you asked us to save the Cercian king yesterday, I decided it would be easier to go there first myself."

"Yeah. That's why I was late; I went to borrow this cloak to help out," Arthur added. "I meant to go find Stale right away... Sorry I took so long."

Stale smirked, completely unrepentant, while Arthur bowed his head in apology. I chuckled when his long silver ponytail slipped out of his hood.

"Thank you, Stale," I said. "And there's nothing to apologize for, Arthur. It's great that you went to the trouble of borrowing that cloak."

Arthur was trying to readjust his hood to conceal his hair. I stepped behind him to rearrange his ponytail into a bun and make it easier to keep his hair inside the hood.

"I'm glad I went straight to you two. I felt much better after I talked to you."

Every worry left my mind once they'd agreed to help me. I knew, without a single doubt, that everything would turn out all right.

"That's my Stale," I said, stroking his hair. I hadn't expected him to gain access to the king's bedroom before our trip tonight. He couldn't teleport directly to Cedric yet, so I'd assumed we'd be sneaking through the castle. But both Stale and Arthur went above and beyond what I'd requested. I wanted to leap into their arms, but now was not the time.

"All right, let's get going to the b—uh, Stale? Arthur?!"

Just as I suggested we depart, I realized both my companions were standing there completely frozen. A flush lit Stale's cheeks. He covered his mouth with one hand and his forehead with the other, as though he was so nervous about this mission that it was making him sick. Arthur was tugging on his hood like he could pull it all the way down over his face and hide. It cast him in shadow, but I could still hear him mutter, "My hair..."

*Maybe the bun isn't quite his style.*

"Er... Let's go, Elder Sister," Stale said at last.

"Sorry! I'm fine," Arthur managed.

We took Stale's hands again. In a heartbeat, my familiar bedroom whirled away before our eyes.

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The first thing I saw was a gigantic bed. A man lay asleep upon it. Judging by his appearance and the gold-accented furniture all around us, he had to be the king. Only a few small candles danced in the room, casting a golden light over the man's hair and the many decorations throughout the chamber.

Cedric lingered at the king's side. He hadn't noticed us yet. The prince was kneeling on the floor next to the bed instead of using a chair. He rested his elbows on his brother's bed with his hands

folded together, as though deep in prayer—perhaps he really was. He rested his forehead against his interlocked fingers, so still he could have been a painting. My heart ached at the sight.

“Cedric,” I said gently.

He didn’t react. I tried again, louder this time, then gingerly reached out for his shoulder.

Cedric jerked at the slightest touch. He blinked up at me, looking on the verge of tears. Grief contorted his handsome face as he gritted his teeth. His fiery eyes were filled with fear and grief. It wasn’t all that different from how Prime Minister Gilbert had appeared at his wife’s bedside four years ago.

Our sudden arrival did not seem to worry Cedric. He stared at me for some time, and then tears of relief quivered at the edges of his eyes.

“Pride,” he said.

It was just like before. He wore the same expression as the day he received that letter from his kingdom. His whole body pleaded without him saying a word. *“Save me.”*

I leapt to respond. “It will be all right now,” I said, setting a hand on his shoulder. Then I glanced back at Arthur.

Cedric seemed to notice the others in the room with me for the first time. “Who’s that?” he asked, glancing at Arthur in his cloak.

“I can’t reveal that,” I told him. “Please, keep this meeting a secret from both of our kingdoms. You can’t even tell my mother. Not a soul can know we were here.”

At that, Stale patted Arthur on the back—it was his turn to act. Arthur crept toward the king, his vision obscured by the hood.

King Lance stared up at the ceiling, his eyes open but unseeing, wandering aimlessly. His sunken cheeks gave him a withered appearance. Even his hands were thin and frail.

The moment Arthur reached for him, Cedric jumped to his feet, but I squeezed his shoulder. "It's okay," I said, a little forcefully. He balled his hands into fists but held still.



Arthur gently placed his hand over the king's open eyes, carefully closing them. My chest tightened as I watched and waited, unsettled by the king who looked like a corpse. Then Arthur touched his brow without a sound.

Arthur had the power to cure illness. Thankfully, due to my past life, I understood that this type of disorder was a medical condition—a mental illness. Arthur should have been able to cure it like any other malady, if only temporarily.

As Arthur stroked the king's brow, his breathing eased. King Lance sank back in his bed as though relaxing for the first time in weeks. He didn't suck in breath as hard or sweat as much. His fierce trembling subsided until he lay limp and peaceful in the bed.

This was even faster than when Arthur had healed Maria. Already, Arthur drew his hand away. But Cedric seemed to have absorbed all the tension that left the king's body. He blinked his wide eyes, jaw dropping as he tried to make sense of the scene before him.

"Big Brother, can you hear me?" Cedric asked hoarsely.

The king flinched, and his eyes slowly opened as though he'd simply awoken from a peaceful dream.

"Big Brother! Do you...know who I am?!" Cedric tried to remain calm, but he bent closer to his brother as he questioned him.

King Lance stared off in a daze, before blinking and finally turning to focus on Cedric. He raised his heavy arm and placed his hand on Cedric's head.

"Cedric..." he rasped. "You're back?" The faintest trace of a smile graced his lips.

That was when Cedric's tears spilled over. He squeezed his teeth together tight and swiped at the wetness, but it just kept coming as he stared at his brother. He then reached up and grabbed his bangs with stiff fingers. With a gasp-like groan, he closed his eyes shut as

tight as he could, but it wasn't enough to stop the flow. Every time he reached up to wipe them away, his bracelets jingled softly.

"What's the matter?" King Lance asked. He must not have realized what had happened to him—that weeks ago, he'd lost his mind.

I opted to draw the king's attention while Cedric attempted to gather himself. "Your Majesty."

King Lance faced me right away. He stiffened, eyes round. "Who are you...?"

Stale stepped forward to respond in my stead. "It's an honor to meet you, Your Majesty. My name is Stale Royal Ivy, and I'm the firstborn prince of Freesia. This is Pride Royal Ivy, the firstborn princess."

"What?!" He flung aside his blanket, which tumbled to the floor as he sat up in the bed. His red-lined eyes brightened with realization. "Princess Pride?! From Freesia?!"

I understood his disbelief. As far as he remembered, his kingdom had no relationship with Freesia whatsoever, aside from the *upcoming* alliance negotiations and the fact that his younger brother ran away to visit us.

"Cedric!" the king gasped. "Did you really—?! Wait! What day is it?! What's going on?! Is Yohan... Is Chinensis—"

"Please calm down, Your Majesty. We don't want people to overhear you," Stale said.

The king was slowly catching up, taking in the scene around him. His eyes only went wider as he did. He touched his throat, which must have been scratchy after all that time without use, and Cedric rushed to fetch him water. Since he still had one hand pressed to his eyes, the prince very nearly spilled it in his urgency. King Lance grabbed the glass out of reflex, downing it in a single gulp. He gasped as he finished the water, his shoulders and face relaxing a bit.

"As you may already know, I am Lance Silva Lowell, king of Cercis, one half of the United Hanazuo Kingdom," he managed. "I apologize, both for my late introduction, and for presenting myself in such poor condition."

King Lance bowed his head deeply. Despite wearing nothing but pajamas, his bearing was impeccably regal.

"May I ask you to explain the current situation?"

His crimson eyes, which matched Cedric's, watched us with clarity and conviction. The deep, clear tone of his voice bore no resemblance to the bedridden man's wheezes we'd heard only moments ago.

Stale nodded. "I'd be happy to."

As Stale explained, King Lance attempted to hold his composure, but shock stole onto his face.

First, the king had spent days in the grip of madness. Cedric arrived at our kingdom to negotiate an alliance, which he formed just today as the king's proxy here in Cercis with Mother. Also, Chinensis had dissolved their alliance with Cercis. On top of all this, Copelandii moved their invasion deadline earlier, and that was already ten days ago now.

I worried this barrage of bad news might disturb the king all over again. He pressed a hand to his head, silently absorbing Stale's words. While the king still processed, Stale entreated him to keep our visit tonight a secret, even from Mother.

King Lance just nodded. It seemed like he was still mulling over the information.

"First of all..."

He reached out and grabbed Cedric by the shoulder, yanking his little brother closer. In shock, Cedric collapsed right on the king.

"You idiot!" King Lance shouted.

*Smack!*

King Lance clocked Cedric's head with a clenched fist.

Cedric groaned and cried out, "What was that for?!"

His brother tugged hard on his golden hair. "It's for leaving the kingdom without a word! And for forming an alliance as my proxy without permission! I would have sent guards after you if Yohan hadn't stopped me!" King Lance scowled at Cedric, rattling off his offenses in one breath.

"I had to do *something*," Cedric said. "You couldn't! Who else would've gone and gotten an alliance with—"

"Princess Pride! Prince Stale!"

King Lance rounded on us now. With Cedric's hair still in his hands, he pressed his little brother's head down low in a dual bow for them both. The motion made his pendant slip out of his shirt, and I nearly gasped as I recognized it.

"I can't imagine how much trouble my foolish brother has caused you..." King Lance continued. "He still lacks a thorough education, and I'm certain you found him to be quite rude the whole time he was with you."

*How am I supposed to react with a foreign king bowing his head to me?! Now I really can't tell him about all the things Cedric did to me over those three days!* Flustered, I waved my hands and stuttered, "P-please don't worry about it..."

I'd accidentally confirmed his suspicions in the process.

"Knock it off, Big Brother! You're messing up my hair!" Cedric snarled.

"It was already messy, idiot! Just keep your mouth shut!"

King Lance raised his head, but kept Cedric's pressed down. He must have been very strong to manage this even in his weakened

state. When he turned toward us again, he had a look of sincerity on his face.

"I truly thank you for coming to our aid, despite my kingdom's refusal to negotiate an alliance until now," King Lance said. "Now that we're allies, I'll do everything I can to support your defensive efforts. I'll also confirm the alliance contract with my own eyes as soon as possible." He shot a glance behind us toward Arthur. "By the way, who might he be...?" he asked, furrowing his brow a bit over the cloaked man who couldn't possibly look any more suspicious.

Arthur simply pulled his hood down over his face.

"He comes from Freesia as well," I said. "When we heard that you had gone mad, we decided to go to him for help. Not even my own mother knows of this man's special power, so I would appreciate it if you kept it confidential."

"I can't believe it..." King Lance remarked, then turned to give Arthur his thanks. For a moment, he muttered to himself about special powers and shook his head. "But...why did I go mad?"

Apparently, he knew little more than we did about the incident. King Lance said he didn't remember much after Copelandii announced the shortened deadline. He must have been under a tremendous amount of stress in that moment; perhaps that was what caused all this. Still, it was strange that he'd recovered so quickly and easily. I hadn't expected him to be quite so lucid so soon. Even when we told him all that had happened in his absence, it hardly rattled him as I expected. *How peculiar...*

Moreover, though he was confused upon waking up, the situation seemed to click for him now. He embodied the perfect, formal, courteous king. Could Arthur's powers eliminate the stress and painful memories? But no, if that were the case, then Prime Minister Gilbert wouldn't have acted out four years ago after shaking Arthur's hand at the accolade ceremony. I couldn't make sense of

this, even with the knowledge of my past life. Maybe his condition was more curable than I'd assumed. Until this moment, I'd secretly worried that, without knowing the root cause of the king's illness, we wouldn't actually manage to heal it.

At this point in the game, the king was supposed to have gone mad due to Freesia's betrayal and the impending invasion, but for some reason, King Lance was completely fine. Did something even more shocking than Freesia's betrayal happen to him? Or was he simply reassured by the fact that Cedric was home? It didn't appear that way to me. The timing also didn't add up compared to what I knew from the game. Until now, everything had happened basically in the order I recalled from ORL—the ambush, Maria's death, Leon being lured into a trap. So why was this the one exception?

"How should I know? That's what I was gonna ask you," Cedric said.

King Lance finally released him. Cedric glared at his brother as he smoothed his hair, then crossed his arms.

"You really scared Fargus and Dario and everyone else. You better apologize to them later," Cedric grumbled.

"You're the last person I want to hear that from, you thoughtless prince. Anyway, I'm relieved to hear that we'll have Freesia to depend on now. I'll contact Chinensis myself first thing in the morning. I can't let them dissolve our alliance without a fight. I'll make sure the United Hanazuo Kingdom lives on."

I nodded, confirming my commitment to fight just as hard for Hanazuo's unity as the king himself. "I hope you'll be successful. Four days from now, my knights and I will be arriving as reinforcements. Take care of your health in the meantime."

King Lance bowed his head. Even with his body still emaciated from his illness, he radiated strength. It was an immense relief to see him recover so swiftly.

During the game, King Lance was only portrayed by voice, never in art. A year from now, when the game's story began, Cedric described his brother as "nothing more than flesh and bones." At the very end of Cedric's route, the king finally opened his eyes again—and that was his one and only scene.

This version of King Lance was a bit weakened, but his body was healthy and his muscles remained intact. He was even strong enough to pin Cedric down with one arm. By the time I returned with my knights four days hence, I suspected he'd be fully recovered.

Cedric faced us, but he didn't quite make eye contact. "Pride. Prince Stale."

"Yes, Cedric?" I said.

He was still averting his eyes when he attempted to speak. "I have to thank you. There aren't enough words for everything you've done for me." His many accessories clinked as he bowed to us.

"Hm. Can I ask you something?"

He glanced up at last, surprised, but acquiesced to the request.

I stepped closer. "I won't return to Cercis with my knights for four days," I told him, my voice coming out deeper than usual. "During that time, I have some homework for you."

The prince's handsome face stiffened. "Sure, anything."

Stale watched me from the side, equally tense. After I left a moment of silence, I grabbed Cedric's shoulders, squeezing them as I met his fiery eyes. He needed to feel the full weight of my next words—this was no joke.

Cedric flinched, his countenance freezing up. I'd addressed him like this before, but back then, it was out of rage. I steadied myself with a breath so I could speak in a quiet and measured tone.

"You need to *study!*"

Cedric blinked at me. His eyebrows knit together as the request sank in. “What are you saying?!”

“I want you to study every last scrap of information about defensive maneuvers like it’s life or death. It doesn’t matter if it’s strategies, weapons, or traps. Just study it all! You never know if we might need your help as the second-born prince!”

The confusion freezing Cedric’s face shifted to suspicion. “Um, is that...a premonition?”

“It’s just common sense!” I snapped. I couldn’t risk his foolish actions jeopardizing our efforts on the battlefield. Three or four days of study wouldn’t normally be enough to make a difference. Scolding him certainly didn’t guarantee he wouldn’t cause trouble. But when it came to Cedric, I had to do whatever I could to make him understand.

“Also, listen to your older brother, His Majesty! Got it?!” I demanded, and once again, he looked at me, confused.

“All right...”

I chanced a look at King Lance, worried he’d see me as presumptuous for lecturing his brother, but he watched me with nothing more than surprise. There was no anger in his wide eyes. Perhaps he thought I was weird. I was a princess, after all—I wasn’t supposed to be bullying a foreign prince.

I quickly apologized to His Majesty, who replied, “No, it’s all right.” That didn’t stop the embarrassment from seeping up my neck and into my cheeks.

“We should be taking our leave now,” Stale said, stepping in to save me from my blunder. “Please remember to keep tonight a secret.” He then held out his hands to me and to Arthur.

“Wait!” Cedric called, rushing forward.

He went right for Arthur, who recoiled the second he noticed the prince's approach from beneath the hood. But Cedric just scooped up Arthur's hands in his.

"Thank you very much," Cedric said sincerely. "I don't know who you are... Hmm. Are you really a man? With hands like these? I guess you are pretty tall. Oh well, it doesn't matter! Look, you saved my big brother. If you ever need anything at all, then come see me. If you want, I'll even let you work for me."

Cedric prattled on, letting all his thoughts loose on Arthur unfiltered. It was giving me a headache. *Actually, he has a job already. He's my imperial knight.* Even not knowing who Arthur was, Cedric should have assumed he was one of my people. How was this man trying to scout recruits in the presence of a princess? This was exactly why we were so secretive about Arthur's power. Every country would want him if they knew.

Stale's mouth twitched as he held back a laugh. "Don't worry, this is better for him than usual."

I couldn't make sense of Stale's words. Meanwhile, the king was cradling his head in his hands. He was definitely angry.

"I...I truly apologize!" the king cried. If we weren't trying to stay hidden, he'd probably be chewing his brother out quite loudly right now.

In the absence of such a tongue-lashing, Cedric blithely continued on. "It's such a shame you're not a woman. If you were, I'd take you as my wife and make you very, very happy. But I really do appreciate your help. I only wish I could look you in the eyes and address you by name! Oh, I've got it!"

Even with his cloak on, I could tell that Arthur was cringing. Cedric had been squeezing Arthur's hands tight, but he suddenly let go. Arthur took a relieved step backward. Cedric didn't seem to pay

this any mind as he removed two golden rings from his right hand and placed them in Arthur's palm.

"It's not much, but I want you to have these. Once the battle is over, I'll bring you as many as you want. I'm prepared to give you whatever you desire, so that I can express my gratitude. I hope you'll visit our kingdom again."

*Thwap!* A pillow flew through the air and smacked Cedric in the head. When I whirled to the source, I saw that King Lance was one pillow short.

"That's enough, Cedric," he said. "You've brought enough shame upon yourself already."

The king's face was bright red as he struggled to keep his voice and his irritation down. He apologized to Stale and me all over again, but at this point it was starting to make me feel more guilty than relieved.

"What do you mean?! I'm showing him the sincerest form of gratitude I possibly can!" Cedric protested, clutching his head. "Don't worry! He's really tall, so he's clearly not Freesian royalty!"

*How do I stop myself from butting into this conversation and putting Cedric in his place right now?*

But as King Lance demanded, Cedric merely thanked Arthur once more and backed away from him. This time, Arthur was the one who reached out and grabbed Cedric to stop him. He tried to shove Cedric's rings back into his hand, as though pleading with the prince that he couldn't accept such a gift, but Cedric insisted.

"No, please take them. It's really not enough. Not even giving you my own fingers would repay your kindness. I apologize if this is impolite. But...right now, it's all I can do for you."

Cedric set his hand atop Arthur's to stop him from returning the rings. Although Arthur couldn't see the complex smile on Cedric's face, the prince's hushed voice conveyed it all the same.

“By the name Cedric Silva Lowell, I thank you from the bottom of my heart, my nameless savior.”

Cedric’s voice emerged quieter than I’d ever heard it. He turned his back to Arthur, then bowed instead to me and Stale.

“Princess Pride Royal Ivy,” Cedric said, “I give you my sincerest thanks. Once everything’s over, allow me to offer you a formal apology.”

I couldn’t speak around the lump in my throat. Yesterday, when he received that letter from Cercis, he probably really was prepared to race from Freesia straight to this bedroom. Perhaps I could have assuaged his fears then by revealing Stale’s ability to teleport and Arthur’s power to heal diseases, but I didn’t. I couldn’t give up such closely held secrets before we finalized our alliance. There was still a small chance that spies and traps lurked behind Cedric’s actions, whether his kingdom was innocent in all this or not.

That was why I went to visit him last night. When I pictured him sitting alone in his room with no idea what was going on or how we planned to fix it, I knew the distress had to be unbearable.

I silently accepted Cedric’s apology, unable to return the sentiment. It was the least I could do. His apology was warranted, even though I had things to atone for as well, but I wanted to make sure I came across as genuine.

“I’ll return in four days,” I said. “I’m determined to protect our ally, the United Hanazuo Kingdom.”

King Lance studied me with his piercing red eyes. After a moment, he bowed his head.

We said our goodbyes, and Stale took Arthur and me by the hand. Cedric never once looked away from us.

“Thank you both,” he said.

The world blinked away, and my familiar bedroom replaced King Lance's. I thanked Stale as we arrived home and let go of each other's hands.

"No need. I'm pleased to see His Majesty is better now. I know our defensive mission four days from now is the right course of action."

I nodded in agreement, eliciting a smile from Stale. King Lance had recovered instantly; he should have no problem visiting Chinensis tomorrow morning.

Arthur didn't react to any of this; he simply stood to the side with his hood pulled over his head. *What's the matter? He must be tired.*

Stale took it one step further and asked him directly. "Hey, what's with you?" He yanked Arthur's hood off, finally exposing my knight's face.

Arthur was pale as a ghost. Sweat dotted his brow, and his lips trembled. He looked downright ill, but he simply lifted his hands to show us the rings he'd received from Cedric.

"What am I supposed to do with something so fancy?!" Arthur cried, eyes skittering between Stale and me.

I struggled to stuff down a grin. Stale smirked openly as Arthur trembled before us, completely out of his element. The rings bounced and clinked in his hand.

"Those *are* pretty nice rings," Stale said. "It makes sense, since they belonged to the prince of a kingdom rich in gold."

The reminder sent a shudder through Arthur. Even Stale and I were entranced by the jewelry, despite having more exposure to such finery. At first glance, they seemed like simple gold rings, but a closer look revealed that each carried the Lowell family crest.

*Of course.* They'd belonged to a narcissist. Why wouldn't they bear his name? What Arthur cupped in his palms was probably worth more than anything Tiara and I wore—to say nothing of the rest of Cedric's accessories. I didn't say that to Arthur, however. He was having enough trouble just beholding the treasures.

"You should have them," Stale said. "Prince Cedric said it was a thank-you present, right?"

"It's way too much!" Arthur blurted. He squeezed his hands tight so his trembling wouldn't send the rings tumbling to the floor.

"Then why not sell them? They'd fetch a high price. That's gold from the kingdom of Cercis. Any merchant would be able to see that right away."

"There's no way in hell I could ever sell a present!"

*Arthur's as upstanding as ever.* That didn't make him any more comfortable about accepting the gift. Arthur was a man, and a knight at that. He had no use for these kinds of accessories. Rings would only hinder him.

"Then if you don't wanna sell it, why not become a Cercian knight, like Prince Cedric wanted?" Stale suggested. "Not that your value compares to th—"

"What?! No! Arthur's *my* knight!" I said.

I couldn't just let him go off to Cercis without a fight. Even without his special power, Arthur had rescued me from danger many times. But more than that, Tiara, Stale, and I treasured Arthur as our friend. Even if Stale's power allowed us to visit Arthur occasionally, a kingdom that lay a ten-day carriage ride away was way too far.

"If you're concerned about your pay, then I can always bring it up with Father or Prime Minister Gilbert," I added.

Stale raised an eyebrow at me, and I suddenly realized his proposal had been a joke all along. Arthur froze and shuddered,

maybe because he was so shocked by my outburst. Stale looked back and forth between us, smiling to himself.

*Oops. I totally killed the mood.*

“Oh! Um, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to...”

Arthur went very still, withdrawing into his hood once more. *Did I really upset him that badly?*

Stale alone seemed amused. He peered under the hood with a mischievous smile. “You hear that? What do you think?”

*Oh no. What if they think I’m the sort of princess who can’t even take a joke?*

Arthur pulled his hood tighter over his face and said nothing. I really hadn’t expected to anger him that much. Panicking, I timidly placed my hand on Arthur’s shoulder. As soon as my fingers connected, Arthur sank down to the floor.

“What?! Um... Arthur?!”

*Is he so mad he doesn’t even want me to touch him?!*

I took a step back. Stale covered his mouth to hide his laughter, but Arthur just hung his head.

Desperate, I tried to fix the situation. “I-I’m sorry! I didn’t think it would upset you so mu—”

“No, that’s not it! I’m just...”

Arthur raised his voice to cut me off, which he never did. He quieted right away, and I held still, waiting for him to continue.

“I’m just...really happy is all...”

I cocked my head. What was he happy about? Was it because Stale had praised Arthur by saying he was worth more than the rings? Such a compliment could make anyone feel shy, but it was also true. We valued Arthur way more than some jewelry, even without his special power. He was a very important person to both of us, yet so humble about it he apparently couldn’t believe that.

I was just relieved he wasn't angry, so I switched to the main subject. "Arthur, why don't you accept the rings for the time being?"

He nodded from beneath his hood. "I got something a lot better than the rings now. So, yeah. Okay. I'll take really good care of them! I'll think of this moment whenever I look at them!" He gripped the rings and raised them aloft.

Was he really that pleased to have Cedric's gratitude? Well, he *was* the prince of Cercis, so that only made sense. Either way, I was just glad he could accept the gift now.

"We should probably start preparing for tomorrow," Stale said, his shoulders still shaking with laughter. I agreed and we all bid each other farewell.

Arthur was woozy when he stood and threw back his hood. It revealed a face as red as a tomato. Perhaps it got hot when he had to keep it pulled down for so long. The moment Arthur stammered a goodnight, Stale teleported him out of the room.

"I'll be going now too," Stale told me, but I stopped him.

"Ah! Wait a minute, Stale."

He froze, blinking his eyes at my response. "What's the matter?"

His scrutiny made me want to squirm, but I had to follow through now that I'd interrupted him, so I surged forward and threw my arms around him to hold him tight.

"P-Pride, what are you doing?!"

"Sorry, but can I stay like this for a bit?" I said against his chest.

I'd been through so much, and now I had to go to war. It was enough to make my head spin. The past few days had gone by in a blink, but my mind was racing the whole time. Only when I had Arthur and Stale around could I think clearly and calmly again. Every moment we spent together was a huge relief.

Whenever Cedric had argued with me, any time I faced something I couldn't handle, even when I witnessed King Lance's horrible state—through it all, I'd drawn strength from having Arthur and Stale beside me.

"Please...allow me this one childish request," I begged him.

Tomorrow, we were leaving the kingdom to head for a real battlefield. I would need all the strength I could muster to make a stand as crown princess.

I rested my head against Stale's shoulder, and he wrapped his arms around me. I squeezed him tighter, and he shuddered. Maybe I was holding him *too* tight, but he returned the gesture. Enveloped in his strong, gentle warmth, I relaxed for what felt like the first time in days. He really seemed more like an older brother than a younger one with how he steadied and soothed me.

After a few moments, I loosened my grip. Stale followed suit and lowered his arms. When I leaned away from his shoulder, I looked up to find his face rosy. I wondered if I'd hurt him, but he held my gaze all the same.

"Thank you, Stale. I feel much better."

I wanted to make some joke about how he could grin and bear an overpowering hug from a girl, but now wasn't the time. Instead, I simply smiled. Stale stepped back and pressed a hand over his mouth. He looked away and pushed at the black frames of his glasses as he said, "May I ask you something?"

"Of course."

His eyes flicked back to me. "Why did you...hug me all of a sudden? Not Arthur or Tiara, but me?"

I scratched self-consciously at my cheek. Tiara was my precious younger sister, and Arthur had sworn to stay by my side. But...

"You're the only one who's seen me at my most pathetic, Stale."

One year ago, Stale had comforted me when I cried with hatred about Leon's younger brothers. I knew he'd accept me even in my moments of weakness.

A smile stole across my lips as I conveyed this. Maybe it was just in my head, but I swore Stale's face got a little redder. Was he angry to have his older sister suddenly demanding special attention? Not that I could blame him, since I'd made such an embarrassing request for a hug in the first place.

"I'm really sorry to ask for this out of the blue," I said. "I'll control myself next time. I just needed some cheering up before—"

"It's all right. You don't have to hold back."

Baffled, I fell silent. Stale turned his red face away from me, but his raised eyebrows revealed how surprised he was by his own actions. When he finally spoke, it was as though he had to pull each word out of his head one at a time.

"I'm...really happy...that you rely on me. So, um...as long as you want to...you can always..."

His voice trailed off into near incoherence by the end, and his eyes danced between me and the wall.

"Thank you, Stale," I said. "Oh, you can also come to me for support whenever you need it, okay?" I wanted him to know he could rely on me as an older sister as well.

"No, I don't—" he began before covering his mouth again, nodding. "It's so unfair," he mumbled into his hand.

When I pressed, he told me it was nothing. With his cheeks still tinged red, he turned to face me and said, "I'll be going now." Then he disappeared from my bedroom.

Once he was gone, I extinguished the candles in my room and fell into bed, still wearing the same clothes as before. My whole body sank into the mattress, heavy after such a long and exhausting day. I

didn't even have the energy to change. Mary and Lotte would simply have to scold me for it in the morning.

Tomorrow, the royal order, Arthur, Prime Minister Gilbert, Stale, Tiara, and I would be heading to the United Hanazuo Kingdom, along with our country's brilliant vanguard unit. Those troops specialized in long-distance travel, so I knew they'd get us there in time.

I rolled over in bed, my thoughts drifting to Cedric. I couldn't help picturing him all alone, trying to hold up his whole country until his older brother awoke. Despite his cocky attitude and blatant rudeness, Cedric had been utterly sincere when he'd thanked Arthur in the most heartfelt way he knew how.

"He's been through so much," I said.

Those words weren't just for the Cedric here. I was also thinking of the Cedric in the game—a faraway prince I hadn't seen in a lifetime. During the game, his homeland was taken hostage and manipulated for Queen Pride's own gain. It shattered Cedric's ability to trust others. The only person he would rely on was his older brother, who was caught in the grip of madness.

Cedric was only the Cercian second-born prince by the time the game began. He kept his brother's madness hidden from the Cercian people and foreign countries, acting as the king's "proxy," all the while waiting for the day his brother would awaken.

More than anything else, he was a kindhearted prince who adored his older brother.

*Don't worry. You two will be able to smile together again someday. I won't allow King Yohan to make the same mistakes he did in the game.*

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“Oh dear, I can’t believe how late it is.”

I sighed as I paced the streets alone. Night had long since fallen, but I was still on patrol after apprehending several more intruders into our kingdom today. They hadn’t expected Freesia’s prime minister to take this matter into his own hands, but I wasn’t going to let anyone sneak into this kingdom.

Rotating my sore right shoulder, I muttered, “I must be getting older.” Ironic, considering I could use my special power to turn back the clock any time I liked. Regardless, I wanted to age alongside my close friend, Albert; my wife, Marianne; and my daughter, Stella.

Just as predicted, the men I arrested today were all from Copelandii. I’d instructed the royal order to get rough with the interrogations. As a result, we’d quickly learned that there were only two intruders still hiding in Freesia. It wouldn’t be long before we caught all the rats, but it would be nice to get them before I had to leave.

My legs automatically followed the path toward home. I was only a few meters from reuniting with my family when...

“Gilbert Butler, right?”

I turned toward the voice, assuming it was a neighbor. The man who faced me wore a hat pulled low over his face and a long coat despite the pleasant warmth of the season.

“And who might you be?” I said, my voice cold enough to seep into bone. I narrowed my eyes at this sudden stranger, though I already had an inkling of who I was dealing with.

“You’ve made quick work of the rest of them, haven’t you?” the man asked, ignoring my question.

“Indeed.” I wasn’t especially surprised by his intrusion. If anything, it made my work easier for one of the rats to come right to me. I cracked my knuckles, but the man just smiled and extended his hand.

"I'm ordering you to be my pawn," he said.

Well, that was hardly an appealing offer. I didn't respond. He spoke as though there could be no doubt that I'd obey this "order," which meant he must have been carrying one heck of a bargaining chip.

The man broke into a wicked grin, presumably taking my silence as distress. "Copelandii wants to make sure you don't send your knights to Hanazuo. We don't care what you have to do to stop them. If you manage it, we'll reward you. Also..."

He trailed off, sneering at me with pure hatred. Was he expecting me to tremble in fear?

"If you do as I say, your wife and daughter won't get hurt."

When he said so, he pointed at my house. It must have taken him a long time to sort out which was mine. It was just an ordinary home and not nearly as well defended as the castle. I wasn't royalty, after all.

I tensed. Perhaps both rats were here now, one speaking to me and one hidden. If that was the case, the other one could get to my house and abduct my family while I was stuck dealing with the man in front of me.

As the awful realization washed over me, I hunched over. The man was watching me warily, waiting for my obedience.

"Heh heh... Aha ha ha!"

Instead, I broke out into laughter.

I couldn't hold it in any longer. The rat cocked his head at me, scowling as he tried to figure out if I'd lost my mind. I tried to quiet my chuckling, waving my hand as I said, "My apologies."

My laughter then flipped into a blood-curdling smile.

With a shudder, the man stepped back. “What’s so funny?!” he demanded, balling his hands into fists. He thought he had the upper hand here, but maybe he’d try to run.

I flew at him with no hesitation, grabbing him by the neck. The man gasped and flailed, but I only held on tighter.

“There’s only two of you left now,” I said, showing him the whites of my eyes. “If you know what I’ve been up to all this time, then your partner is probably nearby watching us. I guess I should show him what I’m capable of.”

“Grah?!” the man choked out, unable to form real words.

“You wanted me to obey you in exchange for my beloved wife and daughter? Ha ha! Such a simple-minded plan, delivered without a hint of embarrassment.”

As the man gasped, I lifted him off the ground. He kicked at me, desperate to free himself, but I didn’t flinch.

“I see. You’re panicking, aren’t you? You’ve lost men and weapons, you’re scared of Rajah, and Copelandii is putting on the pressure. Now, in a faraway land, you’ve lost all means of communication. You spend each day wondering what’s going on or how to achieve your goals.”

I imbued each seething word with more anger and hatred than I could a scream. My captive struggled less and less each moment, probably too far gone to even comprehend my little speech.

“Ah... How foolish.” My voice sounded too cheery even to my ears. I imagined my eyes looked mighty terrifying.



The man tried to glare at me as I regarded his blanching face with a smirk.

“I don’t know where your partner is watching from, but let me tell you something.”

I loosened my grip just slightly. Bouncing back from the brink of death, the man wheezed for air.

“One young lady is the reason for all the good fortune in my life. If you gave me every last thing in Copelandii, or the entire world, it wouldn’t even come close.”

I squeezed again, savoring the man’s flailing and gasping. The intruder pawed at his jacket, trying to reach a weapon—probably a gun—but I used my free hand to crush his wrist. He roared in pain.

“As you know, I love my dear wife and daughter,” I went on.  
“But I’ve already offered my life to someone else.”

I clenched harder, putting a cork on his screams.

“I’m here because of the salvation I received that day.”

Finally, the man lost consciousness and fell limp in my grasp. I sighed as I tossed him aside and wiped his drool off my hands.

“As much as I don’t want to take him home with me, I guess I have no choice,” I said, hefting the man onto my shoulder. I wobbled home, greeting the wide-eyed guards.

“W-welcome back, sir.”

“I apologize, but could you please contact the transmission specialist? I’ve captured another invader from Copelandii.”

I smiled politely at the guards, who rushed to obey my request.

Due to the constant threat of invasion by a Copelandian spy, I’d ensured a transmission specialist was stationed at my home. This guard had the power of communication over distances. Vest wanted me to take on knights for protection in addition to my usual trusted guards, but I wasn’t royalty—I didn’t require any special

considerations. The knights had to be out protecting the village instead. All I needed was that transmission specialist so I could communicate quickly with the castle and royal order.

I used the transmission specialist to relay what had happened here tonight. Less than an hour later, a knight from the palace arrived on horseback to take the intruder into custody. It was only a matter of time before interrogation yielded the final spy, meaning there was just one more man to worry about. I doubted he'd be much of a problem; there was nothing one man alone could do to stop Freesia from marching to war tomorrow. He either had to give up or flee while he still could.

*I won't let you steal from me so easily. From now on, I'll never waver again.*

"I'm home, Maria," I called as I entered, a genuine smile rising to my face. "Sorry about all the fuss."

"I was worried about you," Marianne said, smiling back.

My daughter hopped out of bed at my return. She rubbed her eyes with a lopsided grin, clearly sleepy at this late hour. "Father!"

I lifted her into my arms, my lips tugging wider. Her eyes were every bit as gentle as her mother's. I sighed with contentment before explaining to these cherished people that I had to leave tomorrow for the expedition.

The news troubled Marianne, and her brows slumped in concern. I stroked her hair in an effort to soothe her. My daughter likewise wilted, saddened by the idea of being without me for a few days.

That was when I made them both a promise: "Once I'm back, let's go out and have a delicious meal together."

## Chapter 3: The Wicked Princess and the United Hanazuo Kingdom

**U**NDER NORMAL CIRCUMSTANCES, we would have traveled to Cercis in the United Hanazuo Kingdom by carriage—but these were far from normal circumstances. Thanks to the vanguard's special powers, we sped to the kingdom in three days rather than ten.

The guards at the castle gates were already waiting for us. They unlocked the castle gates and let us right in to their kingdom. As we passed through the streets, the people of Cercis gawked at our procession. Whispers chased our every step.

“Are those the Freesians?!”

“She must be the princess.”

“His Highness mentioned her.”

I knew that Cedric or King Lance must have informed them of our arrival already, but they still seemed frightened of us. This wasn't unusual. Whenever we left Freesia, we encountered fear from people who had only heard rumors of our special powers.

Those powers had placed us just a few kilometers short of Cercis before we switched to carriages and horseback. Currently, I sat proudly upon my horse as a representative of Freesia, leading my knights from the front. Tiara and Prime Minister Gilbert rode inside a carriage, but Stale followed on a horse of his own.

“The civilians look the same as the last time I came here,” Stale murmured from behind me.

He was dressed plainly for now, wearing armor and a black combat uniform better suited to a long-distance defensive mission than his usual neat attire. Stale's black-framed glasses really suited this outfit and made him look even more handsome.

Lotte and Mary had made both his uniform and mine ahead of this trip. They'd both only grown more skilled over time, so our uniforms were a match for the order's sturdy gear.

Like Stale and the knights, I wore armor—although mine was shaped differently to conform to my womanly figure. My crimson uniform stood out, making me both more distinct and more feminine...or so I hoped. I had to tie my wavy red hair up in a ponytail to keep it out of the way, which probably docked a few points from my allure.

The castle had prepared an official order uniform for me, but I felt more comfortable in this one and had received Mother's permission to use it instead. Truth be told, I'd been a bit too embarrassed to explain why I had the outfit in the first place.

Tiara, who sat inside a carriage, was the only one wearing the official white uniform of a royal family member. The pale color complemented her golden hair, which she kept tied back like mine. It made her look more imposing than usual, though she was too adorable to ever truly hide her natural charm. I couldn't help but feel just a twinge of jealousy at the gap in our appeal.

When we reached the southernmost part of the Cercian castle, I announced our presence. "I am Pride Royal Ivy, crown princess of the kingdom of Freesia! We've come with reinforcements for the United Hanazuo Kingdom under the terms of our alliance!"

I shouted loudly enough so that not only the guards but also King Lance and Cedric could hear me. The castle of Cercis was nowhere near the size of ours—in fact, it was rather compact. It consisted of just an old building to the south, a central building, and a northern building. Stale had mapped it out for me after visiting this place himself during the alliance signing. Unlike the Freesian castle, which was essentially a gigantic fortress thanks to the imaginative

game developers, this one was small and charming like something from a picture book.

The guards posted outside rushed into the castle, clearly flustered by our arrival. I sat atop my horse and waited for them to return.

Cedric leaned out of a window, too distant for me to make out any expression. “Pride?!” he called down.

“I’m here as promised, Cedric,” I replied.

At that, he disappeared back into the castle, his flaxen hair whooshing out of sight. I assumed he was coming down to greet us, but instead, the guards came to lead us inside.

“His Majesty is waiting for you,” they said, rattled in the presence of so many Freesian knights.

I dismounted and entered the castle to make my way to the throne room. Cedric rushed to greet us, out of breath, his expression unusually solemn. He jingled with every movement, the rings he’d gifted to Arthur already replaced with new ones.

“Pride!”

He did not look nearly as relieved to see us as I’d assumed he’d be. That wasn’t a good sign.

“Is something wrong, Cedric?” I asked.

Arthur and Captain Callum shuffled behind me as Cedric approached. Tiara and Stale stood on either side of me, and I could feel their hostility rising.

Cedric’s face hardened. He pressed his lips together, furrowed his brow, and averted his eyes. I wondered if he was debating whether now was the right time to discuss it, since we were about to meet with King Lance. After a few seconds of silence, he reluctantly opened his mouth.

"Bro—I mean, King Yohan of Chinensis... He won't accept our aid...and he's blocked off his country entirely!"

His face twisted as the anguish broke through. My mouth nearly dropped open. I remembered this plot twist, but it wasn't supposed to happen yet. Not even close. Had the game suddenly skipped ahead?

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"I am Lance Silva Lowell, king of Cercis. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance, Princess Pride Royal Ivy."

King Lance greeted us from his throne. He shot Stale and me a meaningful look as he professed to be meeting us for the first time.

"Likewise, it's a pleasure to meet you too, Your Majesty. As you know, I am Pride Royal Ivy. I'm honored to be here today." I had to accept the lifeline King Lance had offered and keep up the charade. "By the way, I heard that you recently fell ill. How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right now. I sincerely apologize for my absence." King Lance's eyes softened a bit as he spoke. Though his robes hid most of his body, his cheeks had filled in since the last time I'd seen him. Color had returned to his skin. He sat tall in his golden accessories and plush cape, the very picture of a king. It was an incredible turnaround from just the other night.

We hurried through the introductions so we could get to the real reason we were here: the closing of the Chinensian borders.

"It happened this morning, after I awoke from my illness."

According to King Lance, he and Cedric had rushed to Chinensis first thing in the morning. The two kingdoms sat side by side, and their capital cities were practically neighbors. Before the alliance, this proximity caused some clashes thanks to the differences in cultures,

but the countries' eventual union created a sort of twin capital city that was easy to traverse.

When King Lance and Cedric arrived, they found a massive wall blocking the road, a complete severing of their relationship.

According to nearby residents, as soon as Chinensis nullified the alliance, they had started constructing the wall. In shock, King Lance tried to scale it, but the local townsfolk stopped him. Many had tried to climb the wall themselves, only to have the guards on the other side fire warning shots at them.

Reportedly, the Chinensis guards had told the townsfolk, *"Our alliance is over, and Cercis is our enemy! His Majesty ordered us to not let a single person in! Not even the royal family will be granted mercy should they endeavor to cross!"*

Even if the people of Cercis did make it over the wall, they'd be injured at best and the cause of an international incident at worst. With this sort of tension in the air, the alliance had no hope of revival. Thus, King Lance and Cedric had resorted to throwing letters over the wall and yelling to the guards on the other side that the king had fully recovered. They received no response, and the attempted negotiations ground to a standstill.

Out of everyone hearing this incredible story, I was the only one who understood Hanazuo's true circumstances. I alone knew Chinensis was trying to sacrifice itself to shield Cercis.

Chinensis planned to offer Copelandii total surrender, but first they'd completely cut off contact with Cercis. In this way, they hoped to buffer Cercis, to protect them from suffering the same fate.

I looked at the floor. In the game, Chinensis did build such a wall to separate themselves from Cercis, but that happened *after* they got invaded. Their reasoning here was completely different.

"How are you planning to respond, Your Majesty?" I asked, breaking the heavy silence.

Depending on what King Lance chose, we would have few options. Technically, Freesia had only made an alliance with Cercis, not Chinensis.

“Do you intend to give up?”

King Lance immediately shook his head, pressing a hand to his forehead. “Even if they block our border, I can predict which side Copelandii will invade from. I still plan to send troops out to meet them. However, it doesn’t seem likely that Chinensis will provide us with support. King Yohan and the Chinensian people are preparing for total surrender.”

This meant that Cercis—with us as reinforcements—might have to take on Copelandii and the other two kingdoms alone. This was their only chance of survival, but it was up to the king to decide how to proceed. If we tried to push and forced King Lance one way or the other, we’d be nothing more than interlopers fighting to satisfy ourselves. We had to leave Chinensis to its own devices as well. We couldn’t make it look like they had any part in our resistance, lest Copelandii go forth and colonize them anyway.

“Your Majesty, you understand that you would be going against Chinensis’s will, don’t you?” I said.

I knew this question was a bit rude, but I had to ask it. Cercis was the entire reason we’d come all this way.

King Lance offered a solemn nod. “Our kingdom...the United Hanazuo Kingdom was isolated for a very long time. We lived together as a small corner of a big world. Just as Chinensis protects us, the Cercian people know many Chinensian souls whom they care for greatly. Every day, my citizens come to the castle to demand we save them.”

Cedric, the seneschal, the prime minister, and all the nearby guards nodded in agreement. They all probably had family, lovers, or

friends on the other side of that border. The two countries had intertwined their lives.

“We can never abandon them. It’s impossible,” King Lance declared, casting his eyes downward.

His resolve rang through the room, weighing down every heart present for the speech. Cedric was also quiet now, gritting his teeth and balling his hands into fists. Even the guards and officials couldn’t school their expressions into neutrality. Most had trembling lips and burning eyes, no doubt thinking of the Chinensian people. When I looked at them, my heart filled with relief.

“Very well,” I said. “I’m glad I was able to hear your thoughts on the matter. I apologize for my impolite questions.”

With that, I stood up tall and proud. I took a deep breath, but felt no hesitation. There was no time to lose. Tomorrow, Chinensis was going to become a battlefield.

“In that case, I’ll head to Chinensis myself and try speaking to the king directly.”

“What?!” King Lance’s eyes went wide. His slumped shoulders suddenly straightened. Cedric, the seneschal, the prime minister, and all the guards also stood up taller and gaped at me.

“Even if the king of Chinensis rejects our aid, they need to be informed of Your Majesty’s recovery and the troops we brought here,” I went on. “We will cross the border and speak to King Yohan directly.”

“I appreciate the sentiment,” the king said, voice trembling, “but if anything happened to you, the crown princess of Freesia...”

I smiled, hoping to reassure him. “Thank you for your concern. However, I’ll be perfectly fine.”

With Pride’s combat cheats as a last boss queen, I could probably dodge the guards’ bullets, even if they *weren’t* simple

warning shots. Plus, Stale could teleport us over the wall once we had the right coordinates. But neither of those safeties would be necessary.

“The pride of Freesia, our royal order, is here with me.”

Still smiling, I gestured back at Commander Roderick and the knights. Cedric and the others murmured in confusion.

“What do you say?” I asked Commander Roderick.

He met my gaze with cool confidence and not a drop of hesitation. “Our objective is to capture the wall that blocks off the border,” he said. “The people of Chinensis are already determined to ensure no one else is harmed in all this, so they’ll surely escort Your Highness to the castle. Does that sound acceptable?”

King Lance’s eyes bulged, like he couldn’t comprehend our casual reassurance.

I replied, “I’d say we’re all set to go. Wouldn’t you say, Commander?”

“Yes. We can head out immediately,” he said. Stale, Prime Minister Gilbert, and Tiara were similarly unmoved by the danger before us.

Satisfied, I turned to King Lance. “Please leave it to us, Your Majesty. I promise to convey the feelings of the Cercian people.”

I offered a low bow. My uniform fluttered, but my heart was steady. I contemplated marching into Chinensis to serve as the Freesian princess and support Cercis. I knew that Chinensis didn’t actually want to become a colony, that they were just trying to protect their ally, that King Yohan could still be reasoned with. And I also knew my knights could get this job done.

Once my words reached them, Chinensis would stand up and fight.

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“So this is the quickest path to the Chinensian castle?” I asked, gazing up at the obstacle before me.

“It is, although, it’s currently sealed off completely by this wall,” Cercis’s seneschal replied.

The wall looming before us would have been too tall to climb even if we stacked up on each other’s shoulders. It was wide as well, stretching off far in both directions. Getting over it would prove more complicated than we hoped.

“That damn Yohan. As fast a worker as ever,” King Lance muttered, crossing his arms over his chest.

He tried to mask his distress with anger, but it was a thin facade at best. King Yohan had dissolved their alliance just two days after King Lance fell ill, according to the seneschal. The last thing King Yohan had said to them was, “May the kingdom of Cercis receive all of God’s blessings.” Now that he was well, I suspected King Lance blamed himself for this entire series of events—including the physical wall separating them now.

That was hardly fair, though. I knew from ORL that the relationships involved in this whole story arc were far more complicated. For example, Cedric didn’t look at Yohan as a distant king or even an ally, but as much his brother as Lance. He’d gone to Freesia to beg for help protecting Yohan’s kingdom. In the game, Pride’s betrayal led to Chinensis’s demise.

“Princess Pride, will you be the only one accompanying us on this mission?” Commander Roderick asked me.

Stale stepped forward before I could respond. “If Elder Sister is going, then I’ll join as her steward. Prime Minister Gilbert, you’ll remain here, won’t you?”

The prime minister nodded, donning an elegant smile.

I turned to look at Prince Cedric. “What about you?”

He blinked his wide eyes at me, apparently surprised I’d addressed him. He pressed his stiff lips together for a time before he spoke.

“Please, let me come too!” He clenched the bracelets around his wrists and gulped in apparent pain. His eyes burned with determination as he met my gaze.

At that, King Lance’s mouth fell open. Perhaps he meant to object to Cedric joining us, but he couldn’t get the words out. He simply watched me, waiting for my reaction.

However, Commander Roderick was the one in charge of the operation, so it was only right to ensure he was on board first. “What do you say, Commander?”

“That’s quite all right with me.”

“I can’t let Freesia take care of everything for us,” Cedric declared. “If Princess Pride and Prince Stale are going, then I have to join them. I can lead them to the castle too. I also need to talk to Bro...to King Yohan.”

The resolve was clear in his words. He didn’t say he *wanted* to go; he said he *had* to. I relaxed with a sigh, more confident than ever when I nodded my agreement.

“Well...then I want to go too!”

Shockingly, it was Tiara who volunteered next.

*What came over her?* She hadn’t asked to join us when Stale volunteered himself, but now she stepped forward to face Commander Roderick and me. Her eyes remained fixed on Cedric the entire time. *Don’t tell me she’s starting the Cedric route?!*

No, the look in her eyes wasn’t love or even pity—it was pure hostility. Evidently, she trusted him so little that she wouldn’t even

leave him to this mission. Commander Roderick seemed equally shocked by Tiara's boldness.

Tiara pursed her lips, strode up to me, and looked us both in the eyes. "Please!"

"Tiara, you don't need to be so worried..." Stale whispered, but Tiara shook her head.

I shot a glance at Commander Roderick, again leaving the decision up to him.

"I'll permit it, Your Highness," he said, bowing his head. I felt like I should have been the one bowing, considering he'd allowed our party to swell to such an unruly size.

"Very well. Please lead the four of us to the Chinensian king. We'll follow the knights and do as they instruct." I looked at Stale, Cedric, and Tiara in turn, and they all nodded in confirmation.

Commander Roderick relaxed a little at this. He dipped his head in acknowledgment. "Understood."

With that, the knights knew what they had to do. The first ones to step forward were squad members with special powers—ones we specifically needed for this endeavor.

The knights gathered before the wall. At Commander Roderick's order, they tossed ropes up and started scaling the barrier in tandem, climbing easily despite all their armor and weaponry. Amazing, considering the townspeople had struggled despite carrying nothing at all.

Our knights' strength and fortitude left even Cedric impressed as he gaped up at them, open-mouthed. "Is climbing walls their special power?"

"No, all the knights in our order are capable of doing that," Commander Roderick said. I couldn't help but laugh at his serious

tone. He was right, though I did recall there being at least one Freesian with a wall-climbing special power.

Just as the knights reached the top, we heard flustered voices from the other side.

“Who’re you?!”

“Stay off the wall!”

“Go back to Cercis!”

“Leave or we’ll shoot!”

A few sharp pops followed the threats.

King Lance, Cedric, and the other Cercian officials gasped. “What if it hits them?” one of them said.

However, there was nothing to fear. Each of these knights possessed the special power of deflecting bullets. No attacks from any sort of firearm could injure them, even if they weren’t wearing armor.

After making sure that the ropes were firmly in the grip of troops on the Cercian side, the knights at the top of the wall launched themselves over and down into Chinensis. Bewildered shouts rose from the guards as their bullets went ignored. They tried a few more useless shots before giving up. Then a thick silence fell—our knights had neutralized the guards.

The ropes on our side of the wall bounced a few times—a signal from the other side. Right away, our nearby knights told Commander Roderick, “The area is clear!”

“Ninth Squadron, to the front,” the commander ordered.

The Ninth Squadron specialized in covert operations. They stepped up and grabbed the ropes, then instantly disappeared.

It wasn’t just them—the ropes and the knights steadyng the lines vanished as well. It happened so instantaneously it was almost like watching Stale teleport. Cedric and the others cried out in shock.

"They possess the special power of invisibility," Prime Minister Gilbert said, his countenance all pleasantry and grace. "Fear not. Both the men and the ropes are still here."

He went on to explain the situation for those not in the know: With the special power of invisibility, the men could make themselves and anything they touched disappear. By grabbing the ropes, they had also cloaked all the knights touching the rope on both sides of the wall. Even after Prime Minister Gilbert filled him in, King Lance's mouth hung open. He covered it with his hand, but it was clear his thoughts were still whirling.

Shortly after they vanished, the knights at the bottom of the ropes shouted, "They've successfully ascended!"

Cedric flinched at the disembodied voices. He peered at the place where the knights had stood, as though glaring hard enough would let him see through the trick.

"All right," Commander Roderick said. "Princess Pride, Prince Stale, Princess Tiara, and Prince Cedric... Are you four prepared to leave?"

The Ninth Squadron was still busy issuing orders to one another. The men at the bottom of the wall waited on standby.

Stale, Tiara, Cedric, and I lined up so that the knights could lift us up the ropes. Stale grabbed one end, then disappeared with his knight. I thought he'd teleported until I heard him say, "I'll be going now." The rope creaked as Stale began climbing. My steward was no knight, however, so it took him a bit longer than the members of the order. Still, the signal came back from above sooner than I expected.

Next was Tiara. With a parting nod, she vanished along with a knight. The rope creaked, and the knight said, "Pardon me, Your Highness." Then he carried Tiara up the wall and signaled back down for the next person to head up.

"You're next, Princess Pride," Commander Roderick told me.

The knight I approached watched me nervously, his face tense. His name was...Captain Kenneth, if I remembered correctly. I hoped he was up to the task before him; I wouldn't be as light as Tiara.

"I appreciate your help," I said, hoping to ease his nerves.

"Leave it to me!" he replied, just as anxious as before.

I bid farewell to Prime Minister Gilbert and King Lance, then turned to Cedric. He was already watching me and flinched when I noticed him.

"Cedric, I'll be waiting for you."

He swallowed hard and nodded. I left it at that and faced the rope once more. The moment my fingers brushed the threads, the rope appeared before me. I looked up to find a knight at the top of the wall gripping the rope and waving me up. He was one of the men with the special power of invisibility who made this whole mission possible. Once I touched the rope, I fell into that field of invisibility and could see everyone and everything else in it.

Captain Kenneth tried to pick me up, but I asked for a moment to test my own ability to scale the wall. Stale had clearly wanted to climb the wall by himself, so I was itching to give it a try too. I grabbed the rope and set my foot against the wall. From behind, Captain Kenneth gave me instructions and supported my back, despite his evident concerns. I pulled the rope taut, kicked the wall with my foot, and in one fell swoop...I remained very much on the ground. The rope slipped through my gloved hands, and I landed on my butt.

*I should have known!* Physical strength was the last boss Pride's one weakness. There were scenes where she sailed down from high places, but there was never a scene of her doing anything like scaling a wall with rope. As the queen, she never needed to do such things, of course. But it was still shocking that Pride, who could cut through steel with a sword, couldn't climb a single measly rope.

"I'm sorry. Could you please help me?" I whispered, too embarrassed to speak any louder.

"Of course," Captain Kenneth said, not appearing at all annoyed with me. He wrapped one arm around me and lifted me up. I gripped his shoulders for support and he started making his way up the wall, holding me in one hand and the rope in the other.

"You're incredible," I breathed, marveling at the knight. His ability to scale a wall while carrying someone in armor—even if I *was* a lady—was mind-blowing.

Captain Kenneth flushed red at my compliment. I felt a bit guilty for breaking his concentration and reminding him of the weight he carried, but he reached the top of the wall without incident and descended on the other side. We landed safely before I even knew it. I probably could have done the downward climb by myself, but I already felt bad enough about making this more difficult for Captain Kenneth than it needed to be.

Stale and Tiara were holding the rope at the other end, smiling at my arrival. I kept my hands on the rope as I joined them. Shortly, Cedric and the other knights slipped over the wall as well. Our infiltration into Chinensis was complete.

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Rows of white buildings lined the streets of Chinensis. Small churches and public fountains brightened every road, each structure as beautiful as the next. Most of the paths we found were smooth and paved, which was normal for a capital city, but what should have been a bustling main street lay entirely deserted. The townsfolk huddled in churches and public squares, praying under large crosses for their salvation.

We found the Chinensian castle at the very center of town. It connected to a grand church that housed the oldest and largest bell in the entire country. The throng of worshippers thickened there as the people of Chinensis prayed ahead of what tomorrow would bring them.

The guards opened the large doors to the castle. Chinensis's seneschal entered ahead of us and immediately addressed the king.

"Your Majesty, are you sure you can stand before the people again tonight in that state?" he asked, keeping his voice quiet so no one outside would overhear.

King Yohan stood at a window, gazing down at the people outside. It was clear from his dark circles and emaciated state that he hadn't been sleeping lately. His white hair only emphasized his fragility.

"Yes," the king said, smiling sadly. "This is all I can do for them right now. I'm sorry, but I need your cooperation."

The seneschal's face twisted with pain. Everyone else surrounding King Yohan seemed just as heartbroken at his sorry state.

He gripped the cross pendant he wore around his neck. His eyes lifted to look out at his country's contested border and the wall dividing the United Hanazuo Kingdom, a wall of his own making. Once destroyed, now built again...and it was entirely his fault.

Tomorrow, all the churches, crosses, and places of worship for his devout people would be torn down and burned, replaced with housing for slaves as Copelandii initiated their takeover.

But after Chinensis became a colony, the country's culture would survive. The people could continue to pray to God, even if their principles were at odds with their new status as a slave-producing country.

"Everyone is equal under God."

“We are family as we are friends.”

“Have faith and love for your friends. Have faith and love for your family. Have faith and love for your neighbor.”

These tenets had as little time left as Chinensis itself. And once they crumbled, the people would surely lash out. It was only a question of who they would turn on first. Copelandii? Rajah? Their own kingdom and people? Or perhaps the king himself would be the first to bear that wrath. I doubted King Yohan would mind being the one sacrificed in all this if it would ease their pain, given how he'd acted thus far. Even if it meant his people would never know salvation.

“The last I may ever see of this kingdom might be from a guillotine,” King Yohan said bitterly, as if reflecting on his foolishness for destroying his own country.

“We'll never let that happen.”

I spoke loudly, drawing every eye in the room. King Yohan blinked at me like he thought he was hallucinating. He must have assumed he and the seneschal were the only ones in the room. Or was he so desperate as to interpret my voice as a holy one?

Before he could work it out, I stepped forward. I must have struck an imposing figure with my shining armor, my crimson hair fluttering around me, and my purple eyes fixed on the king. Not to mention the entourage at my back.

“I apologize for intruding on your kingdom without permission, Your Majesty.”

“Who are you?!“ Yohan choked out, bewildered. Then his eyes fell on one young man behind me. “Cedric?! Why are you here?! What about the wall?! The guards?!“

King Yohan's finger trembled as he jabbed it at Cedric in accusation. At the seneschal's command, guards rushed into the room carrying guns, but they froze in confusion at the sight of Cedric.

“Listen to me, Bro,” Cedric began.

King Yohan paused, pushing at the thin frames of his glasses before gesturing for the guards to lower their weapons.

“They’re reinforcements,” Cedric explained. His voice betrayed some hesitance, but everyone was listening intently. “Freesia joined Cercis—well, the United Hanazuo Kingdom—in an alliance. There’s a whole lot of Freesian knights in Cercis right now. We made it this far thanks to them.”

The guards and the seneschal stirred at the words “Freesia” and “reinforcements,” exchanging looks of disbelief. King Yohan alone crossed his arms, pressed his lips together, and glared at Cedric, practically rejecting the idea outright.

“Also...” The prince’s eyes began to wander; he must’ve felt awkward at receiving no response from King Yohan. “Also...” he said, swallowing hard, “Big Brother’s all right now.”

Those were the most confident words he’d delivered yet. King Yohan’s stiff posture broke, and his eyes went round. “Lance is all right?” he asked, his voice soft and hesitant with hope. I hardly dared breathe in the fragile silence that followed his tentative question.

“Yeah, he’s recovered and back to normal now,” Cedric said. “If you don’t believe me... No, either way, I want you to come to our castle. Big Brother’s been worrying about you ever since he woke up.”

King Yohan’s golden eyes wavered. “Oh, Lance...” His lips barely moved. Clearly, his memory of King Lance bedridden and ill pained him deeply. But after several steady breaths, a tenuous smile graced his lips.

“Thank goodness,” he sighed.

His lips slackened as his whole face relaxed, tension seeping out of his body. Cedric stepped closer, almost like he was going to embrace King Yohan.

“Bro, I—”

“Go back to Cercis at once, Cedric.” King Yohan’s tone was cold and authoritarian—far from whatever familial attitude Cedric may have expected. It left no room for doubt and froze the prince in place.

“Why?” Cedric asked, his red eyes searching.

“This kingdom will be a battlefield tomorrow. No, they may invade early and be here today. You have to go before that happens.”

“Bro! Listen to me! I want... Cercis wants to fight! No matter how much Chinensis refuses us, we’re going to protect you! We’ll never let slavery into Chinen—”

“If we’re defeated, Cercis will lose everything!”

After his outburst, King Yohan wrenched his gaze from Cedric and studied his feet instead. Cedric recoiled at the sudden shout. Even the Chinensians in the room gasped into their hands. I was just as dumbfounded as everyone else.

*I never thought he would reject Cedric like that.*

During the game, Cedric explained that he returned to Cercis with backup from Freesia and convinced the two kings to join forces. Cercis and Chinensis were determined to resist Copelandii together. At least, that was what was supposed to happen. For some reason, this reality didn’t match up with the game, and I no longer understood why. All I could do was stare back and forth between Yohan and Cedric.

“Bro?” Cedric prompted, soft and pleading.

King Yohan took deep, ragged breaths, then gritted his teeth. He steadied himself before he spoke again. “When Lance fell ill, Seneschal Fargus and Prime Minister Dario did a great job taking

over. The second-born prince fled the kingdom, and Lance was too far gone for any doctor to help.”

His voice quieted as he recounted the events, as if he was reliving the moments.

“But it was then that I realized something. Chinensis was trying to drag you into our troubles.”

King Yohan smiled sadly at his own words. The flames of bewilderment in Cedric’s eyes flickered violently.

“When you disappeared from the castle, and when Lance fell apart, everyone was so worried about you both. They were terrified of what the future held for their kingdom. What were they to do now that the king was unable to function? Where was Prince Cedric, and what if something happened to him? Without a king, how were they to save Chinensis?”

Around the room, people bowed their heads, the weight of each revelation sitting heavy on their shoulders. They had a right to be so upset—two royals, the backbone of Cercis, had vanished from the public eye.

“I was so scared,” King Yohan said softly.

Cedric swallowed. Clearly he’d spent his life looking up to King Yohan, idolizing him, relying on him just like another older brother. All of that shattered in the face of his current fragility. Reality had torn down the man Cedric sought out for strength and wisdom his whole life and revealed how much this situation had been torturing him.

King Yohan forced a smile.

“I was scared of the Cercian people losing everything,” he said. “I know their despair would be far greater than when Lance became ill.”

Understanding hit me all at once. In the game, Lance descended into madness immediately after the war with Copelandii began. But in reality, it happened before that. Here, Yohan had witnessed Lance's decline, as well as the despair and hopelessness that consumed the Cercian people. It left Yohan yearning to protect his own citizens from similar anguish, even if that meant surrendering instead of fighting to defend themselves.

Everyone knew the United Hanazuo Kingdom could never win the war alone. Seeing people in such fear, pain, and sadness over their king's sudden insanity, losing his own best friend to madness—it crushed Yohan's spirit.

If they dared to resist Copelandii, it would mean that, in addition to Chinensis, Cercis would also lose its culture, name, and history. And Yohan couldn't bear that.

"They're only after Chinensis," he said. "It's our duty to bear this burden. It has nothing to do with any of you."

His golden eyes glinted with firm resolve as he spoke, piercing Cedric head on. Now that Lance had regained consciousness, he was yet another person, including Cedric and the Cercian citizens, whom Yohan would protect from this war.

With that firm determination in his heart, Yohan opened his mouth to send Cedric away.

"You think it has nothing to do with us?! Give it a break already!"

Cedric's voice shook as he cut off the king this time. His shoulders and fists trembled, making his accessories jingle. Yohan's eyes went wide at the sudden interjection, but Cedric met his gaze and refused to back down, blinking back his torrent of emotions.

"We're one kingdom, aren't we?!"

The prince's words sent shockwaves through the entire room, like a blow to the chest. His voice rattled everyone's eardrums. He stepped right up to Yohan, holding his head high.

"It doesn't matter if your names and culture change," he said. "You and Big Brother promised each other you'd protect your kingdoms, didn't you? If Cercis was the one under attack, wouldn't you be doing exactly what we're doing right now?"

Each footstep echoed through the room as he stomped up to Yohan, his anger bubbling up and cooling down in shifts. He drew a deep breath before continuing.

"Mixing us up in your trouble? That's just insulting. We're the United Hanazuo Kingdom. Breaking up the alliance on paper won't do a damn thing. How does that help protect your people?"

Yohan gaped and staggered backward, but Cedric chased his every footstep. He glared daggers at the king, sucking in another breath.

"Bro... Big Brother, the Cercian people, and I are so angry. We're angry at the invaders trying to threaten, overpower, and harm our fellow countrymen."

Cedric snatched up Yohan's hand before he could retreat and gripped it tightly.

"How could we just give up? Sacrificing you and your people won't give us any relief. None of us would be happy with that."

Yohan's eyes widened, irises visibly shaking. He scowled and turned his head away from Cedric. His face had gone as pale as his hair, but Cedric kept on grasping his quivering hand.

It was clear that Yohan had made up his mind about this a long, long time ago, placing his and his people's fates in the hands of their God. But now Cedric—his little brother and proxy for his dearest friend—was yanking him back to an uncertain reality.

The Chinensians in the room shifted their feet and shot each other furtive glances, wavering as their king broke down before them. "Your Majesty..." All of these people had prepared themselves to surrender tomorrow. They'd resigned themselves to this fate. Suddenly telling them they were going to war was no easy feat for a king.

All of their lives hung in the balance.

Silence reigned in the room as everyone awaited the king's decision. Yohan squeezed his hands into fists, gripping Cedric's hand in return. The prince flinched, but held his ground.

Yohan closed his eyes tight and hung his head, but when he finally raised it again, his eyes blazed with determination.

"Seneschal Edmond," he said. "Fetch the minister and the artifacts for a blood oath."

The seneschal startled before gathering himself. "Right away," he responded, flustered.

"You're going to go through with this?" Cedric asked him, tension still evident in his face. As he held Yohan's hand, he peered eagerly into the king's eyes. He spared a glance at the seneschal, who reported that the guards were hurrying to carry out the king's will, then continued to study Yohan.

"Cedric," Yohan said, "I know you well enough to trust your judgment."

A flush washed through Cedric's pale face, and a glimmer lit his eyes. He murmured his nickname for Yohan, trusting and gleeful.

"However, even if I change my mind, nothing will happen without the will of the people. I hope you're prepared for that."

At that, Cedric stiffened. None of us had considered that even the king's orders might not prevail anymore. The people had to rise to this cause as well.

"It'll be all right," I told them. I tried to make my voice firm and decisive, to lend reassurance to these two men who'd been consumed by so much despair and hopelessness of late, to reassure them that this was the correct decision for their homeland and their people.

During the game, Cedric brought Queen Pride to Chinensis, only to have her recklessly threaten and command their people, forcing the hesitant citizens to act as she desired. I couldn't and wouldn't use those sorts of tactics here, but we still needed the full support and approval of the Chinensian people. Otherwise, I couldn't protect them.

"Should anything go wrong, I'll offer my full support and devotion to your people, just as you will," I added.

Regardless of what happened next, I'd already made up my mind.

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A great cathedral stood within the Chinensian castle, a second holy sanctuary in addition to the palace church. It hosted crowning ceremonies, birthday celebrations, royal weddings, engagements...and royal proclamations.

On this day, the Chinensian people amassed in the cathedral to hear their king. Even the castle guards and soldiers joined in, surrounded by the crowd of civilians. I'd ordered my seneschal to tell everyone that they should attend this speech. I knew they were confused about why the king would be addressing them at a time like this—and swapping fearful theories all the while—but it was crucial I do so.

I stepped out before my people. I, King Yohan Linne Dwight, had dragged them all into this mess.

They went quiet before I could even request it. I stood on a raised platform under a cross, the symbol of our faith. They folded their hands and bowed their heads as though in prayer. I knew they were straining their ears for every single word and movement from me. After a long silence, I finally opened my mouth to speak.

We would never surrender to Copelandii. Instead, I told them we would send our troops to fight alongside Cercis and Freesia in a defensive campaign. They stared at me in slack-jawed disbelief, some crying out in shock.

“I understand your concerns,” I said. “But just as our kingdom cares for Cercis, Cercis cares for us. They’ve been trying all this time to find a way to save our kingdom. They’re currently preparing to resist the Copelandian invasion, regardless of whether we surrender.”

“How can this be?!”

“We’ve dragged Cercis into it now.”

“Why would they do that?”

“This can only mean...”

“We can’t protect Cercis.”

“We already made up our minds.”

“Help us, O God!”

One by one, the people shouted in confusion. Someone desperately called out, “Please, convince them not to fight, King Lance!” Everyone around him took up the cry, begging me to reconsider this course.

It wasn’t their own lives they were worried about—it was the safety of Cercis.

I shook my head. “I can’t. They’ve made up their minds. We mustn’t allow them to fight for our sake alone. I ask for your approval in sending troops to join Cercis and Freesia so that we may defend ourselves from Copelandii.”

*Freesia.* That word sent a ripple through the crowd, and they exchanged glances with one another. As a kingdom that had long been willfully isolated from all other foreign countries, “Freesia” felt like something from another world altogether. I explained that Freesia was powerful enough to take on the Rajah Empire, but my people remained skeptical. Their superstition ran deep. I knew that some considered the Freesians’ special powers an affront to God.

To ease their fears, I signaled to my attendants. A minister approached with a small porcelain bowl and a blade. At the sight of this, fresh cries arose.

“Is that...?”

“It can’t be!”

It was the blood oath. This Chinensian ceremony was conducted as a display of faith—a vow of absolute resolve. Anyone who swore an oath to another would symbolize this with an exchange of blood to seal their vow, sometimes accompanied by a speech or documentation. These blood oaths, which we used mostly in matters of religion, marriage, and so forth, held more weight than any other. We were swearing to God himself to uphold our vow. Anyone who broke a blood oath—even royalty or clergy—faced execution.

“Your worries and confusion are natural,” I said. “That’s why I’m prepared to take my oath here before you. I will never allow us to become a colony. I will never allow us to lose the name and culture of Chinensis. I stake my life on it.”

I set my hands on the altar. Everyone watched my every move as the minister started chanting a customary prayer. The clergyman filled the bowl with wine, a symbol of the blood of God and his

people. Combining my blood with that wine was like binding my soul to God's, a vow that could not be undone.

The minister respectfully handed me a short, jeweled blade. All it would take now was a single drop of blood. I steadied myself for what was to come, then brought the blade to my fingertip. Just then...

"P-please wait!"

The shrill cry tore through the room. I froze, searching for the source of the voice. I found a man with his hands folded in prayer—or rather, a plea.

"We understand your resolve, Your Majesty!" the man cried. "But no matter how pure and true your intentions may be, the enemy appears impossible to defeat, and we don't know if we can trust Freesia yet! How can you say with certainty that we won't be wiped out in this battle?!"

He trembled, his eyes filling with tears. Despite his blunt address to his king, no one around him rebuked or disagreed with him. I went still, forgetting to blink as I held the man's gaze.

"We... Even if Copelandii defeats us, we don't want Your Majesty to be punished too! Besides... Besides...!"

His tears spilled over, and the Chinensian man gritted his teeth, trembling with fright. Despite his trepidation about addressing a king this way, more heartfelt words burst free.

"If we do resist Copelandii, if we're defeated by them, if the unthinkable happens to Your Majesty, then your vow will be meaningless! Please, think this through!"

At last, the people around the man covered his mouth to stop him. They weren't trying to reprimand him, though; they were trying to protect him from punishment. Even as this occurred, others spoke up in agreement, begging me to rethink the vow. Were they truly so desperate to keep me from making this sacrifice?

Their compassion and devotion resonated deep in my bones. My hands trembled as powerlessness overtook me. Here, I'd meant to stake my life for these people and thus soothe their fears, but they cried out against it.

"Has your resolve been shaken? Then allow me to strengthen the bond we share."

A woman's voice rang out, not from among the crowd but from the stage above. Surprise washed through the audience. I turned toward the source of the voice and jerked back in surprise at the sight of a woman in armor standing right behind me.

"Who is she?"

"How rude, interrupting King Yohan."

"What's going on?!"

My people talked over each other in shock.

The armored woman strode to my side, facing the Chinensian people.

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"I am Pride Royal Ivy, crown princess of Freesia!" I said.  
"My kingdom has allied with Cercis and Chinensis, and thus we've agreed to send reinforcements. I am the source of this current dispute."

My confident words sent even more turmoil through the crowd.

"Freesia?!"

"The princess is here..."

"How dare she?!"

"His Majesty was about to back down!"

Hostility cut through the surprise now.

"Why did you say it like that?" King Yohan asked, his eyes round. I realized then that I'd described myself as a villain dragging these two kings into conflict. That wasn't going to make Yohan's people want to fight alongside me.

I couldn't focus on any of that, however. I had to keep pushing forward. I raised my voice over the murmuring of the crowd.

"If His Majesty's determination still isn't reaching you, then let us put his very death on the line as well. If King Yohan is unable to uphold his oath..."

I trailed off, letting the silence hold the weight of the implications before I uttered the statement they all dreaded to hear:

"...then I suggest he be burned at the stake."

Shock rippled through the room.

People either fell absolutely silent or shouted in dismay. Even King Yohan gaped at me, his mouth hanging open.

"How *could* she?!"

"Such blasphemy!"

"She's a Freesian demon!"

The hatred toward me intensified. Fear and anger pivoted toward me like daggers poised to strike. The people called for the guards to drag me from the stage, but I went on without hesitation.

"If that comes to pass, I will join him. The two of us can burn together."

A hush overtook the cathedral once more. I waited for the people to soak in my words before I continued.

"If the battle is lost even with my kingdom's support, and Chinensis becomes a colony or province of Copelandii, King Yohan and I will give up our lives and burn at the stake together. I'll surrender my life to the masses, offering my heart to you, the people, just like His Majesty."

Surely it sounded as though I were making the most natural pronouncement in the world; the people didn't seem to know how to react.

"As crown princess of Freesia, I can't carelessly make a vow to your God. So instead, allow me to swear an oath on the next holiest thing there is."

Everyone watched me, unmoving. I glanced at the awestruck King Yohan, then looked back at the crowd.

"I will take a blood oath for King Yohan, whom you love and respect, and for the Chinensian people he so cherishes, before the eyes of your God."

I took up the blade King Yohan had used and sliced my fingertip with it. Blood pooled on my skin and dripped down my knuckles. Then I handed the blade back to Yohan.

"As an ally of the United Hanazuo Kingdom, Freesia vows to protect you once tomorrow comes and this war begins," I said. "Should we fail, then His Majesty and I will burn to ashes together."

King Yohan gulped, but he cut his finger as well, drawing blood. We held our fingers over the bowl filled with wine and let our blood drip in to mingle on the surface. The crowd's voices swelled as we completed the blood oath before them.

Unlike a fealty or servitude contract in Freesia, this blood oath wasn't unquestionably binding. Nevertheless, performing the ceremony in front of the Cercian people was a resolute promise in itself.

With my finger still bleeding, I drew the sword at my waist. King Yohan staggered backward, startled. A gasp swept through the room at the sight of the naked steel I held before the king.

"The great kingdom of Freesia is proud of its ample land and mighty army!" I declared before the people. "Our finest royal order

will be the ones to protect Chinensis! They will never lose against the combined forces of a measly three kingdoms!"

I held my sword aloft, standing before their holy symbol, and dared anyone in that crowd to refute me. None did as they beheld my form framed by that giant cross. The backdrop may have elevated my presence to something sacred.

"We hold pride in our kingdom and the allies we protect! What is it that you hold pride in?! How can you claim to have faith if you don't trust your beloved king or the passion of the Cercian people?!" I hurled questions at these brokenhearted people, but I had to plead with them to stand up and fight.

"The second-born prince of Cercis, whom His Majesty adores so dearly, trusted my kingdom. His Majesty trusted that prince and placed his faith in us. Now it's your turn to have faith!"

*Bang!* I stomped my foot hard enough to shake the whole stage, one thundering thud like the beat of a massive heart.

"Freesia promises to protect you!" I shouted, my statement bolstered by my part in the blood oath. "We'll fight alongside King Yohan, who desires a bright future for his kingdom! Cercis, Freesia, and King Yohan have risen up! All that's left is for you, the proud people of Chinensis, to join us! Are you going to make your king fight alone?!"

At first, no one responded to my blatant challenge. The ordinary people of this kingdom were the final piece in the plan, the last bastion of resistance before we could throw ourselves wholeheartedly into freeing Chinensis from its enemies' clutches.

I stepped back as I worked to catch my breath, leaving King Yohan to address his people. He offered me a faint nod of understanding before looking out over the audience. They watched him with newfound determination, their fear and hesitation washed away by a surge of resilience.

Once more, their king called out to them, binding them together by oath and determination both.

“With our neighbor, we shall defend this kingdom and the love God has shown it,” he declared. “We do this for our children’s futures. People of Chinensis, rise up now with me! For the future of the United Hanazuo Kingdom!”

“Yeeeeaaaaahhh!”

The crowd’s war cry shook the cathedral’s windows, whipping through the entire space like a fierce storm battering the walls.

“We stand with King Lance!”

“With the United Hanazuo Kingdom!”

“With God!”

“With Freesia!”

They howled in support, raising their fists in the air.

“God is with us!” someone shouted, strengthening the voices of those around them.



“Princess Pride,” came King Yohan’s voice. He was almost drowned out by the crowd, but he’d turned to address me. I tilted my ear in his direction, hardly able to hear him. “Why did you—”

“Long live King Yohan!”

“King Yohan! King Yohan!”

This time, their voices really did drown out his question.

King Yohan raised his hands as though to placate the crowd, but they only hollered louder. It didn’t matter. I knew what he meant to ask, and I simply smiled in response. There’d be time for that later.

Looking utterly grateful, he reached his hand out for me while his people still cheered and whooped. I accepted it, squeezing it as I stepped up beside him. We waved to the Chinensian people together, united in our purpose.

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“Elder Sister!”

“Big Sister!”

“Princess Pride!”

I’d left King Yohan behind on the stage and descended the steps behind it, where I met with a very pale-faced Stale, Tiara, Arthur, Captain Callum, and group of knights. Cedric and the rest awaited me as well. They’d been watching me ever since I took the stage with King Yohan.

“I’m sorry I took so long,” I said. “But the Chinensian people said they’ll fight with us n—”

“Why did you do something so reckless?!” Stale cut in.

I had no response. It wasn't the first time Stale had scolded me, and he was right—I had been extremely reckless. Frankly, I figured I had to be in order to fix this.

Tiara began bandaging my finger with a wrap she'd gotten from a castle servant. It was a shallow wound, just enough to draw blood for the ceremony. I'd honestly forgotten all about it.

"It's all right," I assured them. "It's not a deep cut. It'll be all healed by tomorrow."

"That's not the problem!"

This time, Tiara was the one to yell at me. She skillfully wrapped the bandage around my finger, her eyes misty. *Did I really scare her that badly by using a blade?*

"Don't you understand, Big Sister?!" Tiara said. "The blood oath is a ceremony of devotion! If you aren't able to protect the United Hanazuo Kingdom..."

"I know. I vowed to burn at the stake with His Majesty. What about it?"

I smiled, relieved they weren't upset about the knife, at least. I wasn't concerned about keeping my oath at all.

Stale's jaw dropped, and both their faces went pale. I was starting to worry about them even more than they were worrying about me.

"It was all I could think of to make the people have faith in Freesia," I added.

I smiled awkwardly, but Stale and Tiara's pallor went unchanged. I had no concerns about upholding the blood oath. Even the fact that I'd performed a foreign ritual in front of a huge crowd was no big deal to me. It wasn't like I was going to break the oath—and it wouldn't make Freesia look trustworthy to other countries if I

did. This was hardly different from signing a physical treaty, something I'd also done here, and in blood. What was the issue?

"So as long as we win the battle, Her Highness will never have to go that far, right?" Arthur said.

Everyone turned to face him. His voice was pitched lower than usual, and his whole body was tensed up in readiness. Sharp blue eyes, like those of a wolf, fixed on me, searching for any crack in my resolve.

I tried to hold my ground and smile in response to his challenge, but he was so intense in that moment that my lips twitched.

"R-right, of course," I managed. "As long as we protect King Yohan and the United Hanazuo Kingdom, everything will be fine. That's why I took the oath."

Even the nearby Ninth Squadron members shied away from Arthur's terrifying manner.

"Hey, Arthur..." Stale said quietly. At the same time, Captain Callum placed a hand on his subordinate's shoulder.

"That's good, then. There's no chance we'll fail! Isn't that right?" Arthur asked, looking to Stale for reassurance.

"Of course," Stale replied in still-hushed tones. He then slapped Arthur on the stomach over his armor.

Some of the rigidity left Captain Callum's posture when Stale patted Arthur in such a familiar manner. The mood eased.

"Big Sister," Tiara piped up, watching me with teary eyes.

"I'm sorry I scared you," I said, stroking her hair.

Tiara just shook her head. "It's okay. I believe that all of you will be victorious, so I'm not scared at all." When she smiled back at me this time, Stale finally relaxed and breathed his own sigh of relief.

"I'll have to inform Commander Roderick of this development," he said.

*What?!*

“N-no, you don’t!” I blurted.

But Stale was merciless. “Please have Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric make the report,” he told Captain Callum.

*Hang on, hang on! Commander Roderick will get really mad at me if he finds out!*

I grabbed Stale’s sleeve, pleading with him, but he simply smiled and said, “How else should we raise the morale of the troops?”

*Oh no, he’s the spitting image of Prime Minister Gilbert right now! This time, I felt the blood drain from my own face.*

“Now we really can’t risk losing, even if chances are only one in a billion. Don’t worry, since I won’t tell Gilbert about this *just yet*.”

I struggled to find any reassurance in Stale’s words. *Besides, we already know we aren’t going to lose!*

Stale’s voice slipped into a deeper range, much like Arthur’s had. He pushed his glasses up, his whole aura turning deadly. *Now what do I do? Both Arthur and Stale are totally upset with me.*

“Princess Pride!”

I turned to find King Yohan approaching. He was heaving after closing the short distance between the stage, where he’d addressed the crowd, and where we stood behind it—he must have run pretty fast. He adjusted his thin-framed glasses while never once taking his gold eyes off me.

Once he caught his breath, he asked me, “Why? Why did you go so far for a tiny country you have no alliance with, whom you’ve never even spoken to before? You’re the firstborn princess of an enormous country, while I’m the king of a minuscule one. Our lives don’t carry equal weight.”

The king furrowed his brow and stared at me with disbelief. He wasn't speaking out of humility or anything like that, though. He truly believed his life was worth less than mine.

I didn't know how to respond. What could I say that would make sense to him in the face of actions he saw as pure recklessness? Eventually, an answer popped into my head.

"I promised King Lance and Cedric of Cercis, and they are our allies."

"But still!" King Yohan protested. "We're a tiny country... How could you risk your life for our people?!"

"Because your people exist. That's all the reason I need to protect them."

King Yohan's eyes went wide, and he fell silent in response to my blunt words. He gripped at his chest, clutching his cross pendant through his clothes. His throat worked as he sucked in air, his delicate features twitching.

I understood his confusion. A place like Freesia didn't need to go out of its way to risk so much for his country. But in all honesty, if the life of Pride—the last boss—was enough to make the Chinensian people stand up and fight, then that felt like a worthy exchange. We could protect these people if they would only work with us and accept our help. I felt it my duty to ensure they did. My life was much less valuable than that. Besides...

"All I did was take the oath," I said. "You're the one who stirred their hearts, Your Majesty. But the one who moved both of us was Cedric."

Cedric stood behind us, watching our conversation. He flinched when I turned the spotlight on him, his red eyes flickering between us.

"Just as we initially said, Cedric was the one who called us here," I went on. "Because you trusted his words and took action, I was able to come to your aid as well, Your Majesty."

Honestly, the trust he held in Cedric played a huge part in this. King Yohan was much more wounded by the madness of his best friend and the resulting despair of the castle workers than I first thought. It was proof of what an important person King Lance was to both King Yohan and Cedric. King Yohan may or may not have changed his stance if we'd simply barged in hoping to persuade him. It was Cedric, King Lance's little brother, who really tilted the scales thanks to their close relationship. They trusted each other so much. How was it that, in the game, they despised each other so deeply?

At the start of the game, Lance was already gripped by madness. Cedric hid this fact from other countries while working to support his kingdom. But once Chinensis was betrayed and turned into a colony, Yohan began to deeply resent Cedric.

Thanks to Pride's manipulations and broken promises, Cedric "lied" about bringing reinforcements, which stopped Chinensis from surrendering and preserving itself. That lie cost Lance his sanity. And things only got worse once Freesia rose up in revolt to all this. Pride forced Cedric into signing over all of his country's gold to her.

This all made it look like Cedric had sold out Chinensis to Freesia.

In ORL, Yohan turned all his grief and hatred onto Cedric in the aftermath. "*I trusted you, and you betrayed me,*" was one famous line.

During Cedric's route, Yohan happened to run into Cedric while visiting Freesia, resulting in a pretty tense scene. "Bro!" Cedric cried, his voice thick with melancholy. He recoiled as though afraid of Yohan. But Yohan only hissed back, "Don't use that name! You disgust me! You cursed, sad child!"

Cedric had sought help from the Freesian queen without thinking, thereby bringing misfortune upon everyone in his kingdom. Yohan's ire was particularly painful. Cedric had believed that he and Yohan shared a bond of absolute brotherhood. Once that crumbled, something within Cedric crumbled along with it. Cedric never truly managed to trust again.

Lance was the only person Cedric confided in during his route. There were scenes where he held one-sided conversations with his sick brother, looking for guidance and reassurance from the one person who couldn't offer any. It revealed a sadder side to the cocky, narcissistic prince.

Pride was the one who completely severed the bond between Yohan and Cedric in the game. During the climax of the story, she ordered Yohan to stand up against Cedric...but Yohan refused to fight.

"I'm doing this for Lance, not for you," he said.

It was like some sad, final tribute to the bond Yohan and Lance had once shared. That bond survived Yohan's hatred for Cedric over his betrayal, and even Cedric's loss of trust in everyone as a result. It was simply that strong.

"Cedric..."

Here, a world away from the terrible events of the game, King Yohan quietly called out to Cedric. The prince bit his lower lip and froze, his eyes glued to the king but his body trapped in place.

Thus, the king approached Cedric instead. He was slightly shorter than the prince, so he had to reach up to touch Cedric's head.

"You've grown so big," King Yohan said. He ruffled Cedric's golden hair as Cedric's eyes widened.

The prince's eyes dropped. "Give me a break, Bro. I'm seventeen now," Cedric muttered, his voice shaky.

King Yohan just smiled at him and went on ruffling his hair. “No cries of ‘you’re messing up my beautiful hair’ this time?” King Yohan teased. “I’m four years older than you, you know.”

After one last caress of the prince’s hair, he gripped Cedric’s shoulders instead, squeezing them as he stared into Cedric’s eyes.

“Thank you, Cedric. I’ve put you through so much.”

At those words, the tears teetering at the corners of Cedric’s eyes spilled free and ran down his cheeks. The teardrops were tiny at first—to the point where I thought I’d imagined them—but one by one, they grew larger, and his quaking became stronger in tandem.

Though King Yohan’s hands never reached Cedric in the world of the game, here, today, they finally did.

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“So Yohan agreed to it?”

After my speech to Chinensis, our group returned to the Cercian castle. King Lance breathed a sigh of relief when we delivered our report. I nodded, seeing his face a bit more relaxed compared to before, and continued on.

“Yes. Thanks to Prince Cedric, the kingdom of Chinensis is now prepared to fight alongside us.”

Since I had Mother’s authority to act as her proxy, King Yohan and I had officially signed an alliance between Freesia and the United Hanazuo Kingdom in Chinensis. I’d wanted to bring King Yohan back with me to deliver the news to King Lance, but his people needed him. It would take more than a single speech to cement their resolve. Right about now, the news of the alliance would be spreading through Chinensis like wildfire. The whole kingdom had to pivot from

preparing to surrender to preparing for war—and their monarch was essential for that.

“It won’t be easy for them to tear down all the walls separating the borders, but His Majesty ordered the portion of the wall we crossed over destroyed,” I reported. “He’s also placing guards at the walls for defense. I’m sure the troops will be there very soon.”

King Lance nodded along, then said, “I can’t thank you enough for everything that you’ve done.”

None of it was really me, but I accepted his heartfelt thanks anyway. That gratitude belonged in large part to the knights who’d escorted us into Chinensis.

“Now we must figure out how to arrange each country defensively in order to repel the invasion...” I mused.

Freesia, Cercis, and Chinensis would band together to protect Chinensis. It was a small country, but a country nonetheless, and that meant a lot of territory to try to defend. We could predict where the enemy would attack from, but we had to respond appropriately or the battle would be lost.

“My kingdom is already preparing in that regard,” King Lance said. Then he crossed his arms and grunted. “Although now that we’ll have the help of both Freesia and Chinensis, I suppose we should reconsider some of our plans.”

“Indeed. On that note... Well, first I should apologize for taking up so much of your time...”

I trailed off, and King Lance cocked his head in confusion. I needed to hurry up and spit it out, but I felt like I was overstepping my authority here. I’d already pushed these people so much. If I continued to force my will, was I really any better than the Pride in the game?

Feeling a frightening aura rise up behind me, I forced myself to continue. “My kingdom’s brilliant prime minister, commander of the

order, and future seneschal have suggestions for our defensive efforts. I'd like to use this time as an opportunity for all three countries to strategize together. Would you agree to that?"

At my prompting, Prime Minister Gilbert, Commander Roderick, and Stale stepped forward. Even without speaking, the intensity of their presence shifted the mood in the room.

Even King Lance flinched, seemingly sensing the disturbance in the air. "All three countries?" he parroted. Indeed, I meant all three.

"Please, let me explain," Prime Minister Gilbert interjected, smiling at the king. "Allow me to introduce myself first. I am Gilbert Butler, the prime minister of Freesia. It's an honor to meet you."

He rustled the stack of papers in his hands. "Before their return from Chinensis, I ordered a transmission specialist from my country to travel to the Chinensian castle, along with a few knights."

King Lance flinched at the word "transmission specialist." This was something unique to Freesia and our troops with special powers.

Prime Minister Gilbert waved forward a knight standing behind him. This man wasn't the one the prime minister had just mentioned, but he possessed the same sort of special power.

The soldier placed his hand on a pillar near the king's throne and repeated the same words a few times. "This is the kingdom of Cercis. Perspective has been set. Awaiting response."

After some time, an image wavered in front of the throne, along with a voice that said, "*This is the kingdom of Chinensis. Confirming visuals. Now broadcasting. Awaiting response.*"

"What?!" King Lance cried out.

"It's a method of communication created by a special power user from my kingdom," Prime Minister Gilbert said. "We're seeing an image of Chinensis right now, and Chinensis is looking back at us from the pillar."

Even as Prime Minister Gilbert explained all this to King Lance on our side, someone was explaining it to King Yohan on the Chinensian side.

*“Thank goodness. You really do look better,”* came a voice from the other end.

“Yohan?!”

King Lance and Cedric both balked at the familiar voice coming through the pillar. The transmission specialist stepped aside, revealing an image of King Yohan sitting on his throne. He was looking away from us, likely toward the transmission specialist on his side.

*“Lance, I’m so happy to see you looking well again,”* King Yohan said, sounding genuinely delighted.

“I can imagine. I’m sorry, it’s not like you needed more to worry about. But I’m perfectly fine now, as you can see.” King Lance grinned. “You’re looking pretty pale yourself. Can you really fight like that?”

After the initial shock, the two kings relaxed into the conversation. It was clear even from this how much they relied on each other. Cedric, meanwhile, was quiet as he watched this unfold. He leaned against a pillar at King Lance’s side and smiled to himself.

“I’m sorry to interrupt the chat, but might I direct us to the main topic at hand?” Prime Minister Gilbert said once the moment was right.

King Yohan assented, as did everyone else, so the conversation pivoted to the larger issue at hand. With that, Prime Minister Gilbert launched right into the plans and formations for tomorrow. Though he clearly noticed the unusual amount of vigor coming from Stale and Commander Roderick, he showed no signs of fear. I felt a newfound respect for the man.

King Yohan jumped in with his own suggestions. “*If this is the ideal formation, then we should strengthen their firepower.*”

King Lance offered, “Then we’ll use this tower as a stronghold...”

Even Stale joined in, saying things like, “This is where I would attack. Just to be safe, I’d like to station some of our knights over there. To be as cautious as possible, I’d like to see both castles tonight in their entirety.”

They all went back and forth about how to signal to one another if the tide was turning against us too. Commander Roderick shared his thoughts on the best troop deployments, and I contributed whatever I could.

But as I listened to this lively discussion, I couldn’t help thinking of what happened earlier. When our group crossed over the wall to return to Cercis, Stale had immediately informed Commander Roderick and Prime Minister Gilbert that King Yohan agreed to join us. Later, he even met with Commander Roderick to tell him about my blood oath.

I tried explaining that I just wanted the people to trust me and didn’t see any other option, that I was absolutely confident our knights could win this. But Commander Roderick still got really, really, *really* angry when he heard about that oath I made. I’d expected as much.

He shook his head at the part when I interrupted King Yohan’s speech. But when I reached the part where I offered to burn at the stake alongside King Yohan, Commander Roderick swiveled to Stale, fixing him with a wide-eyed look. He cradled his head in his hands at the news of the blood oath.

“Not again...” he hissed.

“Please, don’t hold back. I grant you permission to speak freely, as the firstborn prince,” Stale said.

Commander Roderick lowered his voice so no one else could hear him. “Why do you put your life on the line so easily?! War isn’t a game. There are never any true guarantees! I could report this to Her Majesty and His Royal Highness, you know. This changes the entire meaning of our mission!” His protests came out in a flurry.

As I endured the lecture, my head and body drooped lower and lower until I resembled a crimson turtle. Arthur and Captain Callum stood at attention, lips pursed. They likely worried that some of this lecture was for them and that Commander Roderick was chastising them for not stopping me. Out of the corner of my eye, I caught Stale nodding in agreement. Even Cedric was squirming with discomfort, rubbing at his throat with a furrowed brow. I’d been exposed for the pitiful princess I really was.

All I could do was offer my apologies over and over. “Still, that’s how strong I wanted our resolve to be,” I said.

Commander Roderick just sighed in resignation. “In the first place...we never intended to lose this defensive battle. However...”

When Commander Roderick spoke again, the gravity of his words packed a punch. Tiara, Cedric, Arthur, and Captain Callum all stood up a little straighter.

“This defensive mission isn’t just about ensuring the survival of the United Hanazuo Kingdom anymore.”

The only one of us who retained our composure in the face of this was Stale, who stepped right up to the commander. Though he smiled, ferocity lit his eyes.

That ferocity was for me, and not the commander.

Stale dug in with a sharpness only Prime Minister Gilbert or Uncle Vest could match. He had that same honed, razor-sharp way of speaking, not a single syllable wasted as he laid into me just as hard as Commander Roderick had. All I could do was whimper out, “I understand.”

I'd ordered the Ninth Squadron to keep this all a secret. Prime Minister Gilbert and King Lance would never need to know.

Commander Roderick said, "Before tomorrow's deployment, I'll be reporting this to the knights to boost their morale."

Apparently, my secret would spread soon enough. Still, it would be so much worse if Prime Minister Gilbert and the others also knew. A hearty helping of fear filled my heart. Stale had been right when he said this wasn't just about the survival of the United Hanazuo Kingdom.

*"The very future of Freesia depends on tomorrow's outcome. Isn't that right, Elder Sister, crown princess of Freesia?"* he'd said.

For the first time in my life, I felt the weight of my own mortality.

Tomorrow would decide not just my fate, but the fate of so many others as well.

## Late Night at the Campsite

“**D**ON’T YOU DARE let that fire go out. Prepare for enemy attacks and report anything abnormal to me right away,” Commander Roderick said.

“Yes, sir!” a chorus of voices replied.

It was our first night out of Freesia on our way to the United Hanazuo Kingdom. We’d decided to camp out near the road, seeing as it was best not to travel through more neighboring countries than necessary while taking the shortest route possible.

My tent, as a member of the royal family, sat ringed by the knights’ tents. We also used that inner area as a headquarters for strategizing. The more central to the circle the tents were, the more crucial it was to protect them.

As night fell, the knights sprang into action. After dinner, each squadron attended to its assigned tasks, from settling the horses to looking after equipment to standing guard and doing patrols. Everyone had a job. Being experienced knights—and since there were no newbies in attendance—they set to their tasks with brisk efficiency.

“Big Sister, I’m sorry to bother you so late. Are you already asleep?”

Tiara was standing outside my tent in her pajamas, hugging a pillow to her chest. Guards flanked her all around. We’d bid each other goodnight less than an hour ago, but Tiara had soon returned, restless and wary in these unfamiliar surroundings. Her little brows were sloped in concern. It was her very first time camping out.

“It’s all right. I couldn’t sleep either. Come on in,” I said, smiling.

Relief washed over Tiara's face. When she scampered into my tent, her knights joined mine around the outside, protecting both princesses at once.

"Would you like to sleep in my bed tonight? It might be a bit cramped, though," I said to Tiara. "What do you think? Shall we tell the knights?"

"Yes! I'd much prefer to stay here with you!" she chirped.

The beds we had out here were a lot smaller and simpler than the ones back home, but Tiara and I were slim enough to cozy up together without issue.

I had to chuckle to myself to see Tiara coming to me on her first night out camping. I worried she might when I headed to bed. Still, I was glad she'd asked for help instead of just lying there afraid on her own. Part of me wanted to ask Stale to take her back to the castle at night so she could sleep in her own bed, but this arrangement worked just as well.

She lay on her belly, still keeping her pillow close. "Do you think Big Brother was able to fall asleep? I wish we could all sleep in the same bed..."

"But Stale's a boy," I said with an awkward smile.

Like us, Stale had his own separate tent. As much as it would have been reassuring to have him with us, the many knights guarding us definitely wouldn't allow that. Even if he teleported in, the shadows against the tent walls would give him away.

"How did it look outside? Did you see the stars?" I asked.

"I did! The night sky is always so beautiful, no matter how many times I see it. I also saw the vanguard preparing the vehicles for tomorrow."

The mention of "vanguard" and "vehicles" reminded me of earlier in the day when I'd gotten to glimpse the units' equipment.

Vanguard units generally consisted of soldiers from various squadrons, but the actual makeup of the unit differed depending on the task at hand. I remembered this well from the ambush on the order six years ago.

Normally, the order would use horses or wagons for such a long-distance trip. But the animals could only endure so much. Even the order's horses, which were stronger and heavier than average, had their limits. But the vanguard had another means of transportation.

Freesia possessed a unique and fortified type of wagon. Its wheels varied in size—if anything, they were comparable to the trucks and buses I remembered from my past life. They were large enough to carry horses, people, and supplies. There were also special carriages for me and the royal family. Instead of horses, the special powers of the vanguard unit propelled these two-wheeled carts.

Depending on the circumstances, the vanguard might include members with special powers that boosted running speed, jump height, and even the horses' endurance. There were always troops who could control the two-wheeled carts with their special powers too. The two-wheelers used those special powers as an energy source rather than anything based in science, so they weren't really machines. They relied on the special powers of their creators instead of fuel. This was a weakness of the wagon, though it did allow them to defy the normal limitations of physical machinery.

To me, they looked like big motorcycles—but they could cart along wagons and carriages regardless of weight restrictions. Also, they only went as fast as a single horse. They were great for consistent, speedy travel, though the larger ones were less agile and not useful for all vanguard missions. Still, their carrying capacity and lack of need for fuel made them vital to our current mission.

Every one of the royal family's carriages had a two-wheeler attached, as well as other wagons. Together, they formed a sort of

roofless train. In this way, we could carry as much weight as we needed to and not worry about horses' fatigue. A whole day's journey would take us only an hour and a half.

All of this combined had allowed Mother and I to craft a travel plan that defied Cedric's estimates.

"We're going in the same direction tomorrow, right? I can already feel my heart racing again," Tiara said.

"That's right," I said. "We'll have other kingdoms to worry about once we approach Hanazuo, so we'll have to switch to using horses..."

Other countries tended to view our unique mode of transportation as a threat. We would need to use more conventional means whenever in view.

As I lay in bed, I thought back to all this. Then, copying Tiara, I rolled over and squeezed her pillow tight in her arms.

"Are you comfortable? Think you'll be able to sleep?" I asked her.

"Not just yet... What about you, Big Sister?"

Tiara shyly buried her chin in her pillow. She'd been too nervous to fall asleep while alone in her tent, but now she looked more excited than anxious. She had dozed off beside Stale and me in the past, but we'd never actually shared a bed before.

Lying next to Tiara in the soft glow of a lantern sent me back to the field trips and sleepovers I'd experienced in my past life. We needed to rest before tomorrow's travel, but suddenly, I wanted to stay up all night giggling and chatting with Tiara as I did in my previous world. When she smiled, I smiled back, and soon we both bubbled over with laughter.

"Hey, Tiara, I have an idea. Why don't I tell you a story?"

"Are you sure? I'd love that!" she squeaked, her voice taking up the whole tent.

Tiara loved reading, so I knew the promise of a story would excite her. Her face brightened like she was imagining all the tales I might choose. She flapped her legs and squeezed her pillow tighter, waiting for me to speak. I felt a bit bashful as I tried to think of a story she might not know, perhaps one from my past life. Maybe she'd like a story about siblings defeating a witch, or one about a prince and princess. Finally, I decided on the most famous story I knew.

"How about...‘Cinderella’?"

"What's that?!" She leaned so far forward, she bumped against my nose. Her golden eyes sparkled like gems as she anticipated this unfamiliar story.

"Once upon a time, in a faraway land, there lived a girl who was pure of heart..."

*Just like you, I added silently.*

Thus, I recounted the story of the princess who got her happy ending with a prince, the thing so many women in my past life had sought as well.

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"In the end, Cinderella and the prince lived happily ever after," I finished, lowering the curtain on the story.

Tiara applauded. I'd hoped the tale would lull her to sleep, but she looked just as energetic as when I started. She'd hung on every word, frowning when Cinderella was bullied by her stepmother and stepsisters, beaming at the appearance of the fairy godmother and pumpkin coach, and gasping when Cinderella lost her glass slipper.

She sighed wistfully when I concluded with “happily ever after.” Maybe she wished she had the story for herself so she could devour it over and over again.

“That was wonderful! Where did you read that story?”

“I’m...not quite sure. I think it was a long time ago.”

I wasn’t exactly *lying*, but I couldn’t say that I got that story from a whole different life. Crossing my legs beneath the blanket, I hoped my explanation and awkward smile would be good enough for Tiara.

“I’d really like to read it!” Tiara cried, squeezing her fists.

I reached out and stroked her wavy hair. This was an otome game, not a fairy tale, but when I gazed at Tiara, it moved me to know she was also the heroine of a story. Perhaps she realized my mind was wandering as she peered back at me.

“Princes are best when they’re kindhearted, caring people,” she said.

“That’s true.”

Tiara sank a little lower in the blankets, covering her mouth. Her thin eyebrows knitted together, as if something had suddenly rained on her parade. I tilted my head as I looked at her, wondering if I’d offended her somehow, but she pasted on some cheer and moved to change the subject.

“Big Sister, what kind of princes do you think the men in your life would be?”

“The men in my life?” I echoed. *What an odd question.* Stale and Leon were already princes. A lot of the men I met in high society were aristocrats, not too far off of royalty in this world. She must have meant someone else.

Then Tiara jumped in to offer examples: “Like Big Brother or Arthur...or Prime Minister Gilbert, Val, Prince Leon, or your imperial

knights.” In a whisper, she added, “Do you think...they would make Cinderella happy?”

*Wow, it really does feel like we’re swapping secrets at a slumber party!* I thought. Plus, the beautiful Tiara using Cinderella as the example, rather than a real princess like herself, made her seem especially modest.

“Let’s see...” I began, a warm smile rising to my lips. “I’m sure Stale would search for the glass slipper. He’d immediately scour the country, even going to the ends of the earth if he had to. That’s just the kind of person he is.”

He was always that way in ORL too. During a few different routes, when Tiara escaped to the local village with her love interest, Stale used his teleportation powers to find her. Even when he wasn’t the one she fell in love with, Stale worried for her safety—he treasured Tiara like none other.

I figured the real-life Stale was just as sure to rush to her side. Once he was determined not to lose someone, he would never give up on them. He was the type to go out on a limb for them no matter what, even if everyone else in the world abandoned the pursuit—after all, he was studying his heart out under Uncle Vest to support my future reign.

Once he found Cinderella, Stale wouldn’t dare let her evil stepmother and stepsisters off the hook. Nobody who made his loved ones suffer could hope to earn his clemency.

When I told Tiara my thoughts on the matter, she bobbed her head with wide eyes. “I completely agree!”

Her blatant reply pulled a chuckle out of me, and I added, “He’d take good care of Cinderella, though.” Stale already took such good care of us, I knew it to be true.

“As for Arthur... I think he’d chase down Cinderella before going for the glass slipper. He’d sprint after her carriage with his own two

legs. I'm sure Cinderella would never forget the sight of him running after her like that."

In ORL, Arthur gave up on being commander and ran away with Tiara. At the end of his route, he retired from the order and married her, becoming her prince consort. The real Arthur had kept his vow of becoming a knight and had even risen to the rank of vice captain. A carriage wouldn't be enough to stop the man who was always running straight ahead to protect his loved ones and his promises. That wasn't going to change just because it was love at first sight, so long as he was certain she was his soulmate.

*If Cinderella saw him chasing after her, she'd probably want to jump out of her carriage and into his arms.* After all, she had suffered for so long, and the one man she loved was refusing to be apart from her. Arthur would no doubt grant Cinderella the courage to show her true self even before he found that glass slipper.

Once again, I relayed all this to Tiara.

"He would *definitely* catch up to the carriage!" Tiara replied, cheering on the Prince Arthur in her mind. My smile widened; I had to agree.

I moved on to the next fairy-tale suitor. "Prime Minister Gilbert is already Maria and Stella's prince...but if Maria was Cinderella, he would never rest until he found her again. It probably wouldn't take long."

Having experienced their past in the otome game, I was pretty confident about that. Although I only knew the general story, the man was passionate enough to claw his way out of poverty to the rank of prime minister—all for the sake of the woman he loved. He certainly wasn't lacking in love or compassion. His innocence was what had led him down the wrong path.

*If Prime Minister Gilbert had the powers that came with being a prince, he would have taken different measures...for better or worse.*

Since the prime minister cared for his wife and daughter above all else, he and Maria-Cinderella would live happily ever after. When I thought of it like that, I could totally imagine the couple overcoming almost anything to be together, no matter what world they were in. As long as the hard divide of life and death didn't separate them—as it had in ORL—they were destined to unite in every incarnation. They could be reborn hundreds of times, and Prime Minister Gilbert would accept nothing less.

"You're absolutely right," Tiara said.

"He would make Cinderella happy for the rest of her life," I went on, and Tiara immediately seconded it.

"Val...probably wouldn't search for her."

We both snickered at my curt judgment. I couldn't picture Val chasing after any one woman, even if he fell in love with her. They'd meet once, and then Val would casually give up on her with some comment like, "Wasn't meant to be."

"If anything, I bet his subordinates would start searching everywhere for her," I said, only half joking. In the story of Cinderella I knew, the servants who went looking for her would probably have a horrible time under Val's command.

As rude as Val's vulgar teasing was, I couldn't help but worry about how his womanizing ways might take shape if he were a prince. I pictured the cabinet minister holding that ball so Val would be forced to search for a bride. Once the prince finally found someone he was serious about, he'd force the castle workers to hunt her down.

"After he found Cinderella and discovered who she was, he would run away with her," I said softly.

Instead of inviting her into the castle, I was completely sure Val would ditch the stuffy royal life to elope with Cinderella. Tiara nodded along with my description.

"Leon... Well, he would host balls every single night until she came back. He would wait a thousand nights if he had to."

The version of Leon in the game was always locked away in his room, but once Tiara stole his heart, he spent every day anticipating her visits. Just as Leon waited for Tiara to bring him food and clean clothes, he would wait for Cinderella day in and day out at his castle.

In real life, my sworn friend always greeted me warmly during my regular visits to the kingdom of Anemone. No matter how many years passed, he would welcome Cinderella with open arms, a charming smile, and the words "I've been waiting for you." Until then, no matter how wonderful the women he met might be, he would never even give them a second glance. With all the love he possessed, once he committed to Cinderella and Cinderella alone, there could be no other women in his life. It was easy to imagine him seeing her in his dreams until the day they were reunited.

"How nice," Tiara murmured, sounding spellbound. She truly loved such romantic love stories.

Then I realized Leon would probably confess his feelings to Cinderella before she could even escape from the ball. My face suddenly heated up, as if I were staring down a candle flame. I pressed a hand to my burning cheek and pursed my lips.

This morning, before our departure, Anemone had delivered our knights a large supply of weapons: state-of-the-art arms unobtainable in Freesia. Among them were hand grenades—which I didn't remember from the first installment of ORL at all—scary-looking rifles, and even cannons. Roderick and his men were all honorable knights who saw some of the foreign weapons as a potential threat to their own fighting power, since they didn't know

how to use them. Thus, they'd decided to leave most of the cutting-edge equipment back in Freesia, creating a massive stockpile of spare supplies.

The delivery also included a letter to me from Leon. In it, he thanked me for my efforts, and the final line was "*Remember our promise.*" Considering he had stepped up to provide supplies for the war of his own volition, I figured he might not wait for Cinderella's return after all. As the perfect prince, he was eager enough to sail across the sea if it meant advancing his homeland and their trade.

After some thought, I corrected my earlier conclusion. "Maybe he really would look for her..."

Tiara's expression changed then, as if something had clicked for her. Then she broke into a fit of giggles. *Ah, she knows exactly what I mean.* The younger princess had seen this morning's commotion for herself, after all.

I continued on, this time describing my imperial knights.

"Captain Alan wouldn't let Cinderella get away in the first place. He would grab her hand before she could run."

Now that I had grown closer to the other three imperial knights, I had a good understanding of their personalities. Alan in particular had incredible physical strength. Arthur had shared many stories of the captain's skills, but I witnessed them for myself when I went to observe the order training grounds. Not only was he a brilliant captain, but his own training and sparring sessions were clear displays of his capabilities. I understood why Arthur, commander of the order in ORL, often couldn't come close to Captain Alan in an unarmed battle.

The good captain would never let Cinderella slip away from him. With Captain Alan around, she might not even end up losing her glass slipper in the first place.

"Once time ran out and all her magic went away, he would still accept her. He would probably even tell her he liked her more *without* the magic." I giggled at the thought. Tiara closed her eyes; no doubt she could picture this scenario.

When Captain Alan was first assigned as my imperial knight, he was stiffer and more nervous than anyone else. But after being around me for some time, he became the most relaxed out of all four. Our conversations had become incredibly casual. If I asked for his opinion, he'd say, "Yeah, sounds great!" Were I to inquire about his days off, he'd say, "Oh, I usually hang around the tavern."

Captain Alan had also given me input on what foods to prepare for Arthur's belated promotion celebration. During the process, he'd helped out by taste-testing and standing guard. When Vice Captain Eric told me how much the captain's subordinates looked up to him, it made total sense.

Two years ago, Captain Alan had lent me his jacket after my skirt was torn apart during the intense battle against human traffickers. He hadn't been amused or put off by the sight of me, a princess, in such a shabby state, so he probably wouldn't be taken aback by Cinderella's magic wearing off either. He would treat her with the same level of respect and courtesy. I truly believed that Alan would grin at the sight of Cinderella dressed in rags, her secrets exposed, and see her for the same lovely person he'd fallen for at the ball.

"Captain Callum wouldn't openly search for her, I don't think. He would just sense that Cinderella had secrets, then quietly try to find her again, even if it meant putting on a disguise."

Even before Captain Callum became my imperial knight, Arthur had told me plenty of stories about him. The captain was one of the best in the order. Anyone who heard Arthur gush about the man—myself included—understood that he was a talented, wonderful person. Once I made Captain Callum one of my knights, I discovered

how true that was. He was quick to memorize all the names of my maids and guards, like Lotte, Mary, and Jack.

The captain could also analyze any situation and read between the lines. When I went to observe the knights' training, I saw how Callum used every spare moment, including his breaks, to chat with the rest of the knights. He would also let knights outside of his own Third Squadron—even new recruits to the order—come to him for advice. He cut into his own R&R to give precise instructions and guidance to anyone who sought them. If a knight was feeling unwell or upset, he was the first to notice and approach them to help out.

Once Cinderella made her escape, Captain Callum would act with utmost consideration for her feelings. I couldn't imagine a world where he put her position in danger or exposed her antics to the townsfolk when she was trying to disguise herself. *Maybe one day he would bump into her while she was shopping.*

I rolled onto my back and stared up at the ceiling, thinking about the model knight.

“Even if he found Cinderella again, he might not reveal his identity if she didn’t recognize him. But once he learned of her circumstances and her wishes...he would ask her to marry him. Not as a prince, but as a man.”

I pictured Captain Callum disguising his identity as a prince and kindly reaching his hand out to Cinderella in her rags. Truth be told, I loved the idea of a romance where both parties had at some point hidden their status or identity. Once Val was reunited with Sefekh and Khemet after the fight against the human traffickers, Captain Callum had been so kind to the ones who disguised themselves as children, unaware of who they really were. He was a gallant gentleman who opened his heart to the weak, telling them things like “You must have been so scared” and “It’s okay now.” Even if

Cinderella didn't see that he was the prince, she could probably fall in love with him all the same.

Tiara nodded her head over and over again as she listened.

"Vice Captain Eric...would probably care deeply for Cinderella, but also worry about her too."

Doubtless he would be fretting up a storm. "*She ran away so quickly. Did she have something to do? Did she make it there in time? Does she hate me? Is a woman safe alone in a carriage at night? She danced in glass slippers and then ran off in only one of them. Don't her feet hurt now? Does she need this glass slipper she dropped?*"

Ever since Arthur described how Vice Captain Eric protected the human trafficking victims at the back of the lines, I knew he was someone who did whatever he could to help others.

"If he found Cinderella again, I just know he would cry enough for the both of them. Finally, he would hold her close and say, 'I've finally found you.'"

Instead of feeling elation over being reunited with the woman he loved, he would cry with relief for her safety and the hardships she had to endure. He was a compassionate man through and through.

*"You've had a very hard life."*

*"You lost your parents and were treated like a servant."*

*"You've been alone all this time."*

Vice Captain Eric had been so happy about Arthur's promotion, *he seemed like the one getting the honor. Of the three imperial knights who'd joined Arthur later on, Eric was the one most skittish around members of the royal family. Once he became more familiar with us, his face would light up with joy or cloud over with worry during even our most trivial conversations.*

The vice captain was also one of the people who got angry with Cedric on my behalf when I was told I shouldn't accept Cedric's

apology for his disrespect. At the time, I was surprised to see the gentle, mild-mannered knight getting upset, but it also showed me just how much he cared about other people's feelings.

In all likelihood, Vice Captain Eric had a stronger sense of empathy than even Captain Callum or Captain Alan, although he probably didn't know it. He may have been the brilliant vice captain of the First Squadron, a brother-in-arms Captain Callum was proud to work with, but Vice Captain Eric himself was a humble man who only ever gave responses like, "No, you're far too kind!" and "I still have much to learn." Arthur previously described him as a hard worker who'd honed his skills at an incredible rate as soon as he joined the order, but I secretly also wondered what the source of his mature character could possibly be.



Noticing I'd been silent for a time, lost in my thoughts, I hastened to add, "After all, he's just such a kind person... Um, Tiara?"

My little sister, who'd been nodding her head until a few moments ago, had fallen quiet with her eyes closed. When I listened closer, I heard the rhythmic breaths of sleep. Despite how much fun I was having letting my imagination run wild, I knew I should let her enjoy whatever lovely dreams she was having after all that talk of kindhearted imperial knights. Her expression was so peaceful, unlike the apprehension she showed when she first joined me in bed. I reached out and gently stroked her hair.

At that moment, I remembered one other "prince." He and Tiara were most people's OTP when it came to the game, although here in real life, she despised and distrusted him.

*I wonder what Cedric would be like?* I thought to myself.

Cedric would probably chase after Cinderella as she left, at the very least. He'd pick up her glass slipper and make people search for her. Just like the other princes we discussed, he would most likely be able to find her again. He could lay eyes on millions of people and spot her again without fail. And...

"Huh? Heeey! Arthur, Eric! What's wrong with you two? Focus up while you're on the clock!"

I stiffened the second I heard the shout from outside our tent. While I recognized the speaker right away, I kept my mouth shut tight. Tiara stirred, letting out a sleepy murmur, but she didn't wake.

*That's Captain Alan. Maybe I'll have a listen...*

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"Pipe down, Alan," Captain Callum said. "Remember, this is the royal family's tent."

"Oh, right," Captain Alan murmured, glancing at it. Vice Captain Eric and I fiddled with our bangs as he turned his eyes on us.

As imperial knights, we typically returned to the order headquarters at night, leaving protection of the castle to the guards while the royal family slept. Camping outside was a different matter. The wilderness was a dangerous place, so we—along with the rest of the knights—took turns standing guard, switching shifts in the morning and afternoon. The captains had approached the tent to take their posts for the coming morning. As for the two of us vice captains, who'd been stationed outside Princess Pride's tent all this time...

Well, we were beet-red and hunched over on the spot.

"S-sorry, sirs!" I blurted into my elbow, head hanging low.

Vice Captain Eric stood beside me, barely breathing, his dangling arms ending in clenched fists. I could feel blazing heat emanating from his body, and he couldn't hold eye contact with our superiors. "My apologies!" he cried. "Th-thanks for taking over!"

Captain Alan cocked his head while Captain Callum furrowed his brow, eyeing us with suspicion. With two princesses in the tent, there were twice as many knights on guard as usual, forming a defensive wall around the perimeter. Right now, they were peering at us with impish grins. They had orders to stay quiet and alert to ensure the ladies' safety, so *of course* they'd heard the giddy chatter coming from Princess Pride and Princess Tiara on their very first overnight trip. Compared to the walls of the castle, the thin canvas of the tent was hardly effective at dampening sound.

Their talk was endearing in the beginning. We couldn't help but pay attention to their cheerful giggles and the story Princess Pride told her little sister to help her sleep. The romantic tale was the stuff of girls' dreams. As embarrassing as it was to hear, I was sort of

charmed by it too...that is, until Tiara followed up with the wildest, most unexpected question.

*Princes?! Seriously?! You're going to ask her about everyone?!* Should we be listening to this? All of us shut our traps and listened nonetheless, wide-eyed, as the girls spun scenarios about us in their own little world.

Their take on Stale was fine and all, but as soon as they moved on to me, it took everything I had to keep from screaming, “Please, don’t do this to me!” There was no way I could fumble my duties and start shouting during the royal family’s sleeping hours. Instead, I blushed and chomped down on the inside of my cheek, knowing all the while that my comrades were listening. I would’ve downright collapsed if I weren’t on duty, but I had to stay standing on my wobbly knees.

As flustering as it was to be compared to a prince from a love story, I couldn’t believe Princess Pride thought I would be so passionate as to chase after the carriage. Honestly, she was probably right—but the idea of running after a certain crimson-haired princess instead of “Cinderella” made me so embarrassed, I wanted to disappear. Ever since Princess Pride described the heroine as a purehearted girl, I couldn’t get the image of *her* as Cinderella out of my head.

Vice Captain Eric was in no position to help me out either. He was calm enough when the girls were describing Stale and me, but then Princess Tiara brought the rest of the knights into the mix. First came Captain Alan, then Captain Callum, and then it was his turn. By the time the princesses finished with him, my fellow vice captain was hyperventilating. He sucked in shallow breaths, clutching at his chest like his heart was going to give out. I watched as he clenched his fists at his sides to stay conscious, but the more they praised him, the harder it was for him to breathe. His brain was probably boiling over,

so hearing Princess Pride call him “kind” in a voice as soft and gentle as a puffy cloud must have put him over the edge.

It had only been a year since Vice Captain Eric became one of Princess Pride’s imperial knights; her wild imagination being on full display really threw him for a loop. Although he’d interacted with her a bit before he was assigned as her guard, he’d primarily only ever watched her from afar. He seemed floored to learn she had come to think so highly of him. The two talked more often these days, but when he first became her imperial knight, he was overwhelmed to receive even a single word from her. After all, just one year ago, Princess Pride was practically a goddess to him. Knowing his past experiences, I could understand that.

It all started six years ago, when he was a new recruit working under my father, Commander Roderick. Vice Captain Eric and the other knights had been ambushed while traveling.

*“The commander was trapped under the boulder, so he stayed behind to buy time for us to escape.”*

I shuddered to remember that time, and likewise, Vice Captain Eric’s feelings of helplessness had left a wound in his heart deeper than any scar. After all, he’d been right at my father’s side when the boulder came down and immobilized him. If only he’d been stronger, he expressed, he could have rescued the commander before he was hit. To this day, the respect, admiration, and gratitude he felt toward Princess Pride for saving them never waned. That, as well as his own regret and self-loathing, pushed him to become vice captain and drove him to keep moving forward.

Even just some small talk with his hero made him woozy.  
“Someday, I want to be like her,” he’d say wistfully.

As she was for so many of us, the princess was irreplaceable to him—she had saved his life, inspired his passion for knighthood, and made him into the man he was today. We *all* adored her, and I got

the idea that Vice Captain Eric saw himself as one unordinary fish in a sea of her admirers. To hear her compare him to a prince was too much for him to bear.

At present, he appeared as though he wanted to tell the captains what had occurred—and the unbelievable things Princess Pride had said about us—but he couldn't get the words out. His lip quivered and his eyes filled with tears. I knew he was no stranger to waterworks; on the night he learned he was going to become one of the princess's imperial knights, he cried for some time.

Watching us flounder hopelessly, Captain Callum was the first to notice something was wrong. He patted Captain Alan on the shoulder, called his name, and shot a questioning look at the other knights ringed around the tent. They pointedly flicked their eyes between the tent and the two of us.

The next instant, something even wilder happened.

“Um... Excuse me... Did you happen to hear us out there?”

\*\*\*

Every last knight outside the tent lurched when they heard my voice. I had kept quiet ever since I heard Alan shout, but now that I knew something was wrong with Vice Captain Eric and Arthur—and that sound carried perfectly well through the thin tent—it wasn't hard to put two and two together.

*Oh no! The knights heard me going on and on with all my embarrassing fantasies!*

My whole body heated up and I squirmed in bed at the realization, but I had to be brave. If Vice Captain Eric and Arthur were feeling uncomfortable, it was all my fault. Maybe they were even angry with me. Thus, I had to turn myself in. Keeping my voice down

so I wouldn't wake Tiara, I asked them if they'd heard us. When they fell dead silent, I knew it to be true.

"You really heard us?" I asked again, but the knights probably didn't know how to reply. They had a duty to answer any questions from a princess, but if the knights admitted the truth, they'd be revealing that they eavesdropped on royals' intimate conversation. They must have been racking their brains about to whether to fess up.

I heard Captain Alan sigh and the soft rustle of a hand mussing up hair. Then the captain spoke up, his voice closer than it had been when he first came by. "Ah, sorry, Your Highness. This is Alan. I apologize for yelling while you were asleep. Were you in the middle of discussing something, by any chance?"

Evidently, he felt responsible for the current situation despite having no idea what had led to it. *This must come as a real surprise to the vice captains out there.*

"Oh, it's fine, I was awake the whole time," I answered, timidly lifting my head. "Tiara is with me, actually. She's asleep now, but we were making up fantasy scenarios earlier, which included Arthur and Vice Captain Eric...as well as you and Captain Callum too. It was rude of me to use all of you for make-believe. I'm deeply sorry for that—and for being so loud with all of you around too."

I made sure to apologize to the other knights as well. Being overheard was just an oversight on my and Tiara's parts, but I felt guilty that we'd had such a loud, silly conversation while all the knights gave up sleep to stand guard around us. The knights offered me some reassurances, but they came more sporadically than usual. *Awkward as they might feel about all this, I'm sure they're trying to be quiet now that they know Tiara's still sleeping.*

Captain Alan was the only one who gave a proper response. "Well, whatever you've said about me, I don't mind! It's an honor to

hear that you spoke of me at all, Your Highness. Oh, but if I've been messing something up, please feel free to tell me and I'll fix it right away!"

I grew flustered all over again. "It wasn't anything like that!" I said a bit too loudly, causing Tiara to stir. If the knights were going to think we'd spoken ill of them, it would be better to come clean.

"Erm... I was telling Tiara a story about a princess, so we started talking about princes..."

Feeling bashful, I tried to recount our discussion, but it became more and more of a struggle as I went on. However much I embarrassed myself, I managed to tell them everything—although I was practically whispering by the end. I buried my blazing face in my hands, mortified at having told the captains about my romantic delusions. In all fairness, it would probably be even *more* awkward for the vice captains to have to fill them in instead. This way, I could give them the full story without any misunderstandings.

Once I'd finished, I could just barely see Captain Callum's silhouette slumping over on the spot. I truly hoped he wasn't burning up with shame the same way I was. Then again, maybe my tidbit about him proposing to Cinderella in the middle of town had rattled him.

In my descriptions of the knights, I'd tried to capture the unique traits of all the captains and vice captains. I felt my imaginings were pretty accurate, honestly. For example, if a woman like Cinderella appeared in high society, Captain Callum would consider her circumstances before anything else. In his pursuit, he wouldn't dare go against her own desires.

After Leon kissed my cheek during our sojourn to Anemone a year ago, Captain Callum had taken the time to offer me insight and consolation. Perhaps he'd said more than he meant to back then, especially to a princess like myself. If he was remembering that

moment now, I could totally understand his embarrassment—his relationship with us royals hadn't always been so open.

Six years had passed since my impassioned speech to Commander Roderick and the rest of his knights.

*"You are knights, yes! You're our hope, the light that protects the citizens directly. When a single knight dies, he takes everyone he would have saved along with him!"*

As far as I knew, Captain Callum had never thought much of the royal family before then. He was an elite knight, invited to official ceremonies and such, but that was the limit of his reputation—more title than man. From what I'd gathered, he was a career-minded fellow who took pride in his status and was always climbing to new heights. Whether he offered up his life for his charges or not, it would have made little difference.

When I made my declaration, affirming every individual knight's honor, way of life, and individual might, I wasn't trying to butter them up. I put my life on the line to save their commander, and it seemed to have struck a chord with Captain Callum.

From then on, he seemed brighter somehow, more dedicated to the royal family. I got the impression that he'd be fine with staking his life to protect us now. He'd climbed to his rank through a desire to improve his skills, to save any Freesian citizen in need, and to do whatever it took to help a fellow knight. Perhaps he hadn't realized that before, but he clearly did now—and his drive to protect and serve was stronger than ever.

In fact, I'd discovered that he was so eager to attend the party at Prime Minister Gilbert's house that he'd engaged in a brawl over who would be selected—Captain Alan's idea, apparently. Since the party was much smaller than a formal ceremony, he must have wanted the opportunity to take a little of that honor for himself, keeping a watchful eye on us in the process.

The old Captain Callum would have politely and graciously turned down a recommendation from Arthur to become my imperial knight. He would have been indifferent to the idea. But now, all my praise had been enough to send him into a fluster.

I felt I understood each of my imperial knights well enough to flesh out those scenarios, even if they *were* my flights of fancy. As much as it shamed me to speak of them, whether they came off as impressive or upsetting was probably up to the listener. I hadn't spoken to Captain Callum, Captain Alan, and Vice Captain Eric nearly as much as I had Arthur, whom I regularly saw thanks to our mutual relationship with Stale. Hearing me speak about their personalities so openly must have made it difficult for them to guard our tent with a cool, calm head. When I thought about it, I was extremely grateful for the barrier hiding our faces from one another.

At that moment, I heard Captain Callum take a few deep breaths. "You're far too kind," he said at last. He'd regained his composure much faster than Arthur or Vice Captain Eric—maybe due to Captain Alan's influence.

Then the other captain chimed in, "Wow, it's such an honor to hear you think of me that way! I don't know much about this 'Cinderella,' but if it was you, Your Highness, I'd chase after you whether you lost your shoes or your dress!" He let out a relaxed laugh.

A bit of scuffling happened outside the tent; it sounded like Captain Callum had gone to punish Captain Alan for his frivolity. "Show some respect!" he hissed.

"Sorry, sorry," Alan replied, although he didn't sound very remorseful. Maybe he was being so flippant because of our current separation.

Conversing with me alone used to make Captain Alan quake in his boots, but after his first year of serving as my imperial knight, he

didn't seem quite so frightened anymore. He was fine around the other royals, so I was glad we'd grown to be on friendly terms... But the sight of me in my combat uniform still sent him into a fluster. He would stare, red-faced and silent, rooted to the spot. It never happened when I wore dresses or whatever else, so I could only imagine I struck an intimidating figure in that particular garb. Or perhaps I reminded him of some past regret, like when he had to watch from the strategy room as I fought bandits on that cliff six years prior.

*"Prepare to meet your end, you demons."*

I had only been eleven years old, yet I took out a whole group of bandits with guns, a sword, and my own two hands. The awestruck knights had watched my onslaught from the other side of the projection, maybe even imagining what *they'd* been like as eleven-year-olds. Captain Alan in particular had kept his eyes fixed on me, watching me fight with rapt attention. However the knights saw it, I knew that day was burned into their minds.

Being a member of the First Squadron of the Freesian royal order, Captain Alan had surely had his share of admirers over the years—but from what I'd heard, he was too preoccupied with his training to return their advances. Perhaps he never had an interest in romantic pursuits in the first place, but nowadays, he didn't even turn his head when a pretty lady went by. I liked to believe that seeing me fight had inspired in the captain a deeper respect for the feminine; his demeanor had changed quite a bit since then.

The next time I visited their training grounds after saving the commander, Captain Alan was the first to introduce himself to me. From that day forward, he kept up that same level of energy. He ate, slept, and breathed his knightly duties, to the point that I swore I'd caught Captain Callum calling him things like "musclehead" and "brawn for brains." Apparently, they'd joined the order around the

same time, so this sort of friendly ribbing was probably commonplace.

I also got the impression that Captain Alan felt anxious about seeing me fight again, though I kept that to myself. He wouldn't get the chance anytime soon, most likely, since I'd be protected during the upcoming battle. It had been two years since my skirmish with the human traffickers. The knights were far better warriors than I, but the idea of me holding my own against the enemy probably still made them nervous, especially since we were growing closer with time.

Tomorrow, we would be going to war. I would be nothing like the dainty, beautiful Cinderella in my combat uniform, but I hoped in my heart of hearts that if anything happened to me, my imperial knights would come running.

"Why do you always have to be so absurd?!" Captain Callum snapped.

I could picture Captain Alan giving a lopsided smile as his friend and fellow captain chewed him out. His unbridled enthusiasm had come as a real surprise compared to Captain Callum's formality.

Feeling a bit shy, I said, "Thank you, Captain Alan..."

"Of course!" he replied, still unfazed.

By the sounds of it, Arthur and Vice Captain Eric had also recovered. Captain Alan addressed them next, saying, "We're taking over for you, so go get some rest." I heard the gentle tapping of his hand on their backs.

The two vice captains bid me farewell and began walking away for their break, but one pair of feet stopped in its tracks and turned back around with a *crunch*.

"Um, P-Princess Pride?" came Arthur's voice, breaking the silence between us. Judging by his stammering, I figured he was still feeling embarrassed.

I rolled over in bed. “What is it?” I asked, taken aback.

Captain Alan and Vice Captain Eric murmured in surprise, and Captain Callum once again scolded his men for being so loud. Arthur gulped audibly, and his next words were much quieter.

“Well, uh... If it were you in that carriage, I would definitely, *definitely* chase after you! And, um, if that didn’t work, I would search for you until I found you!”

My eyes went as wide as saucers at his sudden declaration. At first, I didn’t even know what he was talking about, but then I realized he was going off of Captain Alan’s earlier remarks. In my fantasy of Arthur as Cinderella’s prince, I had only imagined him *before* he caught up to her carriage.

*I wonder if he’s trying to prove he would search for her too, just like his superiors. All I meant was that he’d chase after Cinderella no matter what, but it’s kind of cute that he’s setting the record straight.*

Arthur was a brilliant knight, and it was so like him to insert me into the story after hearing it from Captain Alan, one of the senior officers he looked up to. Now that the captain so clearly voiced his devotion to me, Arthur must’ve spoken up to avoid embarrassing himself later on. After all, this topic would probably never come up again, especially if Stale were around next time Arthur had a chance to talk to me. I could imagine how much Stale would tease us upon learning about the whole “fairy-tale princes” scenario. Actually, part of me wondered if the whole “prince” part had been thrown out the window somewhere along the line.

Nevertheless, if I were the one who went missing, my dear imperial knight would be sure to find me again. A smile bloomed on my face, and somehow I knew the other knights were smiling too.

Once he’d said his piece, Arthur took a deep breath on the other side of the tent.

"So passionate," Captain Alan said cheekily.

"Like you're one to talk," Captain Callum cracked back. He was right—the whole reason Arthur felt the need to speak up in the first place was because of what Captain Alan had said.

For a few moments, no one else spoke. I heard the rhythmic jingling of equipment from a distance, as if one of the knights—probably Vice Captain Eric—was fanning himself with a hand. Did they think I'd fallen asleep? Soon enough, a giggle slipped from my lips.

"Thank you, Arthur."

Maybe I was being a bit too bold; all the knights in the campsite could hear us. Even so, I couldn't help it.

"You're my knight, after all. I remember that much, I promise. I wouldn't ever let Cinderella take you from me. Hee hee!"

At that, I heard Arthur stumble, and someone rushed over to support him. Had I driven the point home? Embarrassed him, maybe? Either way, I was absolutely gloating over my little victory. "Please rest well," I told him gleefully.

When Arthur didn't respond, Vice Captain Eric spoke up in his stead. "Goodnight, Your Highness. And good for you, Arthur!" he said, giving Arthur two loud claps on the shoulder.

In a way, this was the best gift I could offer Arthur for earning his promotion since Cedric ruined my first attempt. After the event was delayed, what Arthur received wasn't a surprise party, but a terrible report from a temperamental Stale.

*"Price Cedric made Elder Sister cry."*

Instead of spoiling the surprise, Stale had apparently informed Arthur that Cedric had eaten food I made for a "special occasion." Rage must have flashed through Arthur's eyes then at the sheer insolence of Cedric's behavior. From what I'd gathered, his fury had

been just as intense the next morning—even Captain Alan and the other knights had backed him up.

By now, it appeared Arthur had moved past his irritation for Cedric and wanted to support him alongside me, but he still didn't know the extent of the damage Cedric had caused. I could only hope that my kind words would be enough of a reward.

"We'll be going now," Eric said, dragging the flustered Arthur away.

When I heard Commander Roderick pass them by with a greeting on the way to my tent, I gasped—he must've noticed how odd all the knights were acting and come to investigate. Between Vice Captain Eric taking Arthur away, the knights around the tent awkwardly shuffling about, and Captain Alan with his raucous laughter, the whole scene had to be a real disruption.

Without even checking to confirm whether I was asleep, the commander walked right up to my tent and said, "Goodnight, Your Highness."

That sent me tunneling back into my bed. I felt like I was on a field trip where the teacher had shown up to scold the students for staying up past their bedtime.

## As a Father and a Prime Minister

“STELLA HAS A COLD?”

Tiara and I gaped at Prime Minister Gilbert, who merely shrugged. We’d arrived to ask how Stella was doing, and he’d responded honestly: his daughter, who was turning two this year, was stuck in bed with a cold.

“Is she all right? When did she catch it?” I asked him.

“Be at ease, Princess Pride. It isn’t her first cold, and a doctor has already come by to see her.”

His eyes flickered toward Arthur as he spoke. Arthur could cure his daughter with a single touch, but the prime minister had refused the help. He probably predicted that Arthur would come to check on the situation anyway, even though it was an ordinary cold.

“My wife is doing a good job taking care of her,” Prime Minister Gilbert said. “I’m no stranger to caring for the sick either.”

He smiled, and I returned the gesture without saying more. After caring for Marianne when she was so desperately ill, this minor inconvenience probably didn’t rattle him.

“When she was a newborn, she’d cry through the night. At least now she’s old enough to tell us what’s wrong. It’s much easier this way.”

For a man like Prime Minister Gilbert, who’d already gone to hell and back with regard to serious illness, a temporary cold didn’t seem concerning at all. He could now afford medicine and a doctor, and he had servants who could look after his daughter while he was away. It seemed this particular cold wasn’t very serious anyway.

“You haven’t caught it yet?” I said to change the topic.

“No, I’m careful when it comes to my health,” he said simply. That made sense given what he’d seen Marianne go through.

"Today, I'll exert my every effort to finish my work on time, as always."

*How very like him.* I'd never known the prime minister to shirk his duties, even for a day, unless it was a crisis. He met every deadline, going above and beyond.

"Th-there certainly is a lot on your plate..." I said, sympathetic. I'd always admired his dedication to both his work and his family.

Tiara's head bobbed up and down. "Please let us know if there's anything we can do to help!" she said, doing a little fist pump.

Prime Minister Gilbert gently waved our offers away. Perhaps he didn't see it as a burden at all.

"Compared to when she was still in her mother's belly, my daughter is happy to let me, my wife, and our servants split the burden of caring for her. It's very thoughtful of her."

With that, he bid us farewell and exited the room, but not before I caught a glimpse of his blue eyes narrowing with determination. I'd find out later that he decided right then and there to buy his beloved wife and daughter some flowers on the way home.

## Afterword

**H**ELLO, EVERYONE. I'm Tenichi. Thank you very much for purchasing this book.

With the help of my audience, we've finally reached the point where we can see all five love interests together. This volume is the "alliance negotiation" story arc, which centers around Prince Cedric and Pride. I hope you'll see a new side to Pride, the princess who's gathered so many people in her life who love and adore her.

Suzunosuke-sensei, thank you very much for another lovely batch of illustrations. I was particularly amazed by the detail you put into the bonus chapter art. I also appreciated how well you captured Cedric's description, all the way down to the little details.

Finally, to everyone who purchased this book, those who've been reading the web version, Suzunosuke-sensei, Bunko Matsuura-sensei for the manga version, people who sent me fan letters, everyone at Ichijinsha, the ones who helped with publishing and novelization, people who sell this book, the managers who placed my books at the front of the store, all bookstore employees, the editor who supported me, my family who cheers me on, and my friends—I offer you all my most heartfelt thanks.

I hope to see all of my kindhearted readers again in the future.



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