It was a warm spring day, and the local market was bustling as always. Coco ran through the streets, weaving around people and looking at stalls with wide, curious eyes as she passed. She laughed as she strayed from the cobblestone underfoot and off into a small field, running up to a particularly large tree and settling into the shade.

She pulled out a roll of sweet bread from her bag, ripping a piece to try. She took a large bite and squealed happily. “Ah! So good!”

“Must you talk to yourself?” A voice from overhead grumbled. Coco looked up towards the unexpected sound and gasped. Sitting in the treetops was a girl about her age.

“Oh! I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize anyone was here.” Coco stood and dusted herself off. She was quiet for a moment, deep in thought, before ripping another piece of bread and holding it out to the other girl. “Would you like to try some? It's really yummy!”

The mysterious girl squinted at the offered food before jumping down from the branch she had been sitting on. She hesitantly accepted the bread and took a bite.

Coco grinned as she watched the other girl's eyes light up. “See? Good, right? The stall that sells them bakes them fresh right there!” She pointed towards a stall with a red tent.

“I see…” The girl looked at the tent, then back at Coco. “You’ve been to this festival before, then?”

“Mhm! I come here every year,” Coco smiled and tucked her hands into her pockets. The other girl looked back at the festival.

“Alright then…” She took a deep breath, “Show me around.”

“....eh?”

Coco tilted her head to the side, confused. The girl huffed and crossed her arms. “You said you come here every year. You probably know where all the good stalls are. So, show me around.”

Coco blinked before lighting up and taking the other girl's hands. “Really? Like… a tour guide?”

“Sure, I guess,” The girl tugged her hand away and wiped it on her cloak. “If that's how you want to look at it.”

Coco giggled excitedly and took her hand again, pulling her towards the festival.

—

The two girls wove through the crowd, running along the path hand in hand. Coco would occasionally pause in front of stalls and ramble excitedly about their wares.

“Oh! This is the one where that bread was from! And that one over there by the corner sells these really fluffy knit hats and gloves during the winter, but in the warmer months, they make stuffed animals! My momma got me one last year.” Coco grinned and pointed to a stuffed cat. “Look! That one kinda reminds me of you.”

The girl scoffed, her face flushing slightly. “Exactly how does a plush toy resemble me?”

“Well,” Coco hummed and tapped her chin, “it’s got fluffy black fur, like your hair. And its expression is all grouchy.”

“I am *not* grouchy.” She scowled and crossed her arms. Coco just giggled and pulled her along to another stall.

“But you’re at a festival, and you haven’t even smiled!” Coco tilted her head, “Festivals are supposed to be lots of fun.”

The girl sighed and shrugged. “…it is…a little exhilarating.”

“See?” Coco smiled before gasping and stopping in front of a particular stall. “Oh my gosh! Roasted strawberries! These were my favorites when I was super little!”

“What’s so appealing about some roasted fruit?” The girl squinted.

“You have to try them! They’re so warm and sweet and tasty!” Coco pulled out two coins and handed them to the vendor, who handed her back two skewers. Coco handed one to the other girl before taking a bite of her own and squealing happily. “It’s so good!”

The other girl hesitantly looked at the skewer before taking a small bite. Her eyes instantly widened, and Coco clapped excitedly.

“Good, right? Festivals like this have the tastiest snacks!”

“It’s…passable,” the girl feigned indifference. Coco smiled and sat down on a nearby bench, patting the seat beside her. She gasped and turned to face the other girl.

“Oh my gosh! I didn’t even ask your name! I’m so sorry, that’s so so impolite! I’m Coco.” She stuck out her hand.

The girl looked at Coco's hand with a look of hesitation. She shook her hand slowly before quickly pulling her hand away and wiping it on her skirt. “…Agott is fine.”

“Agott!” Coco smiled as she echoed her name. “That’s funny, I think I’ve heard that name somewhere before. Have you maybe been to my mom's shop before?”

“I don’t think that’s quite right.” Agott sighed.

Coco rubbed her chin, but shrugged. She looked around the festival grounds before her gaze settled on a patch of wildflowers. She clapped her hands together before hurrying over and picking a handful.

“What now?” Agott raised an eyebrow and followed after. Coco sat in the grass and patted the spot beside her.

“My momma showed me a fun trick you can do with wildflowers! Hold still.”

She began weaving the flowers together into a chain before leaning over and trying it around Agott's head. Agott reached up and gently touched the soft petals.

“A flower crown?”

“Do you like it?” Coco smiled excitedly. “Oh, you can’t see it…here!” She pointed to the nearby stream. “Come look!”

Agott stood and walked over to the water, peering at her reflection. She touched the crown, and a tiny smile pulled at her lips.

“It’s…very pretty.”

Suddenly, two knights came running past. Agott flinched and pulled her cloak over her head.

“Excuse us! Coming through!” The knights barked as they looked around. Their gazes scanned the crowd before landing on Coco and Agott.

“Damn it,” Agott hissed, “we have to go, now.”

“Huh? But why-“ Coco was cut off by Agott pulling her by the sleeve. The girls broke off into a run towards the nearby woods, Coco being practically dragged.

“Where are we going?”

“No time to explain,” Agott whispered as they ducked behind a tree.

The pair panted as they caught their breath, and Coco looked around frantically.

“Why are we running? Was it those guards? Did you do something bad?”

“Calm down.” Agott pinched the bridge of her nose. “I’m not a criminal, I just don’t want them to *see me.*”

“But why not? The guards are there to keep everyone safe.” Coco frowned.

“You wouldn’t understand.” Agott clenched her fist around the fabric of her skirt. “If they found me, they would-“

“Found you.”

Agott yelped as a hand came from behind the tree and grabbed her by the cloak.

“There you go again, sneaking out and causing a fuss. Do you have any idea the trouble you’ve caused for the queen this time? Your tutor looks away for a half a second and out you go through the window!” The guard scolded. Agott huffed and crossed her arms.

“…sneaking out? Tutor? …*queen?”* Coco blinked.

Then it clicked

“*Princess* Agott?!”

“And just who is this you’ve roped into your little scheme?” The guard narrowed his eyes.

“Leave her out of this,” Agott grumbled. “She had nothing to do with it.”

The guard looked the young girl up and down. Upon deciding she posed no threat, he huffed a sigh and turned back to Agott. “Queen Adina will be having a word with you straight away. And you can forget about leaving the palace anytime soon.”

“So it is.” Agott frowned. She turned her attention back to Coco. “I’m…sorry for the trouble. Here.” She pulled out a coin and pressed it to Coco's hands. “…for the strawberries. Thank you. I suppose I did have fun.”

As Agott was led away, Coco frowned and waved goodbye. Agott walked silently with a knight at either side of her. People turned to stare as they passed.

“Take that ridiculous thing off your head. It’s unbecoming for a princess.”

Agott grit her teeth and removed the crown. She looked down at the crown before her expression firmed. “I’m keeping it.”

The knight looked annoyed, but didn’t argue. “If you absolutely must, your highness.”

___

When Agott arrived in her room, she collapsed in a heap on her bed. Her mother had barely said a word to her when she returned. Just a simple ‘I expect more from you’. She clenched a fistful of bedsheets.

Her eyes landed on the flower crown on her dresser, and she smiled sadly. That girl from the festival…she had been so cheerful and kind.

Part of her hoped that somehow, one day, she might see her again.

But what were the chances of that? It would take a miracle.

“Right, I think that about wraps up our lesson for today. You’ll be meeting with your dance instructor to practice for the summer ball in about an hour. I trust you’ll spend your free time brushing up on the studying you missed out on during your little escapade the other day.” Qifrey chuckled and dusted off the slate he had been writing on. “Now, do you have any final questions for me, Agott?”

Agott was looking out the window, her cheek resting in one of her hands. She snapped back to attention quickly, a faint dust of pink on her cheeks when she saw the vaguely amused expression on her tutor's face.

“...No questions.” She mumbles.
‘
“Is that right?” The man smiled and crossed the room, peeking down at her slate. It was blank.

“Dear me, Agott.” He chuckled, “It would seem my star pupil has found themselves in a bit of a slump. Don’t tell me the queen scolded you into silence?”

“Im your *only* pupil.” She rolled her eyes. “And im not a child, I don’t shrivel up at a little scolding.”

“I do wish you’d at least take her words to heart. She cares for you, or she wouldn’t bother to discipline you.” Qifrey took her slate and stacked it neatly on the counter. “I'll tell you what, my stubborn little pupil. You tell me what's bothering you, and I may just keep word of you slacking during today's lesson to myself.”

Agott perked up a little, but looked apprehensive. “What’s the catch?”

Qifrey smiled softly. “A wise question to ask. The catch is you have to be completely honest with me. I'll know if you’re lying, you know. I’ve learned your little tells.”

Agott's cheeks burned, and she huffed. “Fine. Im frustrated, alright?”

“Do elaborate.” Qifrey took a seat beside her, hands folded in his lap.

“...Mother told me I’m not to sneak out to see the festivals, but she doesn’t understand.” She gripped the fabric of her dress. “What's so wrong with wanting to experience life outside the palace for myself?”

“Ah, so my pupil has entered her rebellious phase.” He teased. “I understand. When I was young, I snuck out often as well. I frequently became terribly lost, though. That's besides the point. What im trying to say is I understand your desire to explore before you're bound to your duties as the future queen.”

Agott nodded and looked down at her lap.

“I also know,” he continued, “that you're not telling me quite everything.”

Agott grit her teeth and looked away. Qifrey grinned wickedly.

“You met someone, didnt you?” He teased, “At the festival. A charming young boy, perhaps?”

‘I did not.” Agott scowled

“Liar.” Qifrey’s grin only widened. ‘Your ears are positively *burning.”*

Agott clamped her hands over her ears, and Qifrey broke into a fit of laughter.

“Oh goodness,” he wiped a stray tear from under his glasses, “I knew the day would come. Do tell me, your highness. I promise your secret is safe with me.”

Agott's face was bright red and hot. She refused to meet his gaze.

“It wasn’t a boy.”

“A girl, then? All the same, my dear. Tell me about her.”

Agott thought about it for a moment, choosing her words carefully.

“She was…kind.” She said softly. “And cheerful. She reminded me of spring.”

“Of spring? How poetic.” Qifrey smiled. Agott glared at him, and he put his hands up defensively.

“Alright, you met a kind girl that reminded you of spring, and now you’ll likely never see her again, correct?” Qifrey rubbed his chin. Agott nodded sadly. “My, that is truly tragic…and it explains why you’re so terribly upset.”

‘Im not upset.’ Agott protested. Qifrey raised an eyebrow and pointed to her ears, which she covered once more.

“Alright,” Agott scowled, “but do I not have some right? She was so warm…and she made me feel…normal.” She sighed through her nose and looked up. ‘Not a word about it to anyone.”

“Your secret is safe with me.” Qifrey nodded and leaned back in his chair, smiling. “Besides, I remember the feeling. Meeting someone who takes you away from yourself for a while is truly magical. I understand why you'd be upset, my dear.” He looked at the little princess and sighed. “I presume we have no way of finding her?” Agott shook her head.

“I see…” Qifrey frowned. ‘Well, I cannot magically summon this girl for you, but perhaps I can help to take your mind off things?”

Agott raised an eyebrow, intrigued. Qifrey stood and dusted off his lap. “Im low on chalk, and you still need to be fitted for your new ball gown. I suspect you've grown at least two inches since last summer, and that simply won’t do. I could persuade her Majesty to allow you a brief trip into town to accompany me, if you so desire.”

Agoot’s eyes lit up at the thought of leaving the palace, and Qifrey smiled warmly.

‘Very well, go get dressed while I prepare a few things. And Agott?” He leaned down slightly. “Love is a wonderful, beautiful thing. Just try not to let it distract you from your duties, hmm?” He chuckled. Agott scowled.

“It isn't love, I've met the girl once. And besides, you're one to talk. Like I haven’t seen you and Professor Olruggio making eyes at each other between my less-”

“That's quite enough, your highness. Do spare me,” Qifrey coughed, his face red. Agott smiled triumphantly before turning to leave.

As Agott passed, Olruggio poked in the doorway. He watched the young princess leave before walking over to Qifrey.

“What's all the fuss about?” He asked the white-haired man, crossing his arms.

“I’ve been sworn to secrecy.” Qifrey wrapped his arms around the man's waist.

“Secrecy?” Olruggio smirked and rested a hand on Qifrey’s shoulder. “Sounds like she's roped you into her schemes.”

“She's got dirt on me.” He shrugged. Olruggio raised an eyebrow.

“What kind of dirt?”

‘This kind.” Qifrey leaned in and kissed him sweetly. Olruggio stiffened before melting into the sensation.

When the kiss broke, Olruggio rested his head on the other man's chest. “Damn, we’ve been too obvious, haven’t we?”

“It was bound to come to light, I’m afraid.” Qifrey chuckled softly.

‘Well.” Olruggio smiled tiredly, “That's fine with me.”

“Absolutley not.”

Qifrey sighs and chuckles at the guard's harsh tone, his hand still resting on Agott’s shoulder.

“Easthies, please.” Qifrey tried to keep a smile on his face. “I’ll accompany her the entire time, I won’t lose sight of her. Besides, the tailor will need to take her new measurements in person.”

“Then the tailor can come to the castle after filling the standard request.” Easthies glowered at the white-haired man. “I’m not to allow the princess to leave the castle.”

Qifrey sighed and looked down at Agott, a small scowl on her face. He was about to apologize to her for being unable to fulfill his promise when a hand came and rested on Easthies’ shoulder.

“That's quite enough.” Vinanna smiled. “We can’t very well keep her highness locked away in a tower, now can we, Easthies?”

Easthies grits his teeth, the look in his eyes clearly burning with barely restrained anger. Qifrey smiled triumphantly.

“Ah, Captain Vinanna, good morning. I was just taking her highness into town for a short while. I promise we’ll return within a few hours.”

Vinanna nodded and gestured for them to pass through the castle doors. As he passed, Qifrey whispered a quiet ‘thank you’.

“Have her back before sundown.” Easthies barked. “Or I'll have no choice but to escort her home *personally.”*

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“At last,” Qifrey sighed as they set foot onto the cobblestone path that led into town. “For a moment there, I thought our plans had been foiled. I'll have to treat the captain to a drink sometime soon.”

Agott tugged the hood of her cloak over her head the same way shed been instructed to many times before, making sure no one would recognize her. Qifrey chuckled and led the way towards the shopping district.

“Have you put any thought into your dress for the ball, your highness?” Qifrey asked as they wandered through the bustling streets, keeping his voice low so only she could hear. Agott shrugged.
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“Just a longer version of my old dress would be fine.”

“Ah, but this is a chance to try something completely new.” Qifrey clapped his hands together and smiled. Agott just shrugged.

The pair arrived outside their usual tailor, only to find a large sign on the door that read “closed.”

“Oh, dear.” Qifrey rubbed his chin. “Closed? How very unusual.”

“Pardon me, sir,” A civilian approached Qifrey and Agott. “Are you looking for the tailor?”

“Yes, we are.” Qifrey nodded. “But it would appear he isn’t in.”

“You didn’t hear the news then? He’s gone and retired. Moving to the countryside soon with his family.”

“Oh, how lovely.” Qifrey smiled. “Though, a bit of an obstacle for us.”

“Need something made, do you?” The woman smiled. “If I may make a suggestion, there's a tailor that lives on the edge of town. It’s a bit more out of the way, but their handiwork is well worth it. They made my daughter's wedding dress just last month.”

“I see, so they take requests for formal attire?” Qifrey asked hopefully. The woman nodded.

“They do. It's a lovely shop. It's just down the main road, then two lefts.”

“Well, it seems we’ll be taking a walk then. Thank you ever so much for the assistance.” Qifrey smiled and gestured for Agott to follow him down the main road.

The woman waved before making her way in the other direction.

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“Welcome in! I’ll be with you in just a moment.”

“Do take your time,” Qifrey said as he looked around the shop. The walls were lined with bolts of fabric in a variety of colors and textures, and a few mannequins were scattered about. Qifrey ran his hands along a particularly deep purple silk, admiring the color.

“This is quite lovely, what do you think?” He asked Agott, who was standing with her arms crossed. She said nothing in reply.

“Thank you for waiting!” An older woman with a kind smile approached the pair. She noticed the fabric Qifrey was eyeing.
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“We just got that in recently. A very lovely color, though the material can be a bit heavy.” She explained with a smile. “Is this for a dress?”

“A gown, for this one.” Qifrey smiled and gestured to Agott. The woman offered the young girl a smile.

“Oh, how wonderful. For the summer ball im assuming? You’re a lucky girl to be invited to the palace.” She chuckled, “My own daughter won't stop raving about how exciting it would be to have a gown of her own. That being said, we do have some colors that are popular for the summer season just over here. Why don’t you come with me while my daughter takes her measurements upstairs?” The woman offered.

“Yes, that would be perfect.” Qifrey smiled. The woman nodded and walked over to the staircase.

“Coco!” She called, “Come help me out for a moment.”

“Coming, Mom!” a little voice called back. Agott stiffened when she heard that name.

Sure enough, a young girl with light green hair came hurrying down the steps. She looked first at her mother, before turning to greet the customers. She looked at the girl wearing the cloak.

“This young lady needs to be fitted for a gown. Do you think you could take care of it?” The woman asked.

“You can follow me upstairs!” Coco smiled and waved her over. Qifrey gave Agott a nod of permission, and she followed up the steps.

Once upstairs, Coco began rambling as she got out a roll of measuring tape. “You're getting a gown? That's so cool! I’ve always wanted to wear a pretty gown and go to a ball. Dancing around in a pretty dress sounds like something a princess would do!” She giggled. “Oh, do you think you could take off your cloak? I need to be able to get a proper measurement.” She smiled.

Agott stiffened and took a deep breath before lowering the hood of her cloak. Coco blinked in surprise and was silent for a moment before-

“Agott! I mean- Princess Agott of course! Oh, my gosh, you're here! I thought I’d never ever see you again!”

“Shh!” Agott flinches and holds a finger in front of her lips. “Others might *hear you.”*

“Oh! Im sorry!” Coco clapped her hands in front of her mouth, but Agott could still see th huge grin on the girl's face.

“I just can’t believe it! There's a princess and my mom's shop! And not only that, but it's *you!”* Coco rocked on the balls of her feet.

“I don’t understand why you're so excited.” Agott held her elbows. Coco gasped.

“Of course im excited! Im talking to *the princess!”*

“What does it matter if im a princess?” Agott frowned. Coco began waving her hands around.

“Because princesses are so sparkly and elegant and magical! You get to wear pretty dresses, like in the castle, and go to big fancy balls where you dance allll night!” She squealed. “And besides, im not just excited because you're the princess.” She tilted her head to the side. “I’m excited because I get to see *you!”*

Agott's face flamed red, and she coughed into her fist. “Im… sorry for leaving so abruptly the other day.” She looked down. Coco waved her hands and shook her head.

‘No, no! Don’t apologize! That broody knight seemed really, really angry.” She bit her knuckle. “I hope you weren’t in too much trouble…”

Agott sighed and rubbed her neck. “I’m alright. Im used to being scolded for sneaking out.”

“Do you sneak out a lot then?” Coco asked as she began measuring the other girl. ‘Arms up, please.”

“Sometimes.” Agott shrugged. “Not very often. Only when I start to feel suffocated.”

Coco nodded as she measured Agott’s waist. “How did you get out of the palace?”

“Through my window. There's a tree I can climb down.”

“Sneaky!” Coco giggled. She tilted her head to the side. “Don’t they put guards outside?”

Agott huffed triumphantly. “Not enough of them.”

The girls giggled softly before Agott quickly snapped herself back to her cool facade, clearing her throat.

“So, you're a tailor.”

“In training!” Coco grinned and wrote down a few measurements. “I’ve been helping my mom with the shop since I was little, and one day I'll be a proper assistant!”

“I see.” Agott nodded. “Is that what you want to do when you grow up?”

“Mhm! I love it. Making pretty and practical clothes is the best!" She giggled. “Especially when I get to make dresses and capes!”

“Well, I’m happy for you. You get to do something you love every day.” Agott smiled sadly. Coco tilted her head and narrowed her eyes.

“You don’t love being a princess?”

Agott thought about it and shook her head. “It’s…difficult. And it isn’t that I mind the hard work, it’s that I don’t get much time to explore who I am outside of ‘princess’ Agott.” She explained. “Besides, as fun as fancy balls seem, they're quite dull without any friends to talk to.”

“Hmm..” Coco tapped her chin. Her eyes lit up with an idea. “You should invite me to the ball!”

Agott blinked, and Coco froze. After a second, she began waving her hands around again.

“Sorry, sorry, sorry! That was so rude of me to suggest! Balls are big, fancy events! I can’t just imply you should invite a tailor's apprentice to come to such an important event, and I don’t even have a dress to-”

“Alright,” Agott said calmly. “I’ll send an invitation for you and your mother.”

Coco paused before gasping. “You mean it?” She squealed, “You really, really mean it?”

Agott flushed and nodded, looking at the floor. “It would be nice to have someone to talk to…”

Coco clasped her hands around Agotts. “It would be an honor, Agott! I mean, your highness!”

“Ah-” Agott’s face flushed a deeper red. “Please, just Agott.”

“Got it!” Coco grinned. “This is going to be so much fun! I can’t wait to tell Mom! Oh, but now I need a dress…time to make some sketches! What style of ballgowns do you usually wear?”

Coco continued to ramble on while pulling out a sketchbook and sitting on the floor, patting the spot beside her. Meanwhile, downstairs, Qifrey was patiently waiting by the register.

‘Now, where have those two girls gotten off to?” The store owner chuckled as she opened the register. Qifrey handed her a pouch of coins and shrugged.

“Children are oh so terribly unpredictable. They do sound like they’re having fun, though.” He smiled.

“Oh, don’t I know it.” The owner smiled. “Coco is such a curious child.”

The adults chuckled to themselves softly. Coco soon came bounding down the stairs, Agott trailing close behind. “Mom! I got the measurements!”

‘Thank you, my dear.” The woman kissed Coco on the head. Agott returned to Qifrey's side.

‘All done?’ He asked. Agott nodded.

“Well, thank you for all your help today. I believe we’ve found what we needed. I'll come pick it up when it's ready.” Qifrey smiled. The shop owner nodded and waved goodbye.

‘Bye bye Agott! Don’t forget about the invitation!”

Agott nodded and waved back as they left. As the door closed, Coco's mother turned to her.

‘What invitation?” She asked. Coco just giggled.

“You’ll see!”

Agott made quick work of making sure two invitations were sent to the tailor's shop at the edge of town, along with a short note thanking Coco and her mother for making the dress.

Then, time went on, as time always does. Agott resumed her lessons and didn't think about Coco at all.

At least, that's what she tried to tell herself.

"You're slouching."

Agott stiffened at the sound of a voice coming from behind her. She looked over her shoulder to see Qifrey smiling warmly. The man chuckled and looked at Agott's slate.

"My, my, slacking off again? And here I thought our little trip to town would have taken your mind off things. And yet, here you are with your head in the clouds. It's quite unlike you." Qifrey took the seat beside her and folded his hands. "Do tell me what's bothering you so."

Agott sighed and rested her head in her hands. 'When do we get the official guest list for the ball?"

"For the ball?" Qifrey blinked, "The ball you're always oh-so uninterested in?" He thought about it for a moment and tapped his chin. "We're still waiting for RSVP's…so at least another week still. Why do you ask, your highness?"

Agott was quiet, and Qifrey sighed. After a moment, his eyes lit up.

"Dont tell me…you invited someone special?"

'What?" Agott blushed.

"It's the girl from the festival, isn't it? You've found her an dinvited her to the ball." He clapped his hands together.

Agott scowled, but didn't deny it. A grin spread across Qifrey's face."

"Oh, how wonderful!" He smiled, "However did you find her?"

She huffed, knowing it was useless to keep secrets from him. "...The tailors."

"Hmm?" He frowned, confused. Agott groaned and blushed.

"The tailor's daughter," She grumbled.

Qifrey was silent as the wheels in his head turned. When it finally clicked, his mouth dropped open.

“That was *her?* The young girl with green hair? Oh dear me, I left the two of you alone together! The trouble young love can bring… how could I have been so blind?” Qifrey covered his face with his hands. Agott blushed madly.

“It’s not like that! I’m not you!” She scowled. Qifrey continued on about his youth as Agott covered her ears.

“Oh, your highness, you’re growing up far too fast.” Qifrey sighed.

“Who’s growing up fast?” Olruggio knocked on the door.

“I can hardly bear it.” Qifrey dramatically put a hand to his forehead.

“That's quite enough.” Agott’s ears were positively burning hot.

“I apologize for him, your highness.” Olruggio rested a hand on Qifrey’s shoulder. “Perhaps a break from your lesson is in order?”

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Agott was in her room, resting her head on her desk. No matter how hard she tried, she couldn't get Coco out of her head. The way she laughed, how excited she looked talking about making clothes, the way her eyes lit up when she ate roasted strawberries, how determined she looked scaling up the tree by her window…

Wait a moment.

Agott stiffened and quickly opened the window, only to come face to face with a very out-of-breath Coco.

“Hi!” The other girl grinned, wiping sweat off her forehead. “Can I come in?”

“You-!” Agott flushed and quickly dragged her inside, shutting the window with a slam.

“What are you *doing?”* Do you know how much trouble you could have gotten in if you were caught? What if something had happened to you?” Agott barked. Coco just smiled and laughed slightly.

“Im ok! Don’t worry!” Coco gave her a thumbs-up. Agott huffed and crossed her arms.

Coco reached into her bag and pulled out a few fabric swatches. “Here!” She held them out. Agott blinked at the swatches curiously.
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“What are these for?”

“For my dress! I’ve never been to a ball, so I don’t know what color it should be.” Coco grinned. “I thought you could help!”

Agott narrowed her eyes at the swatches before pointing to the white and blue ones. “Those.” She blushed. “It complements your eyes.”

“You think so?” Coco smiled and held the swatch up to her dress, giggling slightly. “I guess it does! Thank you, Agott!”

“Not a problem.” She rubbed her neck. Agott watched as Coco rummaged through her bag and pulled out some sheets of paper. “What *now?”*

“Now we have to draw!” Coco handed Agott a pencil before lying on the floor. “We dont have much time before the ball.”

“The ball…You're coming?” Agott asked hopefully.

“Of course I am!” She grinned. “I wouldnt miss it!”

Agott sighed with relief and sat on the floor beside her, looking at the sketch Coco was making. Her eyes followed Coco’s hands as they swept across the page, drawing neat, precise lines.

“How about… something like this!” Coco leaned back to let Agott see better. Agott scrutinized the drawing, and after a moment, nodded.

“It’s very simple, but elegant. It's perfect for you.”

“Really?” Coco held the drawing to her chest, bouncing excitedly. Agott blushed and nodded.

“Yay! Im so so excited.” Coco giggled.

A knock came from the door, and Agott froze.

“Your highness?” Qifrey’s muffled voice could be heard through the heavy door. “Is everything alright in there?”

Agott swore under her breath and took Coco’s hand, guiding her to the window and handing her the bag she had brought.

“Quickly, hide in the tree until the guards pass. I’ll handle things on my end.”

Coco was flustered, but nodded and climbed to the top of the tree. Agott looked between the door and Coco.

“Be safe getting home…” Agott whispered. “I’ll see you at the ball.”

Coco nodded before the window shut.

“Your highness?” The door creaked open. Agott spun around, blocking the window from view as best she could.

“Professor Qifrey.” She greeted. Qifrey looked around the room skeptically.

“I could have sworn I heard you talking to someone.”

“Just going over my notes from today's lecture.”

“You didn’t *take* any notes from today's lecture.”

“Yesterday's lecture.”

Qifrey pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “You know very well I don’t believe that.”

He sat down on the edge of her bed and patted the spot beside him. Agott hesitantly shuffled over and took a seat as well.

“Alright,’ Qifrey exhaled. “Talk.”

Agott shifted uncomfortably, looking down at her shoes rather than making eye contact with her tutor. The man sighed through his nose and removed his glasses to gently massage his eyelids.

“Dear me, the headaches you’ve caused me lately.” He slipped his glasses back up the bridge of his nose. “One of these days you’ll worry me well and truly sick.”

“I didn’t ask you to make such a fuss over me,” Agott protested.

“Someone surely must.” He frowned and gently touched her shoulder. Agott pulled away at first, but slowly relaxed into the touch.

“If you must.” She grumbled. Qifrey nodded and squeezed gently.

“You had someone in your room.” The man said plainly.

“I did not.”

“It would ease my mind a great deal if you were to stop keeping so many secrets.” Qifrey attempted. “You won't be in any trouble, and neither will they. I promise to keep it between us unless I worry for your safety.”

“I’m in no danger. Is my word not enough?” Agott finally looked up at him. He shook his head.

“At your age? Im afraid the truth is the only remedy. You forget I was young for a time as well.”

Agott fussed with the fabric of her bedsheets, wringing it between her hands. “You promise they won't be in trouble?”

Qifrey nodded and smiled softly. “You have my word.”

“...The tailor's daughter, her name is Coco.” Agott smiled softly. “She came to see me.”

Qifrey sighed and chuckled. “It's as I feared then. You truly are growing up right before my eyes, sneaking in visitors already.”

“I had no part in it; she came here on her own accord.” Agott’s ears went pink.

“You opened the window, did you not?” Qifrey grinned

“What was I to do? Let her be caught by the guards?”

“No, of course not.” The man smoothed the wrinkles in his cloak. “We all have someone we’d open the window for. Someone who’s well worth the trouble they may bring”

The two sat in silence for a moment before Qifrey spoke again.

‘How exactly did she get in? And where are you hiding her?”

“She's already come and gone,” Agott explained, "Through the window and down the tree.”

“The same way you so often sneak out. I see.”

Agott snapped her head around to face Qifrey, who was grinning.

“My dear, you’ve turned up to your lessons with *leaves in your hair.”*

Agott huffed and quickly ran a hand through her hair as if it had personally betrayed her. Qifrey squeezed her shoulder again.

“Not to worry, I haven’t told the guards. It's still a grand mystery how you managed to sneak out to the festival.”

“....Thank you,” Agott sighed. Qifrey gave her a nod.

“So, no more secrets?”

“I should think im allowed at least a few.” Agott tucked her hair behind her ear. “Isn't everyone entitled to at least that much?”

Qifrey thought about it, his own secrets fresh in his mind. “I suppose so…how about a compromise then?”

“A compromise?” Agott echoed.

“No more sneaking out without telling myself or Olruggio where you're going. If we think you’ve upa nd disappeared, we’ll worry sick and have no choice but to tell the guards.” He explained. “If you want to see this girl, we’ll cover for you for a short while, but you *must* stop slipping away unexpectedly. It isn’t safe.”

Agott blinked. “You’d do that for me?”

“Of course I would.” Qifrey’s expression softened. “And things would be different if you were born to a different life, but you’re a princess. Your going missing could mean any number of terrible things have happened. At least give me some peace of mind.”

“...Alright. I'll tell you or Professor Olruggio next time.’ She nodded. Qifrey pats her back.

‘Very good. And one final thing.” His expression turned playfully stern. “No more slacking off in your lessons to daydream. It’s not at all like you.”

Agott huffed softly, a tiny smile on her face. “You're right, it isn’t like me. I don’t know what's gotten into me lately.”

“Oh, I might have an idea as to what.” Qifrey teased. “Now, I’m afraid your dance lesson awaits.”

“My favorite,” Agott said in a monotone voice. Qifrey laughed and began to escort her out of the room.

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“So,” Olruggio set down his drink and smirked. “We all have someone we’d open the window for, do we? Someone who’s *well worth the trouble?”*

“Eavesdropping, my dear, is a *terribly nasty habit.”* Qifrey coughed and set his own drink on the table.

“Don’t talk so loudly then. One of these days, it won’t be me who overhears. Really, you should be thanking me for keeping watch.” Olruggio smirked and nudged Qifrey's foot under the table with his own.

“Come to think of it, did we ever do that? Sneak each other into our rooms when we were young?”

“Moreso now than when we were her age.” Olruggio shrugged. “Our forte as children was always sneaking *out,* rather than *in.* Though we may have done it once or twice, if I recall correctly.”

“We must have stressed Beldaruit grey.” Qifrey rubbed his temples.

Olruggio took another sip of his drink. “Not our fault. That man was grey when we arrived.”

“Still, I have a deeper understanding now of all the trouble we must have caused on our little adventures together.” Qifrey's hands wrapped around his cup as he held it to his chest. Olruggio hummed and nodded.

“It’s normal for children to rebel a little. You worry too much for Agott as it is.”

“I care for her deeply, sometimes more than I can say.” Qifrey smiled gently. “I wish I could guide her through all of this.”
~~~

“You’re doing what you can. Some of it a young girl ought to figure out in her own,” Olruggio reminded. He sipped his drink before his gaze landed upon the stack of letters on the table. “What are all those?”

“RSVP’s for the summer ball, of course.” Qifrey picked up the letter on top of the stack and turned it over in his hands. “A few familiar names, and a few new ones as well. You recall the royal family from the neighboring kingdom? It would seem they’re going to attend this year.”

“They have a daughter about Agott's age, don’t they?” Olruggio raised an eyebrow. “Princess Tetia, was it? It’ll be nice for her highness to have someone to talk to that isn’t some stuffy noble.”

“Watch your tongue.” Qifrey smirked, “But yes, the young princess will be in attendance.” He set down the letter and picked up th next one.

“No wax seal on that one. No family crest either.” Olruggio pointed out. Qifrey nodded and squinted at the return address, his eyes widening.

“It's from the tailor's shop by the edge of town.” Qifrey ran a hand through his hair.

“The tailor's shop?” Olruggio rubbed his beard. His eyes widened after a moment. “The girl her highness personally invited?’

Qifrey smiled and nodded. “It seems this year’s ball is shaping up to be interesting indeed.” He set the letter down on top of the pile.

“I can only hope it all goes smoothly.” Olruggio hummed.

“Im sure it’ll be fine.” Qifrey waved his hand and stood, gathering the empty glasses. “Now, it’s rather late. Shall we head to bed?”

“I suppose we shall.” The other man stood and kissed his cheek. “Goodnight, Qifrey.”

“Goodnight, my dear.”

Qifrey took the glasses over to the kitchen and began to wash them, all the while lost deep in thought.

“Oh, your highness.” He mumbled aloud to himself. “What am I to do with you?”

“Alright…hold it up again for me?”

Richeh nodded and held up the dress. Coco squinted at it and leaned forward, sighing deeply.

“No, it’s still not right.” She sat down in the nearest chair and let her head his the table with a soft *thunk.* Richeh neatly draped the dress back over the mannequin before she went to comfort Coco.

“I think it’s very pretty.” Richeh shrugged

“It *is* pretty,” Coco groaned, “but it’s just not *right!* If it’s too plain, I’ll look silly. If it’s too flashy, I’ll draw too much attention to myself.” She folded her arms on the table to rest her head in them.

Richeh looked at the dress and picked up one of the sleeves. “The little bits of lace are a nice touch…”

“You think?” Coco perked up.

“But it looks more like a dress you’d wear to a festival. Not a ball.”

“Oh…” Coco deflated again.

“It’s just a little flat.” Richeh ran her fingers along the skirt. “Something is missing… What do all those fancy dresses have in common?”

“Poofy. Sparkly.” Coco tapped her chin. “Do you think I should add a hoop skirt underneath?”

“Maybe…or at least a petticoat?”

“A petticoat might work! Then it’ll have a little *poof!”* Coco grinned excitedly, running to a drawer to pull out more fabric. Richeh watched as her friend busied herself with her craft. Her gaze wandered around the room before landing on a sunbather in the window.

“Pretty…and sparkly,” Richeh whispered, “The suncatcher is making little rainbows all around the room.”

Coco nodded, half listening. “My mom bought it from the festival. It’s made of a crystal, I think.”

“Made of crystal…” Richeh tapped her chin. “I have to go.”

“Oh! Bye bye Richeh!” Coco waved before turning back to her sewing.

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“Good afternoon, your highness,” Qifrey greeted Agott as she shuffled in for her lesson. “How were dance lessons yesterday?”
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“I don’t want to talk about it…” She winced at the memory.

“I'll never understand why you hate dancing so much. You aren’t half bad at it.” Qifrey handed her a slate and began to write on the board in the front of the room.

“It’s not about being good at it or not, I just don’t see the point in learning to dance.” She shrugged.

“I suppose it’s been a tradition for royalty to be proficient in dance for a long time, though I couldn’t tell you why.” She shook his head. A smile spread across his face. “Though maybe you don’t enjoy it because you haven’t found your dance partner yet. What if it were, oh, I don’t know, *Coco* you were dancing with?”

Agott coughed, her cheeks suddenly warming. The thought of dancing at the ball with Coco…

She avoided eye contact with her tutor and waved him off dismissively. “I don’t care much for dancing regardless of who it's with.”

“*Sure* you don’t.” The man went back to writing out that day's lesson on the board.

“Oh, speaking of Coco, I saw she and her mother’s RSVP came in the mail last night,” Qifrey said without looking up from his writing.

Agott perked up. Of course, Coco had promised she’d be there, but hearing it was set in writing was a relief as well.

“Princess Tetia and her family will also be in attendance,” He continued, “I expect you to show her around the castle when she arrives.”

“The neighboring kingdom's princess? Why am I suddenly her guide?”

“You’re the same age. She’ll feel most comfortable with you.” Qifrey explained. “Not to worry, she arrives the day *before* the ball. You’ll have all the time in the world to see your little crush when the time comes.”

Agott’s face flamed, and she quickly covered her red ears. “I do *not* have a *crush on her!* She's just a friend!”

“Dear, covering your ears won't do much when your entire face is burning.” Qifrey snickered as he teased her.

“My face is red because I’m angry! Not because you’re right!”

“Oh, silly me. However, could I come to the conclusion that the girl that you describe so fondly, sneak into your room, and *personally invite to a royal ball,* could possibly be someone you even *slightly* fancy?” Qifrey raised an eyebrow.

“That's not fair! I don’t *like* her, I don’t.” Agott said firmly. “She's my friend…I can’t like her…”

“Can’t? Or won’t?” Qifrey took a seat beside her.

“I don’t recall asking you for relationship advice.” Agott huffed and removed her hands from her ears.

“I’m sorry for pushing, your highness, and for teasing you.” He smiled gently. You simply remind me of a younger version of myself. “I can’t like them, ‘they’re my friend’...those are words I know well.”

Agott wrung her hands together. “...What did you do? When you had those thoughts, I mean?”

“We really must continue with the lesson…” Qifrey hummed…”But I'll tell you what. Let's take a stroll through the palace gardens when we’re done, hmm? Just you and me. You can ask me whatever you’d like.”

“...I’d like that.” Agott nodded. Qifrey smiled and gently patted her shoulder.

“Alright then.” He stood and stretched, walking back to the chalkboard. “Today's lesson is a review of dining etiquette. I know you know this well already, but we could all use the occasional refresher! Now, the fork on the outside…”

Agott tried to take notes, but her mind kept drifting to Coco.

She didn’t like her. She couldn’t. Right?

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Coco was asleep with her head on what was supposed to be a petticoat, but looked more like a mess of tulle and fluff. The door creaked open slowly, and Richeh tiptoed in. She made her way over to Coco and bent down close to her ear.

“Coco.”

“Uwahh!!” Coco bolted upright, nearly falling out of her chair. “Richeh, don’t do that!” She rubbed her eyes, giggling softly. When she gathered her bearings, she noticed Richeh was holding her hands behind her back. Coco tilted her head to the side, curious. “What’s behind your back?”
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Richeh held out her hands with a flourish, not saying a word, but looking quite proud of herself. Coco gasped at what she saw. In her hands was a beautiful necklace with lots of sparkly little crystals.

“Richeh! It’s so pretty! Where did you get this?”

“I made it.” She gave a thumbs-up and handed it to Coco. “It's sparkly, like the suncatcher. You can wear it with your dress.”

Coco squealed excitedly and quickly put it on, running her fingers along the little stones. “It's perfect, thank you, Richeh! You’re the best friend ever!” She flung her arms around the other girl. Richeh stiffened at the hug, put pat Coco’s back.

“Touchy,” Richeh whispered.

“Right! Sorry.” Coco giggled and pulled back. “Agott isn’t a touchy person either. Shes always wiping her hands after I hold them.”

“...You held hands with Princess Agott?”

“I didn’t know at the time!” Coco waved her hands frantically. She sighed and flopped back down in her chair. “To be honest, I’m still not sure *how* to act around her. She said to just call her Agott, and she seemed really happy when I didn’t know she was royalty…”

“How do you usually act around her?”

“The same way I act around you, mostly.” Coco shrugs. “Though sometimes I feel extra nervous around her.”

“Because she’s the princess?” Richeh tilted her head.

“It's more than that, though.” Coco tugged on a strand of her hair. “Something about her… she's so serious, but when she smiles, it makes me feel all warm. And every time I see her, she opens up a little more, like a flower just starting to bloom.”

Richeh was quiet as she looked at her friend, blinking slowly.

“Feel all warm? Blooming flower?” The blue-haired girl thought about it before bristling slightly.

“Coco likes Agott.”

“...eh?” Coco blinked. “Eh?! No no! It’s not like *that!”* Coco waved her hands again. “Agott is my friend! And she's the *princess!”*

*“...*Coco held hands with a girl she likes.”

“I did *not!* Richeh, stop it!” Coco whined and covered her face with her hands.

“...Coco is gonna be a princess.”

“*Richeh!”*

From downstairs, Coco’s mom could hear a commotion. She smiled and shook her head as she continued to sweep up.

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“Right, that about wraps up today's lesson.” Qifrey dusted off the chalkboard. Agott sighed and dusted off her slate, handing it back to Qifrey before brushing off any chalk particles from her hands.

‘Now, I do believe I owe you that walk. Shall we?” Qifrey pushed the door open. Agott nodded and made her way down the hall, her tutor following close behind.

The pair made their way into a lovely, secluded garden. An array of colorful flora had just begun to bloom in the warm spring air, and pollinators were buzzing around from flower to flower. Qifrey followed Agott as she made her way down the center path towards the gazebo in the center.

They sat down on one of the benches, both of their shoulders slowly relaxing as they took in the view.

“I will never get used to how breathtaking the palace gardens are.” Qifrey hummed as his gaze swept over the landscape. Agott nodded her agreement, but her mind seemed to be elsewhere.

“Professor…” Agott tugged at the hem of her dress. “Can you tell me how you knew you had feelings for Professor Olruggio?”

Qifrey blushed slightly and smiled. “Coming right out and saying it, hmm?”

Agott rolled her eyes. “It’s not like nobody *knows.”*

“Very well, your highness. Though I’m afraid the answer is a bit complicated.” Qifrey took a deep breath and sighed.

“I met Olruggio when we were still children. Admittedly, I was a stubborn, independent child. I was always trying to sneak out from my own professor's watchful gaze. Olruggio and I happened to be at the same academy, and he was often the one to hunt me down and bring me back.” He chuckled as he reminisced.

“You were a problem child?” Agott grinned.

“I suppose I was.” Qifrey chuckled. “Then, one night when I had snuck out, and Olly came to find me, we became terribly lost. It was so dark we couldn’t find our way back to the academy.”

Agott tilted her head. “What did you do?”

“We ended up in a nearby town for the night. Our professor found us the next morning and scolded us both terribly.” He chuckled. “But that night in town, I ended up opening up to Olruggio about *why* I was sneaking out. I told him I felt stifled at the academy and that I felt no one could

possibly understand me. Instead of being angry at me for being the reason we got lost, the sweet boy gave me the biggest hug and insisted on being friends." Qifrey laughed.

"Professor Olruggio was a *hugger?"*

"He was back in the day." Qifrey winked. "Anyway, when we made it back to the academy, he was practically glued to my side. I hated it at first, but soon enough he started accompanying me on my late-night excursions, and we began to grow close." My own professor, Beldaruit, took notice and teased me *relentlessly."*

Qifrey reached down and ran his hand along the soft grass, his expression wistful, as if lost in a memory. "Before I knew it, I'd grown attached to him. I didn't want to admit it to myself, but I so looked forward to our adventures together and would become sad when he couldn't join me. He was so bright and warm as a child, like the sun. Not unlike your Coco."

"But…when did you know you felt…more than friendship towards him?"

"To be honest, I wasn't positive until we were adults. We're both terribly stubborn, and neither one of us wanted to admit we felt that sort of way." He chuckled. "I was too proud to come out and say it, and he was too bullheaded to take any hints. Not even when I kissed him at our graduation."

"You *kissed him?* Before even confessing?" Agott looked baffled.

"In my defense, I was still sorting out my own feelings. But I was scared it would be the last time I saw him…" He hummed. "Little did I know we'd both been hired at the castle as royal tutors in training. It was so terribly awkward when we reunited." Qifrey smiled.

"So, when were you sure? That you like him?"

"I think I began to suspect it when I found myself on adventures alone, wishing he were by my side. Then I felt it again the day we graduated, and I thought I was losing him. That deep sort of longing to have someone near you, or to be with them once more. I think that's the bud that can bloom into love." Qifrey explained.

"What should I do?" Agott gripped her chest. "I'm still not sure how I feel. What if this feeling is something else?"

"You don't have to know right away, my dear." He rubbed the back of her head. "But if you find yourself longing for someone, I find its best to go to them. That's the only true way to sort your feelings."

"...I want to see her again." Agott released her grip on her cloak. "I want to see Coco."

Qifrey smiled warmly. In that moment, he could see a little version of himself talking to Beldaruit.

"*Professor, I want to go see Olruggio."*

"And that's alright, your highness." He said softly.

"Please, Professor Qifrey, I need to go into town." Agott pleaded, standing from the bench.

'The ball is only a few weeks away." Qifrey blinked in surprise. He looked at Agott, and his expression softened. "You really need to see her *now?"*

Agott nodded firmly, not backing down. Qifrey sighed and smiled.

"Very well, but you'll need to come back before sundown. I'll be checking your room to make sure you've safely returned before supper."

"Thank you, professor." Agott turned to leave, but paused. "Professor…" she blushed, "Say I *did,* like Coco, and im not saying I do." She blushed, "How would I know…if she likes me back?"

"There will be signs," he mused, "but I've found the only true way to find out is to *ask."*

"Ask…" Agott shook her head. Np, not yet at least. She still wasn't so sure herself. "I'll keep that in mind."

"Your highness," Qifrey stood and buttoned up her cloak to ensure she would be warm. "Do be safe."

Agott nodded and started off to her room. When she arrived, she pushed open the window and climbed out into the tree, being sure to carefully shut it behind her before jumping down and hurrying off towards town.

Qifrey watched from her window as she left in a blur of fabric and curls, hurrying down past the castle walls. He swore he could almost see a young version of himself and Olruggio in the distance, hurrying off on their own little adventure together.

He smiled as Agott disappeared into the distance and turned around to return to his duties.

Coco was in her room, hard at work at her desk. Her tongue poked out from between her lips as she concentrated on sewing the final row of stitches onto her dress.

“And…done!” She giggled and hurried over to the mannequin, draping the finished dress over the form and stepping back to admire her work. The once plain dress was well and truly a gown.

Coco simply couldn't resist. She slipped the dress over her head, pulled on the petticoat, and fastened the necklace around her neck before hurrying over to the mirror. When she saw herself, she gasped.

“Sooo pretty!” She squealed and turned around.

“Coco!” Her mother called for her downstairs. “You have a visitor!”

“Oh! Coming!” She called back, quickly and carefully taking off the dress and setting it back on the mannequin before unclasping the necklace and storing it safely in a drawer. She scrambled down the stairs to see who was visiting at this hour.

When she arrived at the bottom of the stairs, she hurried over to the front door where her mom was standing with a cloaked figure. Her mother was turned away, busy closing up the register from a day of sales.

“I’m here!” Coco smiled and stood next to her mom, trying to get a good look at who was under the cloak.

Agott sighed and lowered her hood, causing Coco to gasp.

“Agott! You’re here! But where’s that man you’re usually with?” She looked around to see if Qifrey was somewhere in the shop.

“I came on my own,” Agott mumbled.

Coco blinked in surprise, her hand flying up to her mouth. “Did you sneak out of the pa-”

Agott raised a finger to her lips sharply, nodding towards Coco’s mother. Coco clamped her other hand over her mouth and nodded. She took Agott by the hand and pulled her towards the stairs.

‘We’ll be up in my room, Mom!” Coco called as she dragged Agott towards her bedroom.

As soon as they arrived and closed the door, Coco whirled around to face Agott.

“Did you sneak out again?” Coco whispered. Agott sighed and rubbed her neck.

“Yes and no.”

“Agott! What if those scary guards come looking for you?! I don’t want you to get in trouble!”

“My tutor is covering for me, not to worry,” Agott explained. Her gaze wandered around Coco’s bedroom before landing on the dress. “That’s your gown for the ball, is it not?”

“Yes, it is!” Coco nodded excitedly. Her expressions suddenly shifted, and she shyly tucked some hair behind her ear. “Does it…look ok?”

Agott approached the dress and took some of the fabric into her hands, admiring it closely. “...You made this?”

Coco nodded and stood beside her as she scrutinized each detail.

Agott said nothing for a few moments. The stitches were so clean and neat, and the details were so carefully added. It was clearly made with thought. It was a simple style, not too busy with ruffles and glamour, but it was still elegant. It was….so very Coco.

“Um…” Coco fidgeted with her hands. “So…do you like it? I tried it on earlier, and im really excited to wear it to the ball.”

Agott paused. Coco…wearing this dress?

Her face flamed, and she coughed.

“Ah!” Coco quickly rubbed her back. “Are you ok? Your face suddenly got all red! Do you need some water?”

“Im fine,” Agott choked out, gathering herself. “The dress is lovely. You're very skilled.”

Coco’s own face was dusted pink at the compliment. “Thank you!” She squeaked out. “I tried my very best. I wanted to make sure it was perfect so I wouldn’t…”

“So you wouldn’t…?” Agott raised an eyebrow.

Coco looked down at her feet. “So I wouldn’t embarrass you…”

Agott’s expression hardened, and she shook her head.

“You’re not going to embarrass me.” She narrowed her eyes. “I invited you because I *wanted you there.”*

“But…everyone there is going to be a noble or royalty.” Coco hid behind her hair. “I’m a little scared….”

Agott's heart ached slightly. She wanted Coco to be there so badly, but she didn’t want to make her *uncomfortable*…She sighed and ran a hand through her hair.

“You can…bring a friend, if you’d like. Then you won’t be the only one there who isn’t a noble.”

Coco looked up, her expression curious. “Would that really be alright?”

Agott nodded. As much as she deeply wanted to have Coco to herself, it was far more important that the girl felt comfortable. “I can send an extra invitation. Just show it to the guards when you arrive.”

“Oh, thank you, Agott!” Coco flung her arms around her, pulling her into a hug. Agott’s face went red once more at the contact. She cleared her throat and gently patted Coco’s back.

“It’s no problem, really,” Agott mumbled. Coco squeezed her once more before pulling back.

“I know just who to invite! Oh, but I’ll need to make her a dress as well…and there's only two weeks left before the ball…” Coco rubbed her chin. She looked over at her sewing supplies, shoulders slumping. “But… I’ve been sewing all day…and I’m so very sleepy…”

“Take a break,” Agott said gruffly. “You’ll get sick if you push yourself too hard. Then you won’t be able to come to the ball.”

“Ah! Oh no, you’re right!” Coco slapped her cheeks to get a hold of herself.

“You said you’ve been sewing all day?” Agott looked around the room. “It might do you some good to get some fresh air.”

Coco lit up, an idea popping into her head. “I know! Let's go take a little walk! The sun is going to set soon. We should go watch it together!”

“That sounds…nice.” The tension in Aggot's shoulders relaxed at the thought of it. A moment's respite from the worries of being a princess, just her and Coco…

Without a second's hesitation, Coco pulled Agott back down the stairs. She grabbed her coat from the rack and pushed the door open.

“Mom! We’re going to the hill!”

“Alright, but don’t be long! It’s almost time for supper,” her mother called back.

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Coco giggled softly as they raced towards the top of the hill, collapsing down into the soft grass beneath them just in time to see the sun dip below the edge of the horizon and light up the sky in gentle hues of yellow and pink.

As soon as Agott was settled, exhaustion swept over her. Perhaps it was all the running she had done to make it across town, or perhaps it was the last few overwhelming days of preparation for ball, but she found she could barely keep her eyes open. Coco took notice and gently guided Agott's head to her shoulder.

Agott stiffened, but relaxed and closed her eyes.

"I wish," She whispered, "I could see you like this more often. It gets lonely in the palace."

Coco hummed softly and ran her fingers through Agott's hair. Agott sighed, practically melting under the soothing touch.

"I wish I could be someone else," She whispered.

"Who else would you want to be?" Coco whispered back, her hands continuing their ministrations.

"Anyone." Agott opened her eyes again and looked up at Coco. "Someone who could be by your side. Someone who could freely explore how they feel."

"But being a princess seems so wonderful." Coco looked up at the sky. Night had finally settled, and stars began to shimmer overhead.

Coco waited, but no reply came. She looked down to see that the other girl had fallen fast asleep against her shoulder. Coco paused, a tiny smile pulling at her lips. She gently adjusted Agott so she was lying down, her head in her lap.

Coco pulled off her coat and draped it over the sleeping girl, sitting there in comfortable silence and looking up at the stars.

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"Agott," Qifrey nudged the door to the princess's door open. "Have you washed up? The queen is waiting for you in the dining room."

He looked around, the room eerily silent.
"Agott?" He walked further into the room and looked around. Once he made it to the window, he noticed it was still unlatched. Qifrey pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Oh, good *heavens.”*

“Olly!” Qifrey shouted, running a hand through his hair.

“What’s wrong?” Olruggio poked his head in and looked around. “...Missing princess?”

“Missing princess. The queen is going to *kill me.”* Qifrey groaned and hurried out of the room.

“Do we know where she is?”

“I have a pretty good idea.” Qifrey burst into his room, throwing on his coat. “*Cover for me,* I’m going to get her.”

“Be safe.” Olruggio nodded. Qifrey rushed down the hallway and out through the palace gates.

~~~
Qifrey practically burst into the tailor’s shop, not bothering to catch his breath before calling out to the woman at the register. She turned around, a look of concern etched onto her face.

‘Sir, are you alright? I’m afraid we’re closed for the day.”

Qifrey shook his head as he panted. “Please, have you seen Agott?”

“Agott?” The woman frowned. “I think that's the name of the girl Coco is with.”

“Where are they? Please, I’m the one responsible for her. She was supposed to be home ages ago.” Qifrey pleaded as he leaned against the counter. The woman nodded and hurried over to the door.

“Coco said they were going to the hill. They should still be there now. I’ll go with you.”

“Thank you very much.” Qifrey hurried out the door, following close behind her.

~~

Coco was humming softly as she played with one of Agott’s curls, lost deep in her own thoughts. On one hand, she was overjoyed to get to see Agott again, but worry continued to nag at her. If she kept sneaking out like this, would she be in trouble? The last thing she wanted was for her to cause Agott any distress…

She was pulled out of her thoughts by a hand on her shoulder, turning around to see her mother and a very worried-looking Qifrey.

“Oh, thank *goodness.”* Qifrey sighed. He bent down and gently shook the princess awake. “Your highness, we need to go *now.”*
~~~

Agott quickly snapped awake, looking around in confusion, first at Qifrey, then at Coco and her mother. “What’s going on? When did I…?’

All at once, it came back to her. Her promise to Qifrey to be back before supper, the night sky overhead, and falling asleep beside Coco.

She bolted upright and dusted herself off, turning to Qifrey. “Did I miss dinner? Is it too late?”

“Well past too late to worry about it *now.* Olruggio is covering for both of us. We *must* get you home, or we’re both in *deep trouble.”* Qifrey handed Cocos coat back to her and draped his own around Agott’s shoulders. “Come quickly, no time for goodbyes.”

“But-”

“You’ll see her again at the ball. We have to *go.”*

Agott was quickly whisked away by Qifrey as he hurried them both back to the palace. Coco stood up and waved goodbye, even though she knew the other girl couldn’t turn around to see it.

~~~

“Your highness,” Qifrey whispered as they silently crept through the hallways, “Be as quiet as you can be. When I give the all clear, make a run for your room. I’ll find Olruggio and figure out the plan from there.”

Agott nodded as she tiptoed towards the edge of the hallway, remaining ducked behind a corner. Qifrey peeked out and looked around. No one to be found, the coast was clear. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“Alright, on three.” He rested a hand on her back.
“One…two..”

“I don’t think so.”

Qifrey stiffened as he felt a hand on his shoulder. He whipped around to see the glowering face of the deputy captain of the royal guard.

‘Easthies” Qifrey scowled. The knight gave the professor an equally disdainful look.

Agott's heart dropped into her stomach as the knight kept a tight grip on her shoulder.
~~~

“Professor Olruggio told her Majesty you were *feeling unwell,* and would be remaining in your room this evening.” Eathias gave Agott a blank look before glaring at Qifrey. “She seems to be in fine health to *me.”*
“This is a misunderstanding,” Qifrey tried to speak up, but was silenced by the guard.

“Save your explanations.” He glowered. Easthies turned to the princess. “I have orders to bring you before her Majesty immediately. As for you.” He turned to face Qifrey, “Remain in your quarters until you are called. I suspect there will be a fitting punishment for a professor who would *go behind the back of their queen.”*

A dark expression crossed Qifrey's face as the implication settled in. Agott pulled herself free of the guard’s grasp.

“No! It wasn’t his fault, it was mine!” She gripped her chest. “Professor Qifrey didn’t know! I’m the one who nuck out, I’m the only one who needs to be punished!”

“That is for her Majesty to decide, your highness,” Easthies said flatly. “*Rules are rules.* Those who do not uphold them have no place here.” He began escorting her down the hallway. “Come, the queen awaits.”

“Professor Qifrey!” Agott called back as she was pulled further and further from him. “Professor!”

Qifrey offered her a sad smile as another knight took him by the shoulder. “It’ll be alright, your highness. I’ll be alright.”

“No! Professor! *Professor!”* Aggot choked back angry tears as she watched him be escorted away. ‘Professor….”

~~~
Agott stood before her mother, still wrapped in her professor's cloak, tears staining her cheeks. She tried to steel herself and calm her nerves, but struggled to soothe her own thoughts. The sight of Qifrey being taken away… the terror she felt not knowing what would happen next…

Still, she knew her mother. She knew any sign of emotion was a vulnerability she couldn't afford, for Qifrey’s sake and her own. She whipped her eyes and stilled her expression.

“I heard you weren’t feeling very well.” The queen spoke in an icy tone, looking down on Agott from the throne. “How unfortunate. Though I certainly am relieved to see you seem to have found your strength once more.”

“Mother,” Agott matched her tone. *Be still. Don’t let her know you’re frightened. Don’t let her in.*
“I’m sorry, I disobeyed you once more.” She looked up to meet the queen’s gaze. “I did it on my own; the blame lies entirely with me.”
~~~

“Is that right?” The queen’s expression was unreadable. “That’s not what I’ve seen.”

“Professor Qifrey only came to find me because he was worried. I snuck out without any help, I’m telling the truth.”

The queen was deadly silent. Then, she rose.

Agott was completely still as her mother approached. She could feel her hand on her shoulder, but it brought no warmth.

“Do you think,” Her mother began, “That your professor is the only one who *knows your tells?”*

Agott froze.

The queen leaned back and looked her daughter over. “To think you’d stick out your own neck for this professor of yours. Is he really worth so much?”

“Please…it wasn’t his fault.” Agott grit her teeth.

“You’d be willing to make a deal, then?”

Agott stiffened again as her mother continued.

“I overlook things this once, and you do something for me later down the line, no questions asked.”

“You cannot expect me to take a deal without knowing the exact terms.” Agott’s brow furrowed. “You taught me that much.”

“I see very few options for you outside of agreeing.” The queen began to ascend the steps to the throne. “So, what will it be?”

Agott bit her lip, thinking back to all the times her professor had been there when no one else was.

She couldn’t…she couldn’t *lose him.* Not like this.

She took a deep breath and steeled herself. “I accept our terms.”

A satisfied expression settled on the queen’s face as she looked down at her daughter.

“Good.” She settled into the throne. “I expect great things from you, Agott. Do try to remain more focused from now on.” The queen nodded to Easthies, who stood from his kneel and began to escort Agott back to her room. As the doors to the throne room shut, Agott shivered.

She was guided back to her room, sitting down on her bed and looking out her window. On the ground below, two guards were positioned.

“This time, do try to stay put.” Easthies gave her a sharp look before shutting her bedroom doors.

Agott sat in silence as she stared at the walls in front of her, the weight of their oath still heavy on her mind.

Qifrey sat on the edge of his bed, Olruggio beside him gently rubbing his thumb up and down his hand. It was silent between the two of them for a long while as they sat with the weight of what was yet to come. Olruggio was the first to break the silence, squeezing Qifreys hand gently as he spoke.

“I hate seeing that look on your face.” He frowned. “We have no way of knowing what will happen. Try not to worry yourself sick about it.”

“How can I not?” Qifrey squeezed his hand in return. “The unease of not knowing is somehow worse than any punishment could be.”

Olruggio nodded and slipped one arm around Qifreys shoulders, running his hand up and down his arm to try and offer some comfort.

“...She took the fall for me,” Qifrey whispered. “She *knew* what it would mean for me to get caught with her. She knows what could happen now.”

“She cares too much about you to lose you.”

“I didn’t stop her.” Qifrey clenched his hands into fists around the fabric of his cloak. “What kind of mentor does that make me? Letting my own pupil take all the blame.”

Olruggio squeezed his shoulder. “Qifrey, you both know what would happen if she hadn’t done that. What would become of you…”

“It shouldn’t have mattered.” Qifrey wiped his eyes, trying to fight back a wave of emotions. “I should have stopped her. What if something happens to her because of this? How can I live with myself knowing I didn’t speak up?”

“Try to understand it from *her* perspective.” Olruggio pulled the other man closer. “She’s young, and has the title of princess to protect her. For her, this is reckless, childish disobedience. But for you…”

“A crime against the crown.” Qifrey said bitterly. Olruggio nodded.

“I should have never let her sneak out again.” Qifrey shook his head. “It was far too dangerous. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“You wanted her to be happy. That is *not* a crime.” The other man squeezed his shoulder again, trying to keep him grounded. “Agott is a smart girl. Smart enough to know what was at stake here. She’s playing her cards in the best way she knows how to.”

“She’s putting herself in harms way for me. It feels so wrong.”

“I know.” Olruggio whispered and kissed his cheek. “*I know.* But please*,* respect her wishes*.”*

A sharp knock came from the door, and both of their heads snapped up. Olruggio watched as Qifrey’s face paled.

“Wait here,” Olruggio stood to get the door.

As he opened it, he came face to face with Easthies. His expression hardened.

“I suggest you take your leave,” Easthies said gruffly. “I need to speak with professor Qifrey. *Alone.”*

Olruggios jaw hardened, but he nodded. “A moment, please.”

Olruggio walked back to Qifrey, sighing and squeezing his hand one more time. “Come find me when this is over.”

“If they let me,” Qifrey whispered back.

Olruggio nodded and hesitantly let go, leaving the room silently. Once the door clicked shut, Easthies approached Qifrey, standing over him.

“Her highness insists this all one grand misunderstanding.” Easthies bent down to be face to face with the other man. “That you went looking for her upon discovering she was missing, and had no part in her sneaking out. Is that correct?”

Qifreys heart ached, but he knew what must be done. “That is correct.”

Easthies face remained cold and hardened, disbelief etched onto his features. “Really now? I’m expected to believe her highness would depart from the palace without so much as a word to her *beloved* professor*?”*

“She’s done so before. It pains me that she’s done so again. I do worry for her terribly.” It wasn’t entirely a lie, Agott’s habit of sneaking out long predated her relationship with him.

Easthies considered his words, leaning back slightly. “Even so, when I found you, you were helping her sneak back in.*”*

“That much I wont deny,” Qifrey nodded, “I found her in town, and did aid her in returning to the palace. I was out of line to not report her disappearance to the knights. I was in the wrong, and I apologize.”

A satisfied expression crossed Easthies’ face at the confession. “So you admit to some wrong doing.”

“Some,” Qifrey said firmly.

“But not all?”

“Not all.”

Eathies huffed and glared down at him. “I’ll make myself perfectly clear. *I do not believe you*.”

Qifrey’s heart sank deep in his chest, but he kept his expression neutral. Easthies turned his back to him and continued on.

“However, her highness insists she had no aid in sneaking out. That being said, your punishment for assisting her return and your failure to report her disapearance to the proper authorities will be decided by her Majesty the queen.” He turned to look at Qifrey over his shoulder. “Any objections?”

Qifrey shook his head. “No objections.”

“Good,” Easthies began to walk away. “Remain in your room until the verdict is reached.”

The deputy captain left without another word, the door closing behind him and leaving Qifrey with his thoughts.

~~~

“Your Majesty.” Easthies kneeled before the queen. “I’ve returned. Qifrey has confessed to not only aiding her Highness in their attempt to sneak into the palace, but also in failing to report her disappearance.”

Adina nodded, her gaze cast down on him from her seat on the throne. “And in assisting her escape?”

“That much he denies, as expected.” Easthies scowled. “Though he’s lying, I’m sure of it.”

“I see.” The queen drummed her fingers on the edge of her throne, thinking for a moment.

Easthies remained with his head bowed as he awaited her response, keeping his expression schooled despite his satisfaction.

“He will be suspended.”

Easthies carefully practiced facade of level-headedness snapped. Fury etched into his features as he whipped his head up, unable to maintain proprietary.
~~~

“***What?”***

“I’ve already dealt with my daughter. She is to remain in the palace under high supervision until the ball. As for the professor, he will receive a weeks suspension.”

“A week*?”* Easthies snarled “His crimes go against the very crown itself! To let the man off with merely a *suspension* would be a mockery. I cannot allow-”

“You will allow what I very well say you will allow.” Adina calmly folded her hands.

Easthies grit his teeth and bowed his head. “Of course, your Majesty. Forgive me.”

The queen nodded, satisfied. “If that is all, you are dismissed. See that professor Qifrey remains in his chambers until his suspension is up.”

“Yes, your Majesty.” Easthies stood from his kneel, bowed once more, and turned on his heels. As soon as his face was no longer visible, he allowed it to crumple with rage.

Crimes against the crown must not be so easily forgiven if order is to be maintained.

~~~

“A suspension*?”* Olruggio’s shoulders sagged with palpable relief. “Thank the heavens…”

“I got lucky.” Qifrey leaned back in bed, a tired smile on his face.

“*We* got lucky.” Olruggio corrected, climbing into bed beside his lover. “Though I can’t say I expected this. I was preparing for the worst.”

Qifrey wrapped an arm around the other man as he laid beside him. “I wouldn’t count us out of the woods yet…to be honest, I find it to be a bit suspicious. Her Majesty has no reason to be lenient with me.” He frowned.

Olruggio hummed, thinking about it. “Lets just be grateful for tonight. If she had deeper motivations for letting you off so easy, she’ll make them known soon enough.”

“Indeed…” Qifrey nodded, resting his head on Olruggios shoulder.

~~~

Agott sat in her room, her face puffy from stress. Her mother had agreed to overlook things, but she still hadn’t heard a word from Qifrey. The stress rolled in her stomach, eating away at her slowly even as she tried to ignore it.

She tossed her pen aside, studies long forgotten, and climbed into bed. It had grown quite late in the evening in the time it took to meet with her mother. As she looked out the window, she could see the two guards stationed just below. Just outside her door, she knew another set of guards stood watch.

House arrest was certainly going to prove to be troublesome.

Her mind wandered back to her professor and the smile he'd offered her as he was taken away.

"It'll be alright, your highness. I'll be alright."

She wanted so badly to believe him, but the nauseating feeling in her stomach just would not settle until she knew for certain nothing bad had become of him.

Still, fatigue was beginning to win out over her worry. She wouldn't sleep soundly, but she would have to rest.

And so, rest she did. She blew out the candle on her nightstand, lay down in bed, and squeezed her eyes shut as she waited for sleep to come.

As the week dragged on, Agott threw herself back into her studies.

Her hands cramped from writing vigorously on her slate, her muscles sore from dance lessons, and her mind so full of political jargon her head felt physically heavy. Still, it did little to distract her from the hollowness she felt.

Agott had a number of competent professors, each one specilizing in a particular area of study. Politics, etiquette, linguistics, penmanship, as well as more traditional subjects such as math. Still, none of it mattered. None of them were Professor Qifrey.

Qifrey had first arrived at the palace when Agott was small and barely ready to begin her schooling. He had been a steady hand to her, and more than just her teacher. It was no secret that he was patient and kind, but he also seemed to have a kind of understanding of her that none of her other professors seemed to match.

When you mother is the queen, and your father departed, who is left to raise you?

It was her fault. All this sneaking out, the trouble she had caused for him up until this point and the situation he must be facing at present all stemmed from her childish need for freedom.

Well, she wasn't about to let it happen again.

By the time the seventh day had come and gone, she was *exhausted*. She had seen neither Professor Qifrey nor Professor Olruggio for the duration of the week, and her hope was beginning to dwindle. Thoughts continued to creep into the back of her mind of what could have become of them, but she desperately tried to shake them out. No, if something terrible had happened, she'd have known by now, right?

A knock came from her door, but she couldn't care enough to get up to answer it. What if they had been quietly exiled as to not cause a scandal?

"Your highness?" A muffled voice came through the door.

If they weren't exiled, *surely* they were at the very least fired. It was only a natural course of action, though it did weigh down her heart.

"Agott?"

…She hadn't even gotten the chance to say goodbye. She gripped the sheets of her bed tight as tears threatened to prickle at the corners of her eyes.

The door swung open, and a frantic looking Qifrey burst in. Agott froze at the sight of him.

“Oh thank *god!”* He pressed a hand to his chest. “I was beginning to beelive you had snuck out your window again. What’s gotten into you? I know your professors taught you better manners than to leave someone at the door when they-”

Agott practically tackled him as she threw her arms around him and squeezed him tight. She was angry. She was confused. She was *so relieved.*

“Seven days without a word and you lecture *me* about manners.” She choked out. Qifrey paused and smiled softly, rubbing the back of her head.

“You dont know how much it pained me to keep my silence. I’m afraid such are the grounds for suspension.”

“Suspension?” Agott finally released him enough to meet his gaze. “The that was…”

“My punishment for your little late night escapade?” He chuckled. “Yes.”

“A suspension…” She repeated. “Is it up?”

“It is done.” Qifrey nodded. “Though, i’ve been informed I’ll remain under close watch for a very long time to come.”

Easthies grutned from the doorway, and Qifrey sighed. Agott’s expression tightened as she pulled back from her professor.

“Rest assured, it will never happen again.” She shook her head. “I’m through with sneaking out. It was a childish habit, and I’ve left it in the past.”

Qifrey’s eyebrows raised, though he raised no objections given the present company. “I see. You certainly seem quite resolved in that fact.”

Agott nodded and held up her ink-stained hands. “Ive been practicing my penmanship non stop in my free time, attend every dance lesson, and read my textbooks cover to cover. It’s only right for me to do so, given as im the sole heir, and will one day be queen.”

“That certainly is impressive.” Qifrey leaned forward and squinted at her hands. “Though it seems an awful lot for a single week. Cover to cover did you say?”

“You’re my professor. Is this not exactly what you would hope of me?” Agott furrowed her brow.

“You are royalty, and diligence in studies is imperative.” Qifrey nodded. “But you are also a *child.”*

“I am not a child.” Agott shook her head, her expression turned sour. “ I am a *princess.”*

“Surely a princess is a child all the same.” Qifrey took one of her ink stained hands in his own, running his fingers over her calluses. “Are these from writing?” He asked. Agott nodded.

“They’re not new.” She mumbled.

“I’m aware.” He sighed. “Though perhaps I should have taken note of them much sooner.” Qifrey guided Agott back to her bed and sat on the edge of it. “Your Highness, you will find in life there is a very delicate balance between your duties and your desires. How you tow that line will define the kind of person you are. Pushing too far in either direction isn’t healthy.”

“I know the kind of person I want to become. The kind of *queen* I will become.” Agott stated firmly. Qifrey rubbed his chin.

“Your path is not set in stone.” he shook his head. “I believe it to be important that you fully understand who *Agott* is before you worry about what kind of queen you wish to be.”

Agott looked at her lap, “I already know who I have to be. What’s the point? Is a princess’ path not already laid out?”

Qifrey smiled softly and patted her shoulder. “I think I know someone who may have a bit of a different perspective.”

~~~
Agott stood outside the palace for the first time in several days, though she was flanked by guards on either side. She tried to keep her expression composed and neutral, though it was hard to disguise her wariness as a carriage came to a halt just before the palace gates.

A large poof of pink curls poked out first, followed quickly by a flowy dress. Before she knew it, a girl about her height was standing before her.

“Hi!” The girl clasped both of Agott’s hands in her own, a huge grin on her face. Agott had to force herself not to flinch. Still, she cleared her throat, pulled her hands away slowly, and curtsied.

“Welcome to our kingdom, Princess Tetia. It is an honor to have you.”
~~~

Agott guided Tetia through the long corridors of the palace, not bothering to keep a leisurely pace. She had little patience for all of the princess's gawking and gasping, and just wanted the ordeal to be over and done with.

"To the right is the ballroom where the summer ball will be hosted next weekend," Agott grumbled and gestured vaguely. Tetia peeked over her shoulder to try to get a look for herself.

"Wow, it looks so big! Hey, how many people can fit in there? And what will the decorations be like? And how do you-"

"The library is just up those stairs. I have lessons there twice a day. Do try not to get in the way, should you choose to browse it." Agott continued on. Tetia hurried to catch up and tried to match her quick pace.

"Got it! Don't worry, I'll be super quiet while you're studying." She gave her a thumbs-up. Agott tried her hardest not to let her annoyance show.

"Right."

The two girls continued onward, passing various rooms, hallways, and passages. When they came to the garden, Tetia clapped her hands together.

"It's so pretty!" She squealed and hurried over to look at the flowers. "Are these peonies? They're blooming so brilliantly!"

A small, begrudging smile threatened to pull at Agott's lips as she let her gaze rest on the garden she so loved. "Yes, they are." She nodded.

Tetia crouched down to watch as a small bee flitted between flowers, and Agott allowed herself a moment of reflection.

It wasn't that she had anything *against* Princess Tetia. She seemed nice enough, if not a touch overly cheery, but that wasn't enough to grate on her nerves. No, the problem with Tetia ran a bit deeper.

The two of them had encountered one another when they were much younger, and for a time had even gotten along. However, as they aged, Agott became more level-headed and jaded toward her duties. And Tetia?

No one loved being a princess more than Tetia did.

It *irritated her* to no end. Every ball was spent happily chatting amongst the crowd and dancing the night away, as if she didn't have a care in the world. It was as if the pressures and expectations didn't faze her in the slightest.

~~~ one year prior ~~~

“It sounds to me, your highness, that you're *jealous.”* Qifrey chuckled as he helped remove a few bobby pins from Agott’s hair, gently running his fingers through her curls to help detangle them. Agott bristled and whipped her head around.

“I am *not* jealous.” She scowled. Qifrey raised an eyebrow and crossed his arms.

“No? From the moment you returned to the palace, the only words out of your mouth have been ‘Princess Tetia’ this and “Princess Tetia that.” He handed her a damp towel to wipe her face with. “If she's occupying that much of your mind, surely you’re at least a little bothered by her.”

Agott huffed and crossed her own arms in response.

“Come now, your highness.” Qifrey knelt down to her level and smiled. “You know you can tell me anything, right?”

She thought about it before looking down at her lap. “It’s not fair. She gets along with everyone so *easily,* and she was smiling the entire time. It’s like nothing gets to her.”

Qifrey hummed and gently patted her head. “I’m sure Princess Tetia has her strengths and weaknesses, just like you do.” He comforted.

“But what if her strengths are more aligned with being a princess than mine are?” Agott asked nervously.

“Always so worried about others.” Qifrey sighed fondly. “There's no one set of skills that makes someone a ‘good princess’. You have plenty of wonderful qualities befitting of a ruler.” He assured her and gently nudged her cheek with his knuckle. “Come now, time for bed. You’ve had a long night.”

~~~ present ~~~

Agott sighed and rubbed her cheek as she reminisced. She was brought out of her memory by Tetia tapping her shoulder.

“Sorry! I just wanted to get a better look. Shall we continue with the tour?”

“Yes, of course.” Agott nodded. “Right this way.”

~~~

As the tour came to an end, Agott found herself and Tetia at the entrance to her room. She pushed the door open, and Tetia was quick to make herself at home.
~~~

“So this is your room? It’s so nice!” She smiled and spun around as she took in the space. Her gaze landed on the piles of textbooks on her desk. “That sure is a lot to read.” She tilted her head.

“Naturally.” Agott nodded in satisfaction. “I take great pride in my studies.”

“Then that’s all just for studies?” Tetia poked her head around the desk. “It seems like an awful lot…what do you do for fun?”

“For fun?” Agott raised an eyebrow. Between her lessons and the extra cramming she’d been doing, it had been a while since she’d done much of anything for herself. In fact, the last time she’d found herself having fun was…

Her mind wandered back to Coco, and she quickly shook away the very thought. “My studies bring me plenty of enjoyment. If I get overwhelmed, I occasionally take strolls in the garden.”

“Going for walks is nice and all, but shouldn’t you be balancing studies with things you *like* to do?” Tetia tapped her chin. Agott visibly stiffened.

“What I *like* is knowing I’ll be a competent ruler one day. That’s all the satisfaction I need.” She said defensively. Tetia frowned slightly.

“I didn’t mean to imply you were unhappy, and I’m sure you’re going to be a wonderful queen someday.” She explained. “I just know when I get too wound up in my studies, I get all tensed and stressed. It’s rewarding to do something just for yourself every now and then.”

Tetia turned around, her gaze landed on the flower crown poking out of her desk drawer.

“What's this?” She asked as she gently picked it up. “It’s very pretty. Did you make this?”

“**Don’t touch that.”** Agott quickly snatched it back, carefully checking it over for any damage. She sighed with relief once she was satisfied it was unharmed and tucked it back into the drawer. When she turned back, Tetia looked upset.

“I’m…I’m so sorry.” Tetia looked down in shame. “I shouldn’t have touched that without asking; it was inconsiderate of me. Not only that, but I offended you with my words.” She clasped her hands together in front of her. “I’m not being a very good guest….I’m sorry.”

Agott, to her own surprise, softened. Of course, Tetia hadn’t known; she was only curious and trying to make conversation. She sighed and shuffled over to her bed, sitting down and patting the spot beside her. Tetia blinked, but joined her on the edge of the bed.

“It’s alright, you meant no harm, and no harm was done.” Agott tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she struggled to make eye contact.

An awkward beat of silence passed between the two. Agott groaned and blushed.

“...That flower crown was made for me by someone very special. I’d hate for something to happen to it.”

Tetias expression shifted to one of understanding. “I see. No wonder you’re so protective of it. It must mean a lot to you.”

‘It does.” Agott nodded and smiled softly.

“Whoever made it for you must care an awful lot,” Tetia pointed out. “I didn’t get a very good look, but from what I saw, it was woven with care.”

Agott nodded. “That sounds like Coco. She puts such care into everything she makes.”

“Coco, hm?” Tetia smiled. “That’s the special person’s name?”

Agott’s cheeks went pink, but she didn’t deny it. “Yes,” she nodded, “her name is Coco.”

“You can tell me about her if you’d like,” Tetia giggled. Agott’s face flushed a deeper red.

“I appreciate the offer, but I believe I’ll have to pass.”

“Oh come on, what are friends good for if not a bit of gossiping?”

Agott paused a bit at the word ‘friend.’ She certainly didn’t have many people she could call that, especially not people her age, and certainly not other princesses.

She supposed she didn’t entirely *hate* the idea.

Agott huffed and crossed her arms. “You’re nosey, aren’t you?”

“I prefer to call it curious!”

The two girls chatted quietly amongst themselves. Outside, Qifrey smiled as he watched Agott begin to relax.

“Your grand plan finally in action?” Olruggio tapped him on the shoulder.

“You, my dear, simply must stop sneaking up on me.” He put a hand to his chest. “It’s not good for my heart. And I had very little to do with this.” He looked back at the pair. “They did this all on their own.”

Olruggio hummed and kissed his cheek.

From beside them, Easthies gagged.

(Yeah im ending on that, what of it? Originally it was “Easthies gagged” LMFAOOOO)
((LMAOAOAOA THISIS KILLING ME WHY IS EASTHIES SO HOMOPHOBIC))-Binx

Tetia giggled and lay down on Agott's bed. She looked over at the other girl, whose face was dusted a light shade of pink.

"So, you snuck away from home to go to a festival," Tetia recounted as she kicked her legs, "And happened to run into this girl?"

"For the hundredth time, *yes.* How many times must I repeat this story to you?" Agott scowled and covered her red ears.

Tetia grinned and sat up. "I just want to make sure I didn't miss any of the little details! So you met her at the festival, but alas! You were caught by your guards and brought home to the palace before you could even say a proper farewell. How tragic!" She put a hand to her forehead.

Agott grunted and crossed her arms. Tetia continued on.

"But fate had other plans! You happened to come across her at a tailor's shop. Not only that, but she actually came to visit you at the palace, sneaking in through your window." Tetia stood up on the bed and waved her hand with a flourish. "The fated pair continued their meetings in secret, but oh no! Caught again! Surely this time, the bloom of young love will be crushed." She sank to her knees.

"Are you quite finished?" Agott looked at her incredulously. Tetia thought about it and shrugged.

"Well, that's all I know so far, so….yes!" She smiled and sat back down beside Agott. "It's no wonder you're so protective of that flower crown. I would be too if it came from someone I cared about that deeply."

"I don't even know if I care for her deeply." Agott tucked her knees up to her chin. "I just know I want to keep seeing her. Then I can find out how I really feel."

Tetia nodded and gave a thumbs-up. "You can't rush young love! If it burns too brightly at first, it'll fizzle out fast."

"You sound like you know an awful lot about it." Agott tilted her head to the side.

"I wouldn't say it's personal experience. More so, it reminds me of a fairytale." She shrugged and tapped her chin. "The princess locked away in her tower, the one she cares for on the outside of the palace walls…the secret meetings, the drama, the anxiety of waiting for the fated reunion at the ball…!"

Agott rolled her eyes and tossed a pillow at her. "You make it sound like a children's story."

“A very well written one!” Tetia caught the pillow and hugged it to her chest. “I want a fairytale romance too, you know! If someone snuck up to my window in the night just to see me, I think I'd just die! ‘Oh princess Tetia, I simply couldn't stay away from you another moment!’”

“Spare me your dramatics.” Agott blushed as the other girl continued to go on and on. After a few long moments of barely coherent sappy rambling, Tetia perked up.

“I know! You want to see her again, right?”

“Well, yes,” Agott mumbled. “But as I’ve explained, that’s no longer possible. She lives across town, and the guards keep a closer eye on me than ever.”

Tetia thought about it for a moment, scratching her head. Finally, her eyes lit up. “What if I created a diversion for you? Surely a commotion from the visiting princess would be enough to gather their attention.”

Agott looked surprised, then contemplated it. A chance to see Coco again..but…

Her mind wandered back to Qifrey. Should she be caught again…

No. She shook her head and turned to face Tetia. “I appreciate the offer, but I must decline. I’ve put sneaking out behind me for good.”

“Oh? But you said you wanted to see Coco again.” Tetia blinked. Agott shrugged and nodded.

“Of course I do. But it could hurt the people I care about.” Agott lay down on her bed. “I won't sacrifice one person I love for another. I could never do that.”

Tetia lay down beside her and curled up into a ball. “I see…that makes sense.” She looked up at the ceiling and hummed. “Well, at least you’ll see her at the ball! How romantic of a reunion~. You’ll sweep her off her feet and dance the night away!”

“Oh, please, I’m hardly one for such grand gestures.”

Tetia giggled softly, and Agott continued to blush

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Outside, Easthies grits his teeth. He had been listening to every word of their conversation and was barely keeping his composure. So, the princess had been sneaking out to see a *girl?* How childish.

“You look like you’re about to burst a blood vessel,” A voice from behind him brought him out of his thoughts. He turned to see Utowin standing there with a grin on his face.
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“Utowin,” he narrowed his eyes. “Five minutes late.”

Utowin snickered and shrugged. “Oh come on, I’m here now, aren’t I? C’mon, it’s my shift. You should go get some rest or something.”

He grunted and nodded. Before he could leave, the other man spoke once more.

“You wanna talk about what’s got you so pissy?”

Easthies shot the man a sharp glare. “Watch your tongue.”

“Easy,” Utowin grinned, “I’m just saying, it can't be good to keep all your thoughts to yourself all the time. Clench your jaw any harder, and you’ll break your teeth.”

“...” Easthies sighed through his nose. “Her highness keeps finding herself in danger, all over some silly crush.”

“That makes you mad, huh? She’s getting to that age; shouldn’t we expect a little rebellion out of her?”

“It's unbecoming for a princess.” He shook his head. “The same way it's unbecoming of a *knight* to be *late.”*

Utowin put a hand over his heart. “Ouch. When did this become about me?”

Easthies rolled his eyes. He turned on his heels to start walking away. “Peace is best maintained through order, and order is maintained through duty. It’s as simple as that. Should we forget our place, we threaten to throw that order out of balance.” He began to make his way down the hall. “Keep an extra close eye on her, and the visiting princess too. Who knows the trouble a pair of children can bring upon themselves.”

As Easthies walked briskly down the corridor, he kept his expression stern.

Order had to be maintained, no matter the cost. No exceptions.

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*“*Wow, look how late it got!” Tetia gasped as she looked out the window. “There's less than a week before the ball, I’m so excited I dont know how I’ll be able to sleep!”

“Well, I’m sure you’ll tire yourself out eventually. You can ask one of the knights to show you back to your quarters. I’m sure they've moved your belongings already.” Agott yawned.

Tetia frowned at first, then got an idea.
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“Hey, let’s have a slumber party!”

Agott groaned and covered her head with a pillow.

“Oh, come on, Agott! Please?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Well, too bad, because I’m not leaving!”

Tetia grinned as she took one of Agott's pillows and made herself cozy. Agott scowled for a second, but eventually sighed.

“If you snore, I’m kicking you out.”

“Hey, princesses don’t snore!”

~~~

In the end, Tetia was the first to fall asleep. She snored softly and curled up around the pillow she was holding.

Agott lay awake in bed, looking out the window at the few lights that remained on in the village. Her mind was too busy to fall asleep.

It had been over a week now…she hoped Coco was doing alright.

Still, she couldn’t fight sleep forever. Her breathing slowly evened out, and her eyes fluttered closed.
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Coco couldn't sleep.

She laid awake in bed, clutching her pillow to her chest and staring up at the spots on her ceiling. It had been a while since she'd last seen Agott, over a week now to be exact, and it was eating away at her heart.

"You'll see her again at the ball. We have to go."

It was true, she was certain she'd see Agott soon enough when the ball came.

But…what if Agott didn't want to see her?

She rolled onto her side and hugged the pillow tight. There was so much to being a princess that she didn't understand, and so much that she *couldn't* understand. They were born into different worlds, and there was no helping that.

Coco was a commoner; Agott was a princess. Could they ever be friends?

If not…there was no hope of ever being more than friends, was there?

Coco clung to her pillow and buried her face in it. She didn't even know what she wanted to be to Agott, and it was starting to feel like it wouldn't matter either way. She sniffled and fought back tears that threatened to come spilling out.

Still, she rubbed her eyes and bit back her emotions. Crying wouldn't help anything; it would only give her a headache. She sat up in bed and swung her legs over the side before tiptoeing out of her room and down the stairs. Coco grabbed her coat before slipping out the door.

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"Mmn.." Richeh rubbed her eyes as she heard something tap against her window. She tried to ignore it and go back to sleep, but the same sound came again.

Sighing, she sat up and looked out the window. Standing outside was Coco, arms full of pebbles as she tossed them at the glass. Richeh mumbled as she dragged herself out of bed to let Coco inside.

"It's still dark outside," Richeh whispered tiredly.

Coco nodded and set down the remaining pebbles. "I'm sorry. I couldn't sleep, and I didn't want to be alone."

Richeh nodded and opened the door enough to let her friend inside. She brought Coco up to her room and sat back down in her bed.
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“You talk,” Richeh yanwed, “Im lying back down.”

“Right.” Coco nodded. She curled up on the edge of Richeh's bed. “I’m just…worried.”

“Is this about Princess Agott?”

Coco blushed, grateful her best friend couldn’t see her pink cheeks through the darkness. “It is.”

“What exactly are you worried about?”

“Do you think…a princess can be friends with a commoner?”

Richeh hummed and rubbed her eyes. “Are you not already friends?”

“We are. At least, I think we are.” Coco tucked some hair behind her ear. “But I’m scared that as we get older, we’re going to have to drift apart. She’s going to be *queen* one day, and I’m…” She bit her lip, “I’m just going to be a *tailor.”*

“...Do you want to be her friend?” Richeh looked at her through the dark room.

“Of course I do.”

“Then you should just be there for her. You can’t control if you drift apart later, but does it matter?”

“...It’s hard to love someone when you’re waiting for the day you’re going to lose them.” Coco lay down on the opposite end of the bed. Richeh reached out and made sure she was covered by the blanket.

“I wish…” Coco whispered, “That I was a princess too. Then I could be part of her world, and we wouldn't have to worry so much.”

“...I’ve never met Agott,” Richeh replied quietly. “But it sounds like she doesn’t like being a princess very much. I doubt she would want you to be one, too. If anything, maybe she wishes she were a commoner.”

Coco paused and thought about it, nodding. She snuggled up under the blanket. “Being a princess sounds so wonderful in theory…”

When Coco got no reply, she looked over at Richeh. She found the other girl was fast asleep.

“Goodnight, Richeh,” Coco whispered and smiled.

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The following day, Coco was hard at work making Richeh's dress for the ball. She draped a simple, elegant blue fabric over the form before pinning it into place.

“Can it be a long dress?” Richeh asked as she watched her friend work. Coco nodded.

“If you want it to be long, then of course!” She grinned. “But a long dress might be hard to dance in…”

“I don’t really plan on doing much dancing.” Richeh shook her head. She paused and blinked slowly. “Are you going to dance with Princess Agott?”

Coco stiffened, accidentally pricking herself with a pin. She yelped and shook out her hand. “Ah! Well, I suppose if she asks me to dance, I won't say no? I mean, I’d love to, but dancing with the princess sounds like a super special honor! There’s probably all sorts of rules, and a dance card, and a whole long line of people that want to meet her, and I uh….” Coco deflated. “I’m not all that good at dancing…”

Richeh tilted her head. Coco flustered and put her face in her hands.

“Don’t look at me like that! It’s not my fault, I have two left feet!”

“Maybe we should practice,” Richeh suggested. Coco perked up a bit.

“Do you know how to dance, Richeh?”

The girl shrugged and stood up, dusting off her skirt. “A little bit. My big brother showed me a little bit of what he learned studying at the academy.”

“Oh, that's wonderful!” Coco clapped her hands together. “Do you think you could show me?”

Richeh nodded and gave a thumbs up.

The two cleared the room to make space in the center, standing in the middle.

“Hmm…” Richeh rubbed her chin.

Coco frowned a bit. “What's the matter?”

“The boy puts his hands like this….” Richeh held out her hands, “But… you're both girls.”

“Ah, I see….does one of us have to be the boy?”

Richeh shook her head. “No,no one has to be the boy. You can both be girls.”

“How would…two girls dance together?” Coco blushed.

“You start by curtsying to one another, like this.” Richeh curtsied. Coco hurriedly followed suit.

“Then one hand on her shoulder…”

“Got it!”

“Good,” Richeh nods, “Just follow my steps.”

The pair slowly danced around the room, Coco giggling and Richeh occasionally correcting her steps.

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The two girls sat on the floor, worn out from all the dancing.

“How do royals do that all night?” Coco whined, “My legs feel like jelly!”

“It’s too much…Richeh is melting…”

“Richeh, nooo!”

The pair lay down across the floor in a fit of giggles. Coco sighed and stretched.

“Thank you for all your help. Now im kind of *hoping* I get to dance with Agott.”

Richeh gave her another tired thumbs up. “I’ve taught you well.”

“Hey…do you think Agott is practicing her dancing for the ball too?”

“A princess like her?” Richeh hummed, “She’s probably more than prepared.”
~~~

“I am *so* unprepared,” Agott groaned as she messed up her dance for the fourth time in a row. Tetia stifled a giggle from her seat at the edge of the room, and Agott shot her a glare.

“It’s not funny.” She scowled, her ears red.

“Sorry, I’m so sorry.” Tetia giggled and stood up, making her way to the other girl. “I’m not laughing *at* you. You’re just so expressive when you're annoyed. You’re all puffed up like an angry cat.”

Agott visibly bristled. “Yes, well, you are now the *second* person to make such a tasteless comparison.”

Tetia hummed and tilted her head. “I’ve watched you dance at balls before, and you dont usually stumble so much. Is something wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, I just can’t seem to get it right. I know all the steps by heart, but the second I try to put them together, I fall over my own feet.”

“Dancing is supposed to be fun. It’s no wonder you're stumbling if you’re getting in your own head about it.” Tetia twirled in a circle and curtsied. “See? Fun!”

“We all have things we enjoy.” Agott waved her off, “Dancing just isn’t one of them for me.”

“Or maybe, you just haven’t found the right dance partner.”

Tetia took Agott’s hands and guided one to her shoulder, keeping hold of the other. “Try to imagine you’re dancing with someone you really care about. Focus on them, not on your feet.”

“This is silly,” Agott grumbled.

“It’s not silly! We’re practicing. Now c’mon and give it a try.”

Agott took a deep breath and tried to envision it. Dancing with someone she cared about…

Her mind wandered to what it would be like dancing at a festival with Coco. No stuffy ballroom, no leering nobles, no guards to breathe down her neck. Only Coco, and the feeling of the meadow grass beneath them.

She and Tetia danced slowly, her moves still calculated, but far less stiff. Agott kept her eyes closed as she tried to imagine Coco was right there beside her, dancing under the soft glow of the sun.

When the waltz ended, she opened her eyes to see Tetia grinning smugly.

“Oooh…you were *blushing…”*

Agott covered her burning red ears. “Don’t tease.”

“Agott wants to dance with Coco~.”

“I do not!”

“You *do!”*

*“*Ah! There you girls are. Come, it’s about time for afternoon tea.” Qifrey smiled as he poked his head through the door. Tetia immediately forgot all about teasing Agott, hurrying over towards the door. When she noticed the other girl was lagging behind, she turned around.

“Come on, didn’t you hear? It’s tea time!”

~~~
Agott and Tetia sat in the garden under the gazebo as Qifrey sat nearby, half reading and half keeping an eye on the pair. Tetia swung her legs and hummed.

“Agott, do you get to have tea in the garden like this all the time? I’m so jealous!” Tetia looked around again at all the vibrantly blooming flowers.

“When the weather is nice, I do so on occasion with Professor Qifrey. Though to be honest, I so rarely have the time for leisure activities like afternoon tea.” Agott shrugged. Tetia gasped in horror.

“But you can’t just skip tea!” She shook her head, “It’s important to have a bite to eat throughout the day to keep your body fueled!”

“I eat all my meals.” Agott sighed. “I just find tea time to be a bit…fussy.”

“There's nothing fussy about good tea and cute little snacks!”

A servant set down a fresh pot of tea, as well as a stacked tray full of biscuits and small sandwiches. Tetia looked delighted; Agott was indifferent.

“This...is the definition of fussy.”

“Now now, your highness.” Qifrey reached over and began to pour tea for both girls. “Her highness Tetia raises a good point. You’ve been running yourself ragged for the past week. Take this opportunity to try to relax. Besides,” He reached over and took one of the biscuits and popped it into his mouth. “These are delicious.”
~~~

Agott huffed and reluctantly picked up one of the sandwiches, taking a tiny bite. Almost immediately, her eyes lit up. She tried to hide it, but both Qifrey and Tetia noticed, exchanging grins.

“Alright! Let's eat!” Tetia clapped her hands together.

~~~

Coco sat at her desk, finishing sewing the lining of Richeh’s dress while Richeh looked out the window at a passing wagon full of people.

“They’re already setting up for the next festival.” Richeh put her hand up against the glass.

Coco took a pin out of her mouth so she could reply. “Another festival so soon? It feels like the spring harvest festival wasn’t that long ago.”

“They’re throwing another one right after the summer ball.” Richeh nodded. “Her Majesty the Queen was crowned around this time of year, and this year marks 20 years of her reign.”

“Sounds like a big deal…” Coco stuck her tongue out the side of her mouth as she concentrated on sewing a small bit of trim onto the sleeves. Richeh nodded.

“I expect it’ll be popular this year. From what I hear, they're getting a troop of traveling performers to play in the town square. Not to mention all the vendors…”

“We should definitely go! I mean, assuming we aren’t all worn out from the ball.” Coco giggled and carried the dress over to the mannequin. “And…there! What do you think?”

Richeh eyed the dress, circling around and touching it. It was simple, but still had little touches of elegance throughout.

“Pretty…” She ran her hand down one of the long sleeves. “You’re getting so good at this.”

Coco blushed and waved her hands. “Oh, stop! You’re just saying that. Really, I’m an amateur compared to what my mom can do.”

“You dont give yourself enough credit.” Richeh shook her head. “You’re a very capable artisan.”

Coco beamed with pride as she stepped back to admire her work. Richeh took the dress off the mannequin. “....Can I try it on?”

‘Yes, please do! I still need to make sure it fits just right.” Coco clapped her hands together. Richeh nodded and went to change.
~~~

While Coco waited, she opened her drawer to start putting away some of her supplies. Her hands brushed against the envelope containing the invitations. She carefully pulled them out and admired the intricate penmanship and wax seal stamped on the back.

Only a few days remained before the ball.

The next few days passed without much to note. Agott and Tetia continued preparations around the castle, while Coco and Richeh made their final adjustments to their ballgowns. It was early afternoon when Qifrey knocked on Agott's door, carrying a large box in his hand.

"Your highness," he called through the door. "Do you have a moment? Your dress has arrived from the tailors, and we need to check the fitting."

Agott looked up from her desk, textbooks strewn about her table. "Yes, come in."

Qifrey entered and gently set the box on a nearby table, gently opening the box and pulling out a neatly steamed gown. He laid it out across Agott's bed beside where Tetia was perched. The two girls leaned over to take a better look.

The dress itself was masterfully made and a brilliant shade of deep purple, accented with bits of gold. It was the perfect balance of practicality and refinement. Clearly, both Coco and her mother had put a great deal of thought, care, and effort into making such a gown.

There was only one slight problem.

Agott would never confess as much, but she truly didn't care for dresses or skirts, and especially not *ballgowns.* The heavy layers, the silhouette, the fuss of it all…and heavens forbid when she grew older shed be expected to wear a corset…she shuddered.

"Agott? Something the matter?" Qifrey placed a gentle hand on her shoulder. Agott shook her head.

She shook her head. Naturally, she had confided in Professor Qifrey before about her distaste for gowns, particularly when she was very young and just beginning to wear them. During her first ball as a small child, she had cried nearly the entire night in discomfort, and was only soothed when she was allowed to retire early and change.

Her mother had given her a long talk the following night, and since then, she'd kept her mouth shut and worn gowns without complaints. Even today, her mother's words hung heavy around her head.

"*A princess is expected to uphold a certain image, even when she is uncomfortable."*

Agott touched the fabric of the dress, gently taking it into her hands.

"I only want what's best for you. You understand that, don't you?'

Agott held the dress up to her neckline and looked in the mirror. She could practically see her mother's reflection standing behind her.

“You’re a smart girl. I trust we won't have this conversation again.”

She bit her lip hard, fighting the emotion from showing on her face.

“*Make me proud, Agott.”*

Her emotions reached a head, and she had to swallow her words. She turned the dress around to get a better look at it.

Every single stitch was so lovingly placed. The colors were picked out just for her. Even now, she could picture Coco’s smile as she worked so diligently to bring this dress to life…

Oh…how could she ever bring herself to fully hate something so full of love?

It truly was such a beautiful dress. She loved it, she did. She loved the passion Coco had; she loved the thought that was put into it. And still, she couldn’t bring herself to love the thought of *wearing a gown.*

Even so, she couldn’t outright refuse. It was her duty as a princess to appear as a royal should. As royalty, she would wear the dress. But as Agott? She would have to pretend, as she always did.

Professor Qifrey and Tetia stepped out while a servant helped Agott into the dress. Agott stared herself down in the mirror, watching as her body was enveloped by the gown.

“You look beautiful, your highness.” The servant offered kindly. Agott just nodded. She didn’t *feel* beautiful. She felt like a fraud.

“Thank you.”

Tetia and Qifrey came back in a few moments later, the other princess squealing with excitement and running over to hug her. Agott stiffened, but sighed and reluctantly oat Tetia’s back.

Qifrey rubbed his chin thoughtfully. He recognized the expression on the young princess’s face, but he knew it would be out of line to speak up. Agott was only doing what she knew had to be done. He offered what little comfort he could.

“Are you comfortable enough?”

Agott nodded. For what it was worth, the dress was by far the best-fitting one she’d ever worn. It was a small respite. Qifrey nodded his approval.

“Very well. I’ll make sure it's ready for you the night of the ball.”

With that, Agott changed back into her usual clothes, and the servant took the dress off to be stored and prepared. Qifrey bowed at the door as he left.

“I’ll see you girls in the morning. Oh, and Agott,” He turned over his shoulder, his expression troubled. “I was told to inform you you’d be dining with Tetia this evening. It would seem an urgent matter has come up with the queen.”

Agott nodded, paying it little mind. It wasn’t uncommon for her mother to be busy, especially so close to the ball and the anniversary of her crowning. “Very well. Thank you for letting me know.”

Qifrey nodded and gently shut the door behind him.

~~~

Coco came up the stairs to her room with two cups in hand. She handed one to Richeh, who was sitting on her bed.

Sitting down beside her, Coco lets out a sigh. Their gowns were resting on their respective mannequins, and the sun had already begun to sink lower in the sky out the window behind them.

Coco tucked her knees up to her chest and took a long sip of her tea. The warm beverage helped to relax some of her nerves, but didn’t ease the feeling completely.

“You’re too quiet,” Richeh mumbled as she sipped her own tea. Coco groaned and slumped back.

“Sorry…I just dont feel like myself today.”

Richeh nodded and set her cup on Coco’s nightstand. “Is this about the ball tomorrow?”

“...Mhm.” Coco frowned and hugged her knees.

“At least we’re going together. Your mom is coming along, too. There’s no need to be scared,” Richeh tried to comfort her.

Coco frowned and set her own cup aside. “I know…I’m just…so nervous. I’m not a noble. What if we stand out? What if people laugh at us?”

“We’re guests of the princess. I’m sure Agott wouldn't let anyone laugh at you.” Richeh pat Coco’s shoulder.
~~~

“But I don’t want to be a burden on Agott; she has enough going on already. Being a princess at a ball sounds like a lot of work.”

“Hmm.”

‘What? Did I say something wrong?”

Richeh tilted her head. “No, not exactly. I just expected you to say being a princess at a ball sounded fun.”

“I used to think that,” Coco stretched out her legs. “But ever since I met Agott…I’ve started to see maybe being a princess isn’t all the glamour I thought it was. She seems so much happier when she's away from it all. When I visited her at the palace, I got a good look at her through the window. She looked so sad….”

“I see…” Richeh nodded as she listened. “I think...Agott will be happy that you’re coming then. If she really is sad, maybe you can cheer her up the way you always cheer me up when I’m feeling sad.”

Coco hugged her arms across her chest. “Do you really think so?”

Richeh nodded and gave a thumbs up. Coco relaxed a bit more in her bed.

“Thank you, Richeh…” She reached over and hugged the other girl.

“Mhm.” Richeh pat her back. The room had grown dark as the sun finished settling behind the hill. “We should get some rest. It’s a very big day tomorrow.”

“You’re probably right.” Coco yawned. She took her blanket from the edge of the bed and draped it around herself and Richeh. “Thank you for sleeping over.”

“Of course. Thank you for having me.”

Coco smiled as the pair laid down to fall asleep.

~~~

Easthies stood at attention by the queen's bed as the healer rose from her side. The man bowed respectfully before packing his things into a black bag and taking his leave. As soon as the door was closed, Easthies turned his attention back to the queen.

“Your majesty,” He approached her bedside, putting a hand over his heart and bowing deeply. “How are you faring?”
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The queen was quiet for a few moments. Her face was ghastly pale, and her frame wracked with slight tremors. Her eyes did not rise to meet his gaze, and remained stubbornly fixated dead in front of her. “You need not fret over me. The medic said it was a passing fit.”

“How many more of these ‘passing fits’ before you begin taking them *seriously?”* Easthies' frown deepened. “We’re lucky you didn’t injure yourself when you collapsed. There is no guarantee next time we should be so fortunate.”

The queen began to cough, and Easthies was immediately at her side, a hand on her back. For once, he didn’t *care* about being out of line. He picked up the pitcher of water on her nightstand and poured a glass.

“Your Majesty, please, drink.” He held out the cup, his expression stern.

The queen took the glass in shaky hands, barely able to keep water from spilling over the sides as she lifted it to her lips. The cough slowly died down as she drank, and Easthies’s shoulders relaxed.

“Your Majesty, if I may speak out of turn,” he spoke quietly so as not to disturb her.

The queen still refused to look up as she handed back the glass. “Speak freely.”

“You simply must remain in bed during tomorrow's festivities.”

Queen Adina was quick to shoot him down. She gave him a sharp look before speaking. “**No.**”

“The medic has made it most clear that this was no passing event. Should you push yourself, you risk collapsing again, or far *worse.”* Easthies tightened his fists to try to keep himself level-headed. “Not to mention, what would the kingdom think to see you in such poor health at such a young age? You’d worry the nation half to death.”

“The nation won’t know. This has gone on for long enough without so much as a whisper from the other nobles, and they won’t catch on now.” Adine hardened her gaze. “I won’t allow it.”

“I worry this has progressed beyond something so easily concealed.” Eathies grit his teeth. ‘And I worry you push yourself far too hard. The kingdom needs you in good health more than they need your presence.”

“Your worry is misplaced and unnecessary,” the queen said coldly. “I suggest you focus on looking after my daughter, and spend less of your energy fretting over me. That is your assignment, is it not?”

Easthies kept his tone as neutral as he could. “My assignment and my loyalties are to the crown, and all of the members that serve it.”

“You can best serve the crown by keeping what you know close to your chest.” Adina finally me this gaze, her eyes sharp and serious.

Nothing was to leave this room.

Easthies was in no position to make a rebuttal. He clenched his jaw and bowed. “As you wish, your Majesty.”

The queen nodded and lay back in bed. “You are dismissed. Make sure my daughter has eaten and returned safely to her bedroom.”

“Of course.” Easthies nodded and rose from his bow. He let his hand drop from over his heart. “I’ll remind the servants to bring your medicine in a few hours.”

As he left, he spoke briefly to one of the queen's servants on the instructions the medic had left. “Not a word of this to the rest of the staff,” he glowered, “or the consequences will be *severe.”*

The servant stiffened with fear, nodding and curtsying. Easthies scoffed and turned his back to her as he left.

As he walked down the hall, his mind wandered back to the sight of Adina lying in bed. She had lost far too much weight as of late, and it was beginning to show more obviously. It would only be so long before other members of the palace staff caught on, and the public at large was sure to follow. He gripped his staff tighter.

“*God save the queen.”* He mumbled under his breath.

The rumbling of the carriage gently rocked Coco back and forth in her seat as she kept both hands pressed against the window, peering out at the town as it passed by. Her mother sat at her side, and Richeh sat directly across from her.

“Coco, you’re going to leave fingerprints.” Her mother chuckled and patted her shoulder. “That's no way to thank the royal family for sending a carriage.”

“Ah! Sorry! Sorry, sorry, sorry!” Coco quickly began trying to wipe away the smudges with the sleeve of her gown. Her mother sighed fondly and pulled her daughter to her side.

“Best leave it alone.” She smiled and lightly poked the tip of Coco’s nose, causing it to scrunch playfully.

Richeh stared out the window and up at the clouds. “The sun is already getting lower,” She observed.

Coco’s mother nodded her agreement. “The day just flew by, didn’t it? You two were so excited, I’m surprised you didn’t wear yourselves out just thinking about the ball.”

“Coco’s the one who's been bouncing off the walls all day.” Richeh pointed at the other girl. Coco blushed and put her hands in her lap.

“I have a right to be excited! And nervous. So, so nervous…”

Her mother chuckled and leaned over to press a kiss to the top of her hair. “It’s going to be a very late night for you both. I expect two very sleepy little girls tomorrow morning.” She looked between her daughter and Richeh. “Now, I’m sure it’ll be very crowded at the ball, so remember to *stay together.* I don’t want to have to hunt the two of you down when it’s time to leave.”

“We will!” Coco chirped. Richeh nodded her agreement.

The carriage slowed as it joined a procession of others in a long line leading up to the castle gates. Coco gasped and put her hands back up to the glass.

“Coco, fingerprints.” Her mother reminded her, but the young girl was too enchanted to pay attention to her mother’s warning.

‘It’s the palace! I see the palace!” She squealed. “And so many lords and ladies in fancy outfits!”

As the carriage slowly drew closer, Coco could make out the red-cloaked guards standing at the entrance way. They came to a stop just before the gate, and a guard approached the coachman.

“Invitations?” He asked bluntly. The coachman handed the invitations over, and the guard carefully scrutinized them. He barked their names to someone holding a list, and upon receiving a nod, handed the invitations back.

“Thank you, and enjoy the ball. Long live her majesty the queen.”

~~~

As Coco stepped out of the carriage, she was immediately overwhelmed by the sights. Sneaking up through a tree was one thing, but entering through the grand archway was another. She was surrounded by a sea of noble men and women wearing the most stunning suits and gowns, all walking in the same direction towards the grand ballroom.

The interior of the palace was more dazzling than she could have ever hoped it to be. Candles illuminated the hallways, chandeliers sparkled overhead, and chatter filled the halls with a warmth and playfulness unlike anything she’d ever experienced before. Coco took Richeh’s hand and pulled her through the crowd, giggling as they weaved past the legs and skirts of countless people.

“Coco!” her mother shouted as she struggled to keep up with the children. “Remember to meet me here by midnight!”

“Okay, mom!” Coco called back. She and Richeh weaved through the crowd until they finally emerged at the entrance to the grand ballroom.

Music flowed through the hall in elegant waves, glasses clinked together over the sounds of courteous chatter, and men and women danced together in the center of the room. Even through all the distractions, Coco’s mind remained focused on one thing and one thing only.

She *had* to find Agott.

Richeh struggled to match Coco’s pace as she flew through the crowd and barreled straight for the front of the room. It was nearly impossible to see where they were going due to the height of everyone around them.

“Coco, slow down, you’re pulling me.” Richeh yelped.

“Sorry!” Coco pulled them both to the side as they ducked behind a table covered with assorted refreshments. The two girls caught their breath as Coco continued to look around.

“Purple dress…purple dress…”

“There are *a lot* of purple dresses.” Richeh groaned.
~~~

“Not any like this one! I helped make it, I’ll know it when I see it!” Coco said proudly. She looked around the room until she found an unused chair, pulling it to the side and climbing on top of it.

‘Coco, what are you doing?” Richeh tried to stop her from climbing up.

“Getting a better look!”

~~~

Agott stood tensely beside her mother, who sat perched on the throne, overseeing the ballroom. The queen cast a gaze at her daughter.

“You look stiff. Relax your muscles.”

She listened, but still remained stubbornly rooted in place. Adina sighed and rubbed her temple.

“You should be out there dancing and socializing. You know it won’t be long until your debutante.”

“I’m waiting for someone,” Agott said firmly.

“Not that commoner girl, I should hope.”

Agott stiffened. Since when did her mother know? Adina narrowed her eyes.

“You didn’t seriously think you could keep her a secret from me, did you? Easthies told me all about your little friend from town. No invitations are sent out without my approval.”

“If you’re so opposed to it, why allow the invitation to go out in the first place?” Agott said bitterly.

Adina sighed and put a hand on Agott’s shoulder. “It’s one thing to invite the girl, it’s another to allow her to occupy your time. Time, my dear, is very precious. That is especially true for us royals. Let the girl enjoy the ball; you have duties to attend to.”

Agott jerked her shoulder away from her mother’s touch. “I invited her as my guest, and I intend to greet her properly. Is it not also a royal's duty to be cordial to one’s guests?”

The queen narrowed her eyes as her daughter pulled away, the distance somehow feeling larger than it actually was. Just as she was about to respond, a young girl in the distance stood up on a chair.

“Oh goodness, now what is that about?” Adina frowned. Agott’s head snapped to see what her mother was referring to, and she abruptly excused herself before disappearing into the crowd.
~~~

“Agott!” the queen called after her, but she had already gone. She stood to try and retrieve the child, but Easthies put a hand on her shoulder.

“Your highness,” he hissed in a whispered tone. “The medic insisted you remain seated.”

Adina paused and lowered herself back into her chair. “Of course…” She said solemnly. “Easthies, do have someone sent to keep a close eye on her.”

“Yes, your majesty.” The man nodded. He waved Utowin over and whispered into his ear. He nodded and slipped into the crowd in the direction the young princess had hurried off into.

As Coco looked out over the sea of people, she squinted her eyes, searching for that telltale shade of purple. After a good minute or so of searching, her eyes landed on the queen. Standing just beside her was Princess Agott, scanning the crowd herself.

Coco gasped and grinned. “I see her! I see Agott!”

In the distance, the queen's eyes landed on Coco. She said something to her daughter, causing Agott’s attention to snap directly to the spot Coco and Richeh were. Not a second later, Agott was dashing through the crowd.

“Oh!” Coco smiled excitedly. “I think she saw me! She’s coming over somewhere in the crowd. She’s- oof!”

Coco was nearly knocked right off the chair as Agott abruptly took her by the hand and pulled her down.

“What on earth are you doing? You should be more careful, what if you had fallen-”

Coco pulled Agott into a crushing hug, causing the princess to yelp and stiffen.

‘You're here, it’s really you. I was so worried about you after that night on the hill.” Coco squeezed her tight. Agott’s muscles slowly relaxed as she hesitantly hugged back.

“I was worried too.” She mumbled against Coco’s shoulder. “I’m… happy you came.”

As soon as the two pulled away, Agott took notice of Richeh. “My apologies, it was rude to ignore you.” She curtsied politely. “You may call me Agott.”

Richeh blinked before a light went off on her head, curtseying with practiced ease. ‘It’s an honor, Princess Agott.”

“Please, just Agott is fine.” She blushed. “Being called by my title by someone so close to my age is rather embarrassing.”

Richeh blinked again, but nodded. Agott turned to Coco, then back to Richeh, her face a bit red.

“This is going to sound terribly rude, but may I borrow Coco for a moment? I’d like to speak with her alone.”

Coco’s face went pink to match Agott’s. Richeh looked between the two girls, a smug look crossing her face.

“Ohhh…I see.”

“Whatever you’re thinking, it’s nothing of the sort.” Agott coughed. Coco nodded in hurried agreement.

“Agott just wants to continue our conversation from a while ago! It’s nothing like *that!”*

Richeh just grinned and shrugged. “I’ll be here. Go ahead.”

Agott curtsied again, hurriedly, and pulled Coco through the crowd. Richeh waved as they disappeared.

~~~

Agott and Coco ended up on a small balcony out to the side, overlooking the town. Coco put her hands on the railing as she took in the view, her heart beating a but faster in her chest at the close proximity to Agott. She looked over at the princess, admiring how she looked in her gown.

“This is my first time seeing it on you.” She smiled. “You look amazing, Agott. The color suits you well.”

Agott bit her lip so as not to frown. “The color is lovely, yes.”

Coco was quiet as she observed the other girl's expression. “But…you still look so sad.”

“I can’t hide anything from you, can I?” Agott smiled softly.

“No, you can’t. Out with it.” Coco rested a hand on her shoulder. Agott sighed and rested her hand on Coco’s.

“The dress is so lovely. You made it with care, and I can’t thank you enough.”

“But…?”

Agott couldn't bring herself to respond right away. How could she ever tell the truth? After a few seconds, Coco spoke up.

“You dont like dresses very much, do you?”

Agott froze and met Coco’s gaze. “You can tell?”

“You’re always fidgeting with the hem of your clothes,” Coco pushed some hair behind her ear. “And your movements are so sharp and quick, I’d imagine dresses could become restrictive for you. Even from the day we met, you had climbed up into a tree. That would probably be much easier in pants.”

“Exactly,” Agott quickly agreed. She paused and cleared her throat. “I mean…yes. I find I’d much prefer pants, given the choice. Even a suit would be marginally more comfortable.”
~~~

Coco hummed and tapped her chin. “A suit…” She giggled, “I bet you’d look even more dashing then.”

Agott’s face flamed bright red, and she turned away to hide her expression. Coco bit her knuckle as if surprised the words had slipped out. Silence hung heavy between them before Coco spoke again.

“Next time, I’ll design you a suit instead, ok? Then you’ll be more comfortable.” She smiled nervously. Agott’s expression became impossibly soft.

“Listen, Coco.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “Ever since we met at the festival…you’ve seemed to understand me in a way no one else could.”

Coco paused and held her hands to her chest. “Agott….”

Agott looked Coco in the eyes, her heart racing faster than it ever had. She opened her mouth to speak, but she caught a glimpse of red out of the corner of her eyes, and she froze up.

The guards. Damn it!

She took Coco’s hand and began to guide her back to the ball. It would have to wait, she couldn’t risk being heard or seen.

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Richeh was helping herself to refreshments, stacking little sweets and hor d’oeuvres onto a plate. If Coco was going to run off with her princess, at the very least, she could enjoy herself.

She was just reaching for a little pastry when she noticed the table was…trembling? She narrowed her eyes and set her plate down on the table before lifting the edge of the tablecloth. There, hiding beneath the lavish table, was a young boy. The two made eye contact, and he looked *horrified.*

Richeh lowered the cloth and stood back up. She looked around the room. Left. Right. She shrugged before diving under the table herself.

The boy trembled as Richeh scooted over to him and tucked her knees to her chest.

“...What are you doing?” She tilted her head.

“What are *you* doing?” The boy whispered back. “What if someone saw you come under here?”

“They’d probably be very confused.” She shrugged. “Who are we hiding from?”
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He stiffened, then sighed. “How did you know I was hiding from someone?”

“I can’t think of another reason someone would cower beneath a table.”

The boy rubbed his neck and looked down, his long bangs covering his eyes. “My father…he wants me to dance.”

“Dancing.” Richeh wrinkled her nose. The boy nodded his agreement.

“Dancing…” He sighed. He cleared his throat and shuffled uncomfortably. “I’m Euini, by the way.”

Richeh nodded and held out her hand. “Richeh.”

Euini shook her hand nervously, his palms a sweaty mess. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to drag you into this. My father is very strict, and if he saw me standing around, he’d scold me terribly.”

“I see…so you need to find someone to dance with.” Richeh nodded and rubbed her chin. She turned to the boy and held out her hand. “Alright, get up.”

“...eh?” he blinked. Richeh rolled her eyes.

“I’ll dance with you, so get up.”

Euini flushed red and waved his hands dismissively. “I couldn’t possibly ask you to. Besides, you don’t seem fond of dancing either. Let's just...stay down here.”

Richeh huffed and shook her head, keeping her hand outstretched. “No, you can’t hide down here forever. Best to face it head on.”

Euini looked at her apprehensively, but slowly took her hand. The pair crawled out from under the tablecloth and dusted themselves off. Richeh cast one last look at her plate of sweets before sighing and shaking her head. It could wait.

She began pulling him towards the center of the dance floor. “You know how to waltz?’

‘Well, yes.” he blushed. “I’ve taken a few lessons.”

“Good. I’ll lead.” She rested her hand on his shoulder.

The two began to slowly dance together, hand in hand.
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From across the room, Tetia poked her head out from the group she was talking to, her gaze landing on Richeh and Euini.

“Oh?” She tilted her head. “Who are they?”

The noble she was talking to glanced over at the pair. “I believe that is the Duke’s son…as for the girl he’s dancing with, I can’t say for certain. I haven’t seen her around before.”

Tetia hummed and nodded. “I see…If you’ll excuse me for a moment.” She curtsied to the group and broke away. As soon as the dance ended, she hurriedly approached the pair.

Richeh and Euini finished the dance, stepping to the side of the ballroom closer to where the refreshments were. They were both slightly out of breath, but Euini had a huge smile on his face.

“Thank you, Richeh.” His cheek warmed up. “You were really wonderful out there.”

Richeh nodded and picked up her discarded plate of snacks, popping one into her mouth. As soon as she did, a hand suddenly touched her shoulder, and she jumped.

Whipping around, Richeh made eye contact with the pink-haired girl, quickly swallowing her bite of food. She was about to speak, but the other girl beat her to it.

“Hi! You’re two are really good dancers. I’m Tetia, by the way.” She grinned and curtsied. Richeh quickly matched her curtsy.

“Thank you, I’m Richeh.”

Euini looked terrified again as he hurriedly bowed. “Princess Tetia, it’s an honor to make your acquaintance.”

Richeh blinked. “Another princess?”

“Mhm! Sorry, I forget to mention that little detail sometimes.” She shrugged. “You’re Lord Euini, right? I gotta say, I’ve seen you at a ball or two before, but I’ve never seen you dance.”

“Ah, well…” Euini trailed off, but Tetia seemed to be quickly distracted.

“Whoa, your dress is so pretty! It’s a little longer than the ones I usually see.” She reached out and touched the fabric, admiring the stitches. “Somehow it reminds me a lot of Agott’s dress.”

“You can tell?” Richeh sounded a bit impressed. “I guess that makes sense. Coco and her mother both worked on them.”

“Coco…” Tetia paused, then lit up. “Coco from the town? You know her?”

Richeh nodded. “We came to the ball together.”

“Oh my goodness, this is too good!” Tetia squealed and took Richeh by the hand. She looked over at Euini. “Sorry, I’m going to borrow your dance partner for a moment!”

Before Euini could protest, Richeh was already being dragged away by the princess. He sighed and put his hands in his pockets.

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Utowin finished reporting to Easthies, who nodded sharply.
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“Find them, and don’t lose sight of them again.” He scowled. Utowin chuckled nervously and saluted before hurrying off.

Adina was struggling to sit still, heat snaking up her back and taking root behind her eyes. Her body continued to shake slightly. Luckily, most of the guests seemed to be preoccupied with their mingling to pay it any mind.

Unlike Easthies.

“Your Majesty.” He frowned as he watched her tremble.

“Not a word about it. Where is my daughter?” The queen gripped the arm of her throne. Easthies sighed and stretched his back.

“Utowin found them on a nearby balcony. They’ve since disappeared back into the crowd. I’m certain he’ll locate her soon, or I’ll do it myself.”

Adina took a deep breath to try to calm the shaking. “Surprised you haven’t gone to see to it yourself as is.”

“And depart from your side in this condition? Utowin is a plenty capable guard, he can handle it.”

“You know I loathe to be treated like I’m feeble.” She narrowed her eyes at him. Easthies matched her expression.

“You may loathe it as much as you want. You cannot deny the truth of the matter.”

The queen opened her mouth to reply, but began to cough. Easthies posture snapped to attention, and he moved to stand in front of her and hide her from view.

“Your *Majesty.”* He offered her a handkerchief from his pocket, which she accepted and held over her mouth. “This cannot go on. The doctor warned that should the cough worsen, you are to return to bed rest.”

The coughs died down, and Adina pressed her mouth into a thin line. “What’s a few hours more?”

“A few hours more could very well stand between you and a *week* of bedrest, or god forbid, worse.” Easthies hissed quietly. “You insist on attending for the sake of appearances. What kind of impression would it make on your people should their queen ***collapse****?”*

“It won't come to that.” She shook her head stubbornly. “If you could please bring me some water.”

Easthies' expression was deeply unconvinced, but he held no sway. He bowed and turned to Luluci.

"Keep a close eye on her." He whispered so as not to be overheard by Adina.

Easthies hurried off to bring back the requested water as quickly as he could. A sinking feeling ate away at his chest. That cough…

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Tetia and Richeh hurried out towards the hallway. As they rushed by, they nearly bumped right into Professor Qifrey and Professor Olruggio.

"Oops! Sorry!" Tetia quickly apologized before hurrying off. Olruggio sighed, and Qifrey chuckled.

"The energy children have never ceased to amaze me." Qifrey adjusted his glasses.

"We're getting *old."* Olruggio squeezed the other man's arm. "Now come on, standing here won't make us any younger, and I believe you promised me a dance?"

Qifrey kissed his cheek and wrapped a hand around his waist. "I'm all yours for the night. The girls can handle themselves."

"Sounds good to me." Olruggio smiled and began guiding him into the ballroom.

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Richeh was pulled along until they reached a small hallway off to the side, no one around to eavesdrop or interrupt. Tetia spun around on her heels and took Richeh by the hands.

"Ok, girl to girl, tell me." She grinned, "What's the story with Coco and Agott?"

Richeh thought about it before looking around to make sure they were alone, as if they were sharing secrets.

"I don't know much." She shook her head. "But Coco has been acting all funny ever since the festival, and she gets all giggly when she talks about Princess Agott."

"Giggly how?" Tetia pressed.

"Giggly like…staring off into space. Saying she reminds her of a blooming flower…"

Tetia squealed and clapped her hands together. "Agott told me all about how she met Coco. She had this flower crown Coco made in her bedroom, and she seems very protective of it." She

thought for a moment before dropping Richeh's hand. “But even so, Agott isn’t quite sure of her feelings…”

“I don’t think Coco is either…but it makes sense. They haven’t had much time alone together to talk.” Richeh rubbed her chin. “If only there were a way to give them some privacy…then they could tell each other the truth about how they feel.”

“Oh, I think we can do better than privacy.” Tetia rubbed her hands together and giggled. “Richeh, help me out with something? I know *just* the place.”
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Agott and Coco hid amongst the guests, ducking behind tables and trying to avoid the guards.

“What’s going on? What’s happening?” Coco whispered as the princess looked around.

Agott scowled and shook her head. “I saw one of the knights snooping around. I don’t want him to eavesdrop.”

Coco nodded, her brow furrowed as Agott pulled her through the crowd and out into the hallway. She looked around to ensure they weren’t followed.

“I think we’ve lost them. For now, that is.” She sighed.

“I don’t fully understand. Isn’t the knight's job to protect you?” Coco touched her shoulder gently. Agott sighed and shook her head.

“Not if Easthies put him up to it. I don’t think he’d much like me spending so much time with you.”

Coco winced, but kept her hand where it was. “Oh..I see…”

Agott quickly put her hand on top of Coco’s. “Please, don’t let it get to you. What matters is that *I* want to see you. That’s enough.”

“Yeah.” Coco smiled softly and nodded. “That’s more than enough for me.”

Agott smiled as well and turned to fully face the other girl, taking both of her hands. “Coco, listen, about what I was going to say on the balcony…”

“Agotttt! Hey! Over here!!”

Agott’s expression fell. *Really? Another interruption?*

“Tetia,” She plastered on a smile, but grit her teeth. Agott turned back to Coco and gestured towards the other girl. “Coco, this is Princess Tetia. She’s a guest at the palace. Tetia, this is Coco.”

As Agott finished speaking, she shot Tetia a stern look. *Don’t say anything embarrassing.*

Tetia perked up and gasped. “So *this* is the famous Coco! I’ve been waiting to meet you!” She took Coco’s hand and shook it warmly. Coco hurriedly curtsied.

“Oh! It’s such an honor to meet you, your highness!”

“Oh, please! A friend of Agott’s is a friend of mine, just Tetia is perfect, if you don’t mind!”

“Yes, yes, thank you, Tetia. Now that instructions have been made, if you don't mind, *I’m in the middle of something*,” Agott said through her teeth.

The pink-haired princess hurried up to them and looked between the girls. She giggled and nodded.

“I can see that!” She clapped her hands together. “But a dark hallway is no place to talk romance~.”

Both Coco and Agott immediately flustered and hurried to deny it, but Richeh popped out from behind Tetia.

“We have a surprise planned out for you.”

“Mhm!” Tetia clapped her hands. “It’ll be worth it, pinky promise!”

Agott was just about to shoot them down, but she saw the intrigued look in Coco’s eyes.

“A surprise?” She clasped her hands together. Tetia and Richeh both nodded.

“Just follow us!” Tetia took Agott’s hands, and Richeh took Coco’s.

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The four girls arrived in the palace garden and soon found themselves at the center of the gazebo. Fairy lights had been strung across the archways, casting the entire garden in a warm, soft glow. Coco audibly gasped as she bent down to admire the flowers.

‘So, so pretty…” She exhaled as she kneeled.

Agott softened as she watched her take in the scene with such a reverent gaze. She turned to Tetia and Richeh.

“When did you find the time to set this up?”

“One of the servants was tending to the garden when we got here!” Tetia explained. “She was more than happy to set up a few lights.”

“I see,” Agott mumbled. She looked around the space before meeting her friend's gaze once more. “*Thank you.”*

“This is all so wonderful!” Coco giggled and spun around. “Now the four of us have the perfect spot to enjoy the ball!”
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“Indeed.” Tetia smiled before letting out a dramatic sigh. “It’s such a shame…”

Agott caught on to her tone of voice almost immediately. “A shame?”

Tetia threw her arms around Richeh, practically hanging off the other girl. “Oh, we would just love to stay…but Richeh and I have to attend to…” She dramatically pressed the back of her hand to her forehead. “*Urgent business!”*

“Yes, most urgent.” Richeh nodded.

Agott crossed her arms and raised an eyebrow. Coco frowned and looked between them.

“Urgent business during the ball? Is everything ok?”

Tetia blinked and looked around. She hadn’t expected to be questioned about her excuse.

“Oh! Well, uhm…you see…” She thought about it for a second. Suddenly, a lightbulb went off in her head. She pointed an accusing finger at Richeh. “Richeh met a boy!”

“A boy?!” Coco’s jaw dropped. “What?! When?”

“Yes!” Tetia declared firmly. “And he’s at the ball all alone! So you see, I have to get Richeh back to him right away!”

Richeh blinked, but didn’t say anything. Coco frantically looked between the other three girls.

“Why didn’t you say so?! We should all go back to the ballroom!”

“No!” Richeh and Tetia said simultaneously. Richeh cleared her throat.

“You two could stay back here. So no one takes our garden spot.”

“Exactly!” Tetia chimed in. “We won’t be long! You two just make sure to keep watch for us until we get back!”

“Oh, well…I suppose that's alright.” Coco hummed. “But I wan’t to meet this boy before we leave, Richeh!”

“Yes, yes, plenty of time for introductions later! We must go!” Tetia began to drag Richeh back towards the entrance to the palace. Before she left, she sneakily gave Agott a thumbs up.

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Qifrey and Olruggio were waltzing together at the center of the ballroom, Qifrey shead on the other man's shoulder as they slowly danced. As they turned, Qifrey caught a glimpse of the queen, and immediately narrowed his eyes.

Olruggio must have noticed the other man stiffen, because he leaned into his ear and whispered. “What's wrong?”

“Keep dancing. I’ll tell you in a moment.”

Olruggio nodded as the dance continued. As he pulled his partner closer, Qifrey whispered to him again.

“*Something is wrong with the queen.”*

The words sent chills down his spine. He furrowed his brow, but did not slow his steps.

“What do you mean?”

Qifrey risked another glance in the queen's direction. “It’s Easthies. He’s hovering more than usual.”

“Easthies hovering over the queen is nothing new.”

“It’s different this time. And besides, she’s *trembling.”*

Olruggio spun them around so he could take a look for himself. Sure enough, Adina was clutching the arms of her chair and fighting back tremors. “Shit…” he hissed. “Do you think anyone else has noticed?”

“Not that I can tell.” Qifrey shook his head. “But this feels like bad news.”

The dance ended, and Qifrey quickly pecked Olruggio’s lips. “I’m going to try and get a closer look.”

“I’ll be waiting for you.” Olruggio squeezed his hand and nodded.

Qifrey began to maneuver his way toward the throne through the sea of nobles, muttering apologies and excusing himself as his shoulders brushed up against people. “Terribly sorry. Coming through. Pardon me.”

No sooner had he made it to the front than his eyes landed on the queen, doubled over with a handkerchief pressed against her mouth. His eyes widened at the sight.

Queen Adina abruptly rose from her chair before-

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Coco and Agott stood in the garden, hands awkwardly hanging by their sides. Coco fidgeted with the edge of her gown before speaking up.

“You wanted to tell me something?” She smiled shyly.

Agott cleared her throat and nodded. “If it’s alright…could we sit?”

Coco nodded, and the pair sat on one of the gazebo benches. Agott took a deep breath before beginning to speak.

“Coco,” She exhaled and looked down at her shoes. “I can’t explain why, but ever since I met you, things have felt so… different. It’s like my head is constantly clouded. I can’t focus on my work, I can hardly sleep, and I’ve been filled with more doubts than ever.”

“Oh…” Coco looked down as well. “I’m sorry.”

“No!” Agott quickly took her hand, her cheeks pink. “It’s not a bad thing. I mean, it’s different, but I didn’t say I minded….”

Coco’s face went red as she felt Agott’s hand around hers. She slowly, very hesitantly, laced their fingers together.

Agott’s body stiffened, but she didn’t pull away. She leaned into the sensation like an eager cat, her head resting on Coco’s shoulder.

“I missed you,” Agott confessed under her breath. Coco nodded.

“I missed you, too.”

The two sat in silence, looking in opposite directions from one another, the quiet sounds of the wind rustling through the garden a quiet melody.

“Is this really ok?” Coco whispered. “I don’t know if what I’m feeling…is acceptable.”

“Acceptable…” Agott scoffed. “I’m so tired of doing what’s acceptable.”

Agott thought back to her studies, to what she had said to Qifrey.

“I already know who I have to be. What’s the point? Is a princess’ path not already laid out?”

Is that really what she felt? Deep in her heart, she knew those words were a lie to protect herself. Being a good princess, becoming the queen, it was all so far from her mind. In this moment, it felt a million miles away.
~~~

“You’re a *princess.* I’m just a commoner. What if…I’m bad for you?” Coco whispered into the darkness.

“How can you ever think that?” Agott buried her head deeper against Coco's shoulder. “I keep thinking back to that night on the hill when I fell asleep. You told me being a princess seemed *wonderful.”* Her eyes began to shimmer with unshed tears. “But the only thing in my life that I truly found *wonderful* was you. Only you.”

“Agott,” Coco repeated breathlessly.

The princess took a deep breath. Before Coco could say another word, she felt lips press against her cheek.

……

Coco’s face flamed red. She stammered, abruptly stood, and hurried off towards the palace. Agott was on her feet not a moment later.

“Coco, wait!” She called after, but the other girl had already disappeared inside. Her heart *shattered* as she fell to her knees. “Coco…”

~~~
Richeh and Tetia took their time returning to the ballroom, giggling amongst themselves.

“Do you think it’s gonna work?” Tetia whispered. Richeh shrugged.

“Only time will tell.”

As they approached the ballroom, they heard a sudden scream ring out. Both girls stiffened with fear and hurried over to see what had happened.

Neither one could see over the ocean of people gathered in the ballroom, but an obvious commotion could be heard from inside.

“What's happened!?”

“Someone get a healer!”

“Coming through! Please, make way!” Qifrey shouted as he burst through the crowd and into the hallway. His eyes landed on the girls, and he hurried over. “Tetia, where is Agott? It’s urgent.”

“She’s in the garden with Coco. What’s going on?” Tetia’s brow was deeply furrowed with worry.
~~~

“Nothing for you girls to involve yourselves in. Olly!” He called over his shoulder. Olruggio appeared a moment later. “Good, take her highness Tetia back to her chambers, and see that this other little one finds her way back to her carriage.”

“But the ball-”

“The ball is over.” Olruggio put a hand on the girl's shoulders. “Come quickly, before the hallway becomes too crowded, and I lose sight of you both.”

Qifrey nodded to his partner before dashing down the hallway towards the garden.

~~~
Agott was on the ground, staring off into space.

*She’d messed everything up. Things would never be the same again. She couldn’t go back.*

Her thoughts were interrupted by someone hurrying out into the garden. She looked up with hope in her eyes, but instead of Coco, she saw Qifrey.

“Agott.” he was at her side in an instant. “Are you alright?”

“Professor.” She hugged him tight, fighting back tears. “I messed up. I fear I’ve done something terrible.”

Qifrey’s expression tightened as he hugged her back. Oh, he hated to have to add to her worries at a time like this.

“Agott, listen to me, *very carefully.”* he gripped her shoulders and pulled back to look her in the eyes. “You’re coming with me to your room, *now.”*

‘What? What's happened?” Fear flashed across the young girl's face at the gravity of his tone.

“I’ll explain as soon as I can, I promise,” he helped her up from the ground. “But right now, I need to get you safely to your room. Can you trust me?”

Agott wiped her eyes and nodded. Her professor scooped her up into his arms.

“Good. I promise, everything is going to be alright.”

Without another word, he hurried her inside and in the opposite direction from the ballroom.
~~~

A kiss! Agott kissed her! Oh my gosh!

Coco was so excited, she didn't even remember when she began to run. As she hurried down the hallway, she nearly ran straight into a white-haired man running in the opposite direction.

It had all happened so fast that she simply hadn't had the time to process. What should she say?! Should he have kissed her cheek back?! She slapped her cheeks to try to get a hold of herself. Ok, deep breaths, you can do this!

Coco steeled herself and rushed back towards the garden. As she burst outside, she hurriedly looked around. "Agott! I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to run away like that! I just got so excited that I…Agott?"

As she looked around, she found the garden was completely empty.

"...Agott?"

Olruggio quickly helped Tetia to the hallway closest to her room. One of the Knight Moralis was waiting and helped escort the princess the rest of the way to her room. Once he was sure she was in safe hands, he hurried Richeh outside where the carriages were waiting.

“Richeh!” Coco’s mother hurried over and hugged the girl. “Thank goodness you're alright.” She pulled back and looked to Olruggio. “Where’s Coco?”

Olruggio sighed and rubbed his neck. “Your daughter is still in there?”

Coco’s mother nodded and kept a hand on Richeh’s shoulder. “Please, I don’t want to risk losing this one in the crowd. If you have *any* idea where she might be-”

“I’ll find her.” Olruggio turned on his heels. “Just tell me what she looks like.”

~~~
As soon as he and Agott were securely in her bedroom, Qifrey set the young princess on her bed. He was out of breath as adrenaline pumped through his body, and he took a moment to sit on the edge of her bed and catch his breath.

The two sat in silence for a long while, Agott lost deep in her thoughts, and Qifrey reeling with how to break the news to her at such a difficult time. He sighed and ran a hand through his hair.

“Before I say anything…are you alright?” Qifrey rested his hand on her shoulder and gave it a comforting squeeze. Agott wiped her eyes and sniffled.

“I made a mistake.” She whispered. “It was too soon…”

Qifrey frowned as he noticed her dress was slightly torn, and her knees were scraped. He sighed and got up to retrieve a first aid kit from the adjoining bathroom. He kneeled down and began very gently cleaning the wounds and applying a disinfectant before bandaging them with gentle care.

“There,” he hummed and placed the final bandage. “Much better.”

Agott’s eyes got teary all over again as she looked at the tears in her dress. The very same gown Coco had worked so hard on…it was torn.

“I've ruined it…” She whispered.

“Your dress? I’m certain it can be mended.” Qifrey sat back beside her on the bed. Agott shook her head.

“It’s not just the dress…”
~~~

Qifrey's expression softened, and he wrapped an arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer. "Agott…what happened tonight?"

Agott sniffed and rubbed her eyes once more. "I…I *kissed* her."

Qifrey stiffened. He knew *exactly* where she may have gotten that idea from. "I see. I take it that didn't go over as well as you may have hoped…?"

"She ran away from me." Agott laid back in her bed, fresh tears welling up in her eyes. Qifrey sighed and lay back with her.

"I'm sorry." He hummed and remained still beside her, offering comfort where he could. "Did she look upset?"

"What does it matter? She ran away, of course, she was upset."

Qifrey coughed and rubbed his chin. "I wouldn't say so necessarily…"

Agott frowned and rolled onto her side ot better face him. "She ran *away from me.* As fast as she could."

"Well, she could have just been embarrassed and flustered."

"...Who runs away from someone just because they're flustered?" Agott's expression was one of sheer disbelief. Qifrey sighed and blushed a bit.

"I never did tell you the full story of Olruggio and me graduating, did I?"

Agott shook her head, calming down and sitting back up in bed. Qifrey followed suit and folded his hands into his lap.

"When I kissed Olruggio, I thought I would never see him again." He hummed and looked wistfully out into the distance. "I was a nervous mess. Right after we received our diplomas, I pulled him in and kissed him right then and there in the corner of the hallway."

"What did he say to you?" Agott asked softly.

"I didn't give the poor boy the chance to even catch his breath. I bolted as fast as I could, straight out the door." Qifrey smiled sheepishly. "I wasn't really thinking, I was just too nervous for his reaction to stick around."

Agott nodded along to his story, a sliver of hope returning to her aching heart. "Coco…does strike me as the type to let her emotions get a bit ahead of her. Though I guess it would catch

anyone off guard to be kissed on the cheek so abruptly, especially someone like Coco or Professor Olruggio."

"The cheek?" Qifrey blinked innocently. His mind caught up to his mouth a few moments later, and he cleared his throat. "Oh, my sweet, innocent Agott…"

"Don't tell me," Agott made a face of disbelief. Qifrey laughed nervously.

"Yes, well, what I did is completely irrelevant. And likely a bit more of a risk." He waved his hand dismissively. "The point is, I wouldn't be so quick to think that you've *ruined* things between the two of you. People have a funny way of surprising you when you least expect it."

Agott nodded slowly as she processed his advice. 'I see…I suppose I'll have to talk to her if I want my answer."

"That's the spirit." He rubbed her back soothingly. "Communication is always key; never forget that. It's something I've had to learn myself."

"Thank you, professor." She smiled and leaned against his shoulder. He gently patted her head.

"I'm glad I could bring you some comfort." He hummed. Qifrey allowed a few moments of easy silence to pass between them before taking a deep breath. "But I'm afraid there is something most pressing we need to discuss."

~~~

Olruggio hurried through the palace. How hard could one little girl possibly be to find? At least, that was what he had told himself as he came up empty-handed once more.

He was beginning to grow frustrated as he searched high and low. No one was left in the ballroom, she wasn't in any of the hallways, and it seemed none of the frantic partygoers had seen a green-haired girl passing by.

"Damn it," he grumbled as he turned a corner. He stopped when he turned the next corner. Through one of the large windows, he saw someone standing in the palace garden.

There, standing between the rows of flowers, was a little girl with green hair. That *had* to be her.

"Coco," he called out as he hurriedly approached. The young girl looked up, startled.

"That's you, is it not? Your mother is worried sick about you." He took hold of her wrist and began to pull her with a gentle urgency toward the doors. "Come, I need to get you back to your mother."
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“I can’t leave yet, I don’t know where Agott went!” She resisted him slightly. “Please, it’s important.”

“Agott?” He raised an eyebrow. “Important? I assure you, whatever it is won’t take precedence. What’s *important* is getting you home safely.”

“But Agott-”

“In her room,” he grunted and began ushering Coco towards the door once more. “She’s safe.”

Coco’s face twisted with conflict. She was relieved Agott was safe, but she still hadn't gotten the chance to express how she felt.

“Look,” Olruggio guided her through the mostly empty hallway. ‘Whatever it is, you’ll have your chance to tell her. But not *now.”* He exhaled deeply. “And not for a good while. Poor girls about to go through enough…”

“What happened? Where is everyone?” Coco asked as she looked around the corridor.

“Not my place to say. Surely you’ll get word soon enough. God knows these things love to spread. Soon as the papers get their damn hands on a story like this…” He grit his teeth.

The pair made it to the entrance of the palace and were immediately surrounded by a horde of nobles, and frantic chatter was exchanged in hushed tones.

“Don’t listen.” Olruggio covered her ears. No need for the young one to be frightened by the news so soon. He guided Coco back to where her mother and Richeh were waiting.

“Coco!” Her mother hugged her tight. She looked up at Olruggio and smiled tiredly. “Thank you so much.”

He grunted and nodded. “Get ‘er home safe, the both of them.”

Without another word, Olruggio turned around and left in search of Qifrey.

A few minute slater, the carriage they had arrived in pulled around to the front. Coco’s mom ushered both her daughter and Richeh inside. Just before the door closed, Euini hurried up to the door.

“Lady Richeh!” he pressed his hand against the carriage. “I never got the chance to say goodbye.”

Richeh shuffled over to the window and pressed her hands against the glass. Euini placed his in the same spot as the other side.

“Will I see you again?” He asked softly.

Richeh blinked. “I’ll be at the festival in town.”

Euini sighed and nodded. “I’ll…I’ll meet you there! Please, wait for me!”

The coachman gripped the reins and prodded the horses to begin to move. Euini stepped back away from the carriage and waved shyly as they pulled away into the night.

The rest of the night passed by in relative silence. Richeh and Coco went straight to their beds as instructed by Coco's mother. Richeh climbed into bed and fell asleep right away.

Coco, however…

The young girl lay awake in bed, cheeks flushed pink as she gingerly touched the spot where Agott's lips had pressed. The gesture was so sweet and so unexpected that her mind was still reeling.

Agott had kissed her.

She rolled over onto her side, facing away from Richeh and smiling softly.

Agott kissed her, and she liked it.

There were a million things she wanted to say to her, and yet she could barely form a coherent thought. Through the haze of her giddiness, anxiety loomed overhead. By the time she had returned to the garden to confess how she felt, Agott was already gone.

What if…she thought Coco had rejected her?

The thought sat uncomfortably on top of her chest. She didn't mean to leave her all alone in the garden; she just…got excited.

Then, of course, there was the matter at hand. Just what had happened at the ball while she and Agott were talking? Never in her life had she seen so many people leave in such a hurry. It hadn't even been exceptionally late at night, so there was no chance the party had simply fizzled out. Everyone seemed to be in such a panic…but from what?

She thought back to the man who had found her in the garden and brought her back to her mom.

"God knows these things love to spread. Soon as the papers get their damn hands on a story like this…"

A story like what? Coco wracked her brain for answers, but came up with nothing. She'd have to ask Richeh in the morning…

Slowly, she closed her eyes and began to drift off into slumber. The warmth of Agott's lips against her cheek was fresh in her mind as her breathing slowly evened out and she fell into a dream.

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“Agott,” Qifrey said softly, broaching the subject with as much delicacy as he could muster. “Before you say anything, I want you to try and stay calm. We don’t know for sure what has happened, and I can only tell you exactly what I saw.”

“Why tell me anything at all then if you don’t know what's happened?” Agott clutched her bedsheets. Her heart thrummed against her chest with worry. Any number of terrible things could have gone wrong in the time she was with Coco, and for it to be bad enough, the long-awaited summer ball was cut short; it had to have been *worrisome.*

“I’d rather you hear it from me first, and not through the rumors of the palace staff.” He gently took her hands and rubbed his thumb along her knuckles. “I promise, as soon as we know more, you will be the first to be informed.”

Agott nodded slowly and squeezed her professor's hand. She took a deep breath before meeting his gaze. “What has happened?”

Qifrey clenched his jaw. The fear in her eyes was palpable. How could he possibly worry the poor girl when she was so stressed as it was? Still, she was owed the truth.

“...It’s your mother,” he whispered. “She’s collapsed.”

Agott stiffened. Collapsed? That could be for any number of reasons. Was she sick? Exhausted? Attacked?

“What happened?”

Qiffey sighed deeply and hugged Agott to his side. “I don’t know…she didn’t look very well. I was on my way to check on her when she suddenly fainted.” He rubbed her arm to comfort her. “To be honest, Agott…she hasn’t seemed like herself for a while.”

Agott furrowed her brow and thought back to the past few times she’d seen her mother. She had always been quiet and a bit reserved, but she did seem more distant than usual. Not to mention she’d been stricter as of late…

She burrowed her face into Qifrey’s chest. “I don’t want her to be sick.”

“Oh, Agott.” He rubbed the back of her head, “I know.”

Qifrey held her close as he replayed the incident in his head. She had gone down so suddenly;y, still clutching onto that handkerchief, the fabric was speckled a horrifying red.

“...Do we have any idea what caused it?” Agott refused to look up from his chest.

“She’s with the best doctors the kingdom has to offer. Whatever the problem is, I’m certain they’ll discover it.” Qifrey soothed as gently as he could. His heart clenched, knowing even if they found the underlying issue, there was no telling what the prognosis might be.

Fainting spells, weakness, coughing blood…he was no doctor, but it didnt bode well.

All he could do was hold the young princess tightly, offering whatever support he could in this dark hour.

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As the sun rose on the kingdom the following morning, Coco stretched out her limbs and yawned. Richeh was no longer lying beside her, and she could hear the sounds of chatter coming from downstairs.

She shuffled out of bed and slid on her slippers, padding down the wooden staircase and coming to a halt at the bottom. Her mother and Richeh were sitting at the table, breakfast already made and served.

“Morning, sleepy head.” Her mother kissed the top of her hair as she sat down at the table. “Did you have sweet dreams?”

Coco nodded happily and picked up her spoon, taking a bite of the warm porridge. As she ate, the sweet flavors of the mixed berries brightened up the meal and her mood.

“Richeh, have you already packed your things? Your mother will be expecting you home soon.” Coco’s mother took a bite of her own food as she addressed the girl.

Richeh nodded as she finished her bowl. “I’m going home to change, but then I want to head to the festival.”

Coco perked up a bit. She had been so worried about Agott and the ball that it had completely slipped her mind. Still, Richeh was supposed to meet that boy there, right? Not to mention she did *love* the festivities…the music…the food…the people…it might be a good distraction for a little while.

“The festival?” Coco’s mother frowned. “I’m not so sure that's a good idea. You girls had such a late night…”

“Please, Mom? We want to go listen to the music! Besides, Richeh is supposed to meet someone!”
~~~

Her mother thought about it and sighed. She knew how excited the pair were for another adventure…but she also knew the festival was bound to be riddled with gossip about the night before. She wasn't so sure she wanted the children to know what had conspired…

Both Coco and Richeh gave their best pleading looks, hands folded neatly and eyes sparkling.

She exhaled and shook her head. "Alright, alright…"
The girls cheered and high-fived. Coco's mom began to clear the table.

"Just to be clear, you're both to come home by sunset. I don't like how rowdy those festivals get after dark…and one more thing." She turned back to her daughter. "Coco…there might be some…rumors going around today. Nothing is confirmed yet, so don't worry yourself too much."

Coco blinked and nodded innocently. "Ok, Mom, I promise I won't."

"You're a good girl, Coco." Her mother patted her head before pulling a small coin pouch from he pocket and handing a few silver coins to her daughter. "For food. Make sure to each a proper lunch, not just snacks."

Coco giggled and nodded, pocketing the coins. She and Richeh hurried back upstairs so Coco could get ready.

Coco and Richeh hurried through the streets of the festival, the few coins her mother had given her jingling in Coco's pockets as they ran. The sounds and smells of the festival filled their senses as they approached a large archway, fresh flowers woven between wooden beams, welcoming them into the atmosphere.

Vendors called out from their stalls, peddling their wares to each passerby in hopes of getting a sale. Coco spun around and giggled as she tried to take it all in.

She felt a tug on her sleeve as Richeh pointed towards a particular stall selling shiny crystal pendants and charms. "That's the vendor where my mom and I found the necklace I gave you."

Coco gasped and hurried over, leaning down to get a better look at all the shiny baubles and trinkets. "They're so sparkly! Look at all the colors!"

Richeh gently picked up a little crystal rabbit, holding it up to the light and watching as it cast small rainbows across the ground. Coco peeked over and smiled at the sight.

Suddenly, a large man bumped into Richeh's shoulder, almost causing the girl to drop the crystal. Coco was quick to reach out and steady her friend. She turned to see who had bumped into her, but the men were already walking away.

"Did'y hear about the queen? Right awful from what I've heard."

"Any word from the palace?"

"Not a peep from the lot of 'em."

Coco and Richeh looked at each other. Right, the incident at the ball.

Richeh gently set down the crystal rabbit and rubbed her shoulder where the man had knocked her. Coco frowned and gently touched her other shoulder.

'Hey, Richeh…" Coco asked as they began walking past the other stalls. "Do you have any idea what happened last night?"

Richeh shook her head. "Tetia and I were headed back to the ballroom when we heard shouting. After that, everyone ran out in a hurry. All I know is they were calling for a healer."

"Those men were talking about the queen…Do you think she's alright?" Coco whispered as if sharing a secret she shouldn't know.

"I don't know," Richeh confessed. Coco's expression fell. She really hoped she was ok, if only for Agott's sake. She didn't know very much about Agott's relationship with the queen, but she was still her mother. Should anything happen to her own mom, she'd be positively heartbroken.

Richeh seemed to take notice of her friend's sullen expression and quickly began trying to cheer her up. She tapped Coco's shoulder and pointed to the center of the square, where a few traveling bards were performing.

Coco perked up slightly at the warm sounds of music. She shuffled over to where a few of the bards had gathered and sat down on a wooden bench beside Richeh to listen to them play. There were a number of performers of all ages; a good number of them were men in their middle years, but a few were younger musicians among their ranks. Sitting in the very front was a boy who appeared to be about their age.

As he played, Coco watched his expression light up with joy. His apparent love for the craft was something she could sympathize with in her own love of sewing. It brought a gentle smile to her own face.

As the song concluded, the boy heard the soft clink of a coin landing in the basket he had in front of him. He looked up and locked eyes with Coco.

"Thank you!" He grinned and bowed. Coco nodded and smiled warmly.

"You played beautifully." She giggled. The boy rubbed his neck sheepishly.

The man sitting beside the boy patted him on the back. 'Don't be modest, kiddo. The young lady gave you a compliment."

"Dad," he whined and blushed before turning back to Coco. "Thank you again, I appreciate you taking the time to listen," he set down his roundlute and reached out his hand to shake hers. "The name's Custas, and this is my father, Dagda."

"It's a pleasure to meet you both." Coco grinned and shook their hands. Richeh reached out and did the same.

The older man, Dagda, covered his mouth with his fist as he yawned. "Oh, excuse me." He cleared his throat. "It was a late night at the ball yesterday, and we got up early to set up for the festival."

"You were at the ball last night?" Richeh asked and tilted her head.

"I was. This ones a bit too young to be playing at big fancy events just yet." Dagda gently pats his son on the shoulder. Custas rolled his eyes.

"I told you I could have handled it!"

Dagda shook his head. "For what it's worth, I'm glad you weren't there. Wouldn't want you caught in all that chaos."

Richeh and Coco exchanged a look. If Dagda was at the ball, he might have seen what happened.

“Mister Dagda, if you don’t mind me asking, what happened last night before the ball ended?” Coco clutched the fabric of her skirt. “I’m afraid it has affected someone very dear to me.”

“Someone dear to you, eh?” The man raised an eyebrow before looking around. His gaze landed on a familiar red cloak in the crowd. He sighed and dropped his voice. “Knights Moralis instructed us not to talk about it. Keepin' it all hush until they can release an official statement.”

Coco’s expression darkened. If whatever had occurred was serious, they sent knights to control gossip? It couldn't have been good.

“But, “ Dagda sighed, “if it’s someone close to your heart that's got you all worried, I supposed theres no harm in telling you what I know. Custas,” He looked at his son. “Take these two young ladies back to the tent, would you? Gonna need a bit of privacy.”

Custas nodded and picked up his instrument before gesturing for the two girls to follow.

“C’mon, it’s not too far from here.”

The trio slowly made their way to the back of the festival, ducking behind the vendor’s carts and to a decently sized tent where musicians had gathered to rest or tune their instruments. Custas guided them to a corner towards the back with a small table and waved for them to sit down. A few minute slater, Dagda lifted the flap of the tent and ducked inside before letting it fall closed behind him.

“Alright,” he sighed and took a seat across from the three kids. “No knights this far back from the festival. At least I should hope not.” He hummed and yanwed again. “Here’s all I know…”

One of the other traveling bards came by with a few mugs full of water, setting them down around the table. Coco picked hers up and took a long sip as she listened to Dagda speak.

“I didn’t see too much from where I was sitting, but I’ll tell you everything I know.” He held his own mug in both hands. After taking a sip, he wiped his mouth and began to speak again. “The musicians were set up just off to the side, and my view was somewhat obstructed by the other guests when the party actually started, but before the I saw when they brought the queen in. She wasn’t walking all that well from the start. Kept leaning on one of her guards.”

Coco nodded as she took in the information. So whatever had happened, it didn’t come on suddenly. Dagda set down his mug and continued on.

“The queen is never seen without her knights flanking her, so that wasn’t all that unusual, but they seemed to be keeping an especially close eye on her. The knight with the long black hair, he was watching her like a hawk. Hardly left her side in the entire night. I didn’t pay the whole thing too much mind, as it isn’t particularly my business.”

“Did she look sick?” Richeh piped up as she drank from her own mug. Dagda shrugged.

“She looked *unstable,* but I wasn’t sitting close enough to say for certain if something was off. Though it became clear pretty abruptly that something was the matter.” He grunted. “We had just finished playing one of the waltz numbers when she bolted up from her throne. Naturally, I looked over, assuming she was making an announcement, but she just…crumpled to the floor.”

Richeh and Coco’s expressions darkened. So that was what happened. The queen had suddenly collapsed in front of the most influential figures in the kingdom.

“They took ‘er off right away, but the sight alone was enough to cause a panic and provide plenty of fuel for rumors.” Dagda crossed his arms and leaned back in his chair. “It’s never good for a nation when its ruler is publicly in poor health. Tends to cause all sorts of political problems and fosters doubt and fear amongst its civilians. No surprise they’re trying hard to keep the whole thing under wraps…not that it’ll do much good.”

Coco looked down at her feet. She could only imagine how Agott must be feeling, knowing her mother was so sick. Dagda reached over and ruffled Custas’s hair.

‘Which is *exactly* why I’m glad you weren’t there. It was a practical stampede of nobles.” The man patted his son on the back. Custas groaned and tried to fix his hair while Dagda smirked. He turned back to the girls and exhaled through his nose.

‘You kids are too little to remember when the king became ill, but it caused a real uproar.”

Coco nodded. She was still a baby when the king suddenly became very sick and subsequently passed away. All she knew was that the queen refused to remarry and took on the duty of the crown alone.

A thought crept into the back of Coco's mind that made her shiver. She didn't know what kind of sickness the king had contracted that led to his death, and she certainly didn't know if it was anything like what Queen Adina was afflicted by, but if it were anything like the king's sickness….

"Mister Dagda," Coco fidgeted with her hands. "If…the queen were to pass away…what happens to the crown?"

Dagda raised his eyebrows. It was a fair question to ask, but he had to give it some thought.

"Well, then Princess Agott would be crowned, I suppose."

Coco froze. But…Agott was so *young.* If anything were to happen to Queen Adina, would she really be forced to succeed to the throne?

"Not on 'er own of course." Dagda clarified, "There'd be an appointed regent."

"A regent..?" Coco blinked. Dagda smiled and chuckled.

"Someone trusted by the throne to be appointed as temporary monarch in the case that the next in line to rule is too young, absent, or incapacitated," he elaborates. Richeh and Coco nod in understanding.

"What kind of person gets appointed to a position like that?" Richeh asked quietly.

Dagda rubbed his chin. "Well, I suppose that's something the royal family is debating right about now, just to be safe."

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A simple white carriage rolled to a halt just outside the palace gates, and an attendant was quick to retrieve a wheelchair from the trunk and unfold it at the carriage door.

Beldaruit was assisted out of the carriage and settled into his chair, offering the attendant a kind smile.

"Thank you, I can handle it from here." He waved them off and began to push himself toward the castle entrance. Standing at the gates were a few of the Knights Moralis, accompanied by Qifrey.
~~~

“Master Beldaruit, I trust your journey from the academy was comfortable?” Qifrey greeted with a polite bow.

“Oh, stop it, no need for formalities.” He chuckled. Qifrey straightened up and turned to open the palace doors.

“Very well then, I’ll escort you to your chambers.”

~~~

Dagda cleaned up the mugs from the table and set them to the side. Coco lingered nearby, her mind still full of questions she wanted to ask the man. She tugged on one of his pant legs to get his attention.

“Mister Dagda…” She said quietly, “When the king got sick, was it similar to what's wrong with the queen?”

Dagda shook his head. “I’m sorry, kiddo, but I’m not sure. When the king got sick, they were pretty secretive about what was going on. I don’t know what his symptoms were. Only people who would know that are medics and apothecaries.”

“Just the royal ones, I’m guessing.” Coco kicked at a rock on the floor, defeated. How could she find out more about what was going on if the only people with any information were at the palace?

“Not necessarily. The king's illness was a bit of a mystery. They called in professionals from all over our town and the next to try and get him well again.” Dagda hummed and patted her head. “I suppose if you’re really looking to find out more, you should ask one of the apothecaries in town.”

“I know an apothecary!” Custas chimed in. “I can take you to him, too. He’s a good friend of mine.”

“You know an apothecary in *training,”* Dagda corrected with a smirk. “You’re talking about that young boy who lives in the middle of town, aren't you? Tartah?”

“Well, yeah,” Custas shrugged. “But he's bound to know some of the details about the king since he *works* with apothecaries.”

“Just don’t bother anyone while they’re working.” Dagda nudged his son with his foot. “And *don't* let the Knights Moralis overhear you digging into this further. Can’t afford to be causing any trouble.”

“We won’t!” Custas grinned and took Coco’s hand. “C’mon, he should be working at the first aid tent today, observing.”
~~~

Coco quickly took hold of Richeh’s hand before she could be pulled off by the energetic boy. Soon, the three of them were hurrying off back through the festival in search of a boy called ‘Tartah.’

Coco, Richeh, and Custas approached a large tent with a red cross painted on the tent flaps. Custas strode right in, pushing the flap aside and gesturing for the two girls to follow him inside.

Standing in the corner, sorting a few boxes of medical supplies, is a young boy with ginger hair. He squints at a container of herbs and grumbles to himself.

“Hey, Tartah!”

The boy looks up to see Custas standing over him. He smiles and sets the container outside.

“Hey, Custas. Finish up your work for the day?”

“For now. Dagda and I are on a break while some other musicians play their sets. What's the matter? You looked really annoyed a second ago.” Custas tilted his head and picked up the jar of herbs.

“None of these are labeled,” Tartah sighs and squints at another jar. “They put all the herbs into smaller containers since we didn’t need as much for the festival, but they forgot to put tags on each jar.” He rubs the back of his neck in frustration. “What if there were an emergency and I needed to know what jar holds what?”

“Um…maybe I can help?” Coco piped up from the back of the group. Tartah raised an eyebrow.

Coco leaned down and looked at some of the herbs. “Sometimes we use wild-growing herbs and flowers for dyes at my mother's shop, so my mom gave me a book on them when I was little. She was always worried I’d get my hands on poison oak or something.” She giggled.

Tartah thought about it before nodding. “That would be a great help. I can tell some of them by smell and shape, but it’s the color that's throwing me off.”

“Doesn't help that half of these are already powder.” Custas dipped his finger into one of the jars and turned to Coco. “Tartah’s a wicked good apothecary. He really helped me out the last time I had a fever, and Dagda was freaking out.”

“I’d be able to help more people faster if everyone would just *label things.”* Tartah scowled.

Coco picked up one of the jars and squinted at the powder inside. It was a pale, yellowish green. “This one looks like yarrow…my mom used it once to get a particular shade of yellowish gold.”

“Yarrow is also good for wounds. Stops bleeding.” He took the jar and added a tag, carefully writing a label in neat letters before setting it aside.

Coco picked up another jar. The pair continued on, labeling the containers and discussing both their aesthetic and medicinal properties.

“You know your herbs.” Tartah grinned as he finished writing out yet another label. “I appreciate all the help. That being said, I take it you’re not visiting just to sort powders.”

Richeh nodded and spoke up. “We wanted to ask if you knew anything about what happened with the late king.”

Tartah stiffened, then looked around. “Knights patrolling nearby,” he kept his voice low, “They wouldn’t want us talking about it with what happened at the ball.”

Coco’s heart sank. She really didn’t want to hit a dead end…if she better understood what Agott was going through, maybe she could better support her.

Tartah looked around. Well, there didn’t seem to be any knights close by…and this girl did do him a solid…

“Alright, but don’t tell anyone I went and filled you in,” he sighed. Coco perked up and shuffled closer so he could whisper to her. Tartah leaned in and began to speak.

“From what I’ve heard among the healers, the king was sick for a long time. It started about a year before he passed. Started with tremors, then an unsteady gate. He was nauseated frequently, and would vomit blood on his worst days.”

Coco took in the information, her body tense. Tartah sighed and continued.

“Some doctors reported that towards the last few weeks of his life, his emotional state wasn't what it used to be either, and he began to forget things.”

Custas, who had been doing his best to listen in on the whispering, chimed in. “Dagda said the queen had an unsteady gate, didn’t he? And that she was trembling?”

Tartah shot him a look. “Keep your voice down.”

“You don’t think... the sickness that killed the king…” Coco’s expression was dark and serious. Tartah let out a sigh.

“I would hope not. Even after his passing, they were never able to find out what the king's affliction was.” He shook his head. “It was a real tragedy, and an even bigger medical mystery.”

A sick feeling settles in Coco’s stomach. Richeh noticed and was at her friend’s side in an instant to comfort her.

“I really hope Agott is doing ok. She must be so worried about her mom…” She bit one of her fingernails. Richeh continued rubbing her back.

“Great. The king passes from some mysterious illness, and now the queen’s sick too.” Custas said a bit too loudly. Tartah waved at him to lower his voice, but the boy continued droning on.

Outside, Luluci stopped in her tracks just outside the first aid tent. She narrowed her eyes as she heard what sounded like children discussing the queen. Just as she was about to lift the flap of the tent, a hand rested on her shoulder.

“Whatever it is, let it be.”

Luluci turned around to see Galga, a stern expression on his face. “Trouble at the festival gates. We need to go.”

“We can’t be expected to let these rumors run rampant.” She scowled

Galga sighed and shook his head, leaning in to mutter something into her ear.

“Someone reported a suspicious figure with arms full of flyers. Wearing a thick cloak and a cap covering his eyes. Sound familiar?”

Luluci stiffened and immediately turned her attention away from the tent. “*They’re* here?”

“Can’t hurt to check,” Galga grunted. “Let’s get going.”

~~~
Euini looked around the festival as he passed through the entrance. He’d made a promise to Richeh to meet her here, but he had no idea where to even begin.

There were plenty of vendors and attendees standing around, but they were all huddled into groups and poring over what looked to be flyers or pamphlets. One happened to flutter by on the wind and land at the boy's feet. Picking it up, he squinted at the printed words.

As he read, a shudder ran through him.

*Oh, this couldn’t be good.*
~~~

As the four continued to whisper amongst themselves, Coco overheard one of the nurses coming back into the tent.

“Sinocia,” the woman frowned as she approached her partner, a flyer clutched in her hand. “Have you seen this?”

The other nurse, whom Coco gatherers must have been Sinocia, turned from the man whose arm she had just bandaged and accepted the flyer to take a better look. As she read, her face paled.

“Oh, my…Where did you get this?” She put a hand over her mouth.

“They’re scattered everywhere. Seems there isn't a person at the festival without their hands on one of these.”

Tartah furrowed his brow and stood up, setting the last jar of herbs aside and walking over to where the two women were poring over the flyer. “Has something happened?”

“Nothing for you children to concern yourselves with.” The taller nurse rolled up the flyer and tucked it under her arm. Tartah‘s expression turned sour.

“You said yourself these were all over the festival. I’m bound to hear what's going on eventually, so just let me see it.”

“Tartah, please.” Sinocia put a hand on his shoulder. “It’s not the sort of thing we want any young ones mixed up in.”

Custas made his way over and crossed his arms. “As if we aren't tangled up in it already.”

As the two nurses tried to dissuade the boys from prying, Richeh snuck over to the edge of the tent an spoked her head out. Sure enough, crowds of people stood huddled around flyers. They were *everywhere.* Nailed to posts, tarded amongst hands, and even scattered across the ground. Richeh swiped one off a nearby fence and tucked it into her pocket.

She snuck back over to Coco and gave her friend a nod. Flyer secured.

Getting the message, Coco went over to where the boys continued to argue for themselves. She touched both of their shoulders.

“Maybe it’s better if we stay out of it.” She said softly

The nurse nodded firmly. “Listen to your friend, Tartah. And stay in the tent until the Knights Moralis get this under control.”

Custas and Tartah both sulked as they made their way back to where Richeh was waiting.

‘Man,” Tartah rubbed his neck, “I get that Ermile and Sinocia have good intentions, but they still treat me like a little kid. What good will keeping secrets do at a time like this?”

“Adults hate to admit to themselves that we’re not as naive as we seem.” Richeh pulled the flyer from her pocket. The two boys immediately perked up and huddled around to get a look at what it said.

As Coco peeked at the pamphlet and slowly began to read, she felt color slowly drain from her face.

Oh.

Oh.

She choked back a gasp, not wanting to draw attention to their secret little investigation. It was difficult *not* to let herself react. There, written in a deep black ink and sharply printed letters, was the following message:

The time has come for the end of an era.
The crown must fall to make way for true freedom.
May this pestilence continue to fester.
Days of light will soon follow, and our period of darkness will come to a swift and final conclusion.

Coco felt her heart drop. Who would write such an awful thing? She could only imagine what Agott might think should she ever see this.

“Who could have done this?” Coco’s voice trembled.

Before anyone could offer a response, the tent flap opened again.

“Ermile,” Sinocia came hurrying in with someone under her arm. “I found this young boy wandering the festival. He seemed distraught, and he’s unaccompanied.”

Ermile looked up from what she was doing and sighed. “Bring him in. Safer for him to be here with all that chaos outside.”

The group looked over to see what was going on, and Richeh immediately hurried over to the boy.

“Euini.”

Euini stiffened at the sound of her voice, immediately relaxing upon seeing her face. “Lady Richeh, thank goodness.”

He hugs her, and Coco feels a sharp stab of jealousy shoot through her heart. Why was it so easy for everyone else to reunite when she had to be so far from Agott?

Still, there was no time to dwell on that. This boy might have seen something the others hadn’t.

“You're Euini? From the ball?” Coco asked as she approached him. The boy gave a shy nod.

“I’m sorry, now might not be the time for proper introductions.” Coco gripped the pamphlet in her hands, crumpling it slightly. She held it out so Euini could see. “Do you know anything about this flyer?”

“Where on earth did you get that?” Ermile quickly snatched it from her hands, but it was far too late; they had all seen what it said.

‘‘Please, tell me if there's anything you know.” Coco took hold of the front of Euini’s cloak. The boy stammered slightly.

Before he could answer, a loud commotion began outside.

“There he is!”

“Stop him!”

The hurried sound of boots against dirt as the Knights Moralis rushed towards the center of the festival. Without thinking, Coco rushed out of the tent and began to pursue the direction they were headed in.

“Coco!” Richeh called as she chased after. In a panic, Euini followed after Richeh. Custas and Tartah stood there in shock before chasing after the trio.

“What did I say about staying put?!” Ermile began hurrying after the children.

~~~

Coco panted as she ran, her feet flying as she chased after red cloaks in the crowd, headed to god knows where. All she knew was that the knights had found the person they were after, and whoever it was, they were likely responsible for the flyers.

For the threat against the queen
~~~

She couldn’t stop now, even if it meant throwing herself into danger. She couldn’t go on not knowing for a second longer.

She came to a break in the crowd and found herself back where she had first met Custas. There, in the center of the festival, stood a group of strangely dressed individuals concealing their eyes.

Coco tried to push her way through to the front of the group, but the crowd around her grew quickly in numbers. The Knights Moralis shouted into the chaos in an attempt to stop a spectacle from even occurring.

“Everyone, get back!” Luluci held the pole of her sphere out to the side, blocking the crowd from encroaching any closer.

Coco could hear the whispers of the festival goers growing louder as she was knocked around, unable to see anything that was happening up front. She could hear her friends calling for her in the distance, but she paid them no mind. Her only focus was on finding out what was going on.

Gagla broke free from the crowd and out into the clearing between the gathering civilians and the mysterious group. As soon as his gaze landed on them, he recognized them immediately. He moved to approach them, but a strong pair of arms restrained him.

“Sorry about this,” a calm voice whispered into his ear, “But I can’t have you interrupting until he’s finished.”

Galga grunted and began to pull himself free, but a cloth was placed over his nose and mouth. He instantly tried to hold his breath, but a sharp jab to the side forced him to inhale sharply. His vision swam before he dropped to his knees.

“Galga!” Luluci called through the crowd. She looked between the mysterious figures and her fallen comrade before making her choice. She rushed over to the unconscious man’s side.

Coco gasped as she saw the knight hit the ground through the gaps in the crowd. People pushed forward, nearly knocking the girl off her feet.

From the center of the clearing, one of the men stepped forward and began to speak.

The whispers of the crowd were so loud, Coco could barely make out a word he was saying. It seemed everything was growing louder and louder, closing in around her. She was sure she’d certainly be crushed.

Then, all at once, she heard it.

“**Death to Queen Adina!”**

Silence fell over the crowd. Luluci whipped her head around to face the person who had spoken.

“**Death to Queen Adina! May her fall make way for the rise of true greatness!”**

The hooded man suddenly ducked at the blade of a spear just barely nicking his cheek. Luluci's eyes were wild and furious. From the crowd, two more knights arrived, spears at the ready.

One of the other hooded members was quick to step forward and parry the attack, while another still approached the man who had been speaking.

"We've made our point. No need to face the knights head-on."

"A shame," the cloaked man shrugged. "And I had so much more I wanted to share."

The pair began to withdraw, but Luluci thrusted her spear out once again, blocking their exit. The other two knights were quick to surround the group. Front he crowd, a casiter flew over people's heads and hit the ground. After only a second, a huge plume of smoke erupted and reduced all visibility.

"Don't lose sight of them!" Luluci shouted as she grabbed hold of one of their cloaks.

Coco coughed as smoke filled her lungs. As she rubbed her eyes, she could just barely see a man slip away off to the side.

"A pity to waste something so valuable. Iguin should learn not to run his mouth. The flyers were more than enough."

Coco turned and tried to follow him, pushing her way past people's legs. A hand on her ankle stopped her.

"Don't"

The knight who had fallen unconscious before had pushed himself up onto his forearms and kept hold of her. As he sat up, he gestured for her to cover her mouth. "This is no situation for a young girl to get mixed up in."

Before she could react, another hand grabbed her wrist. "What were you thinking? You were headed straight into danger." Ermile kept a tight grip on her as she guided Coco through the crowd. "Leave this to the knights."

As the smoke began to clear, Luluci looked down at the cloak that remained in her hands. The man wearing it had managed to slip it off through the smoke. She grit her teeth and hurried back over to Gagla.

"Are you alright? How do you feel?" She knelt beside him.

He grunted and slowly began to stand. "Just groggy. I'm fine."

Luluci slid an arm under his shoulders to support him, her expression dark. “They got away.”

“No one was hurt. That’s what matters.” He shook his head. “Come, we need to report to the palace immediately.”

“They could still be nearby. I can go after them.”

“No,” Galga shook his head. “There's been a threat to the queen's life. Our place is by her side now.”

The air slowly became more breathable, and the group had disappeared without a trace. Even the canister releasing the smoke was gone.

“Not so much as footprints.” One of the other two knights hurried over to the pair.

“But hey, you got their cloak.” The other pointed to the fabric in Luluci’s free hand.

Luluci looked down at the make of the cloak. It was eerily familiar.

“Brimcloaks,” Galga huffed. “No doubt about it.”

~~~

“Brimcloaks?”

Coco sat in the medical tent along with Custas, Tartah, Richeh, and Euini.

“I didn’t see them myself.” Euini shook his head as he pushed the flyer across the table. “But it seems like they’re behind this. My father told me something similar happened around the time the king passed away…”

“But…who are they? And what reason do they have for wishing harm to the royal family?” Richeh frowned. She noticed Coco’s hands were trembling, and gently rested her own over them.

Euini rubbed the back of his neck. “From what I know, they’re a particularly rowdy political group. They take issue with nobility, especially the idea of a monarch. There used to be more talk of them in noble circles when they were active, but when the announcement of the king’s death came, they suddenly went quiet.”

Coco couldn’t keep the fear off her face. Was this the sort of threat Agott had to deal with?

“So what, they come out of hiding now that the queen is rummored to be sick to spread their great ideologies?” Custas put his feet up on the table.
~~~

“I guess it makes sense. People are bound to be feeling a bit vulnerable with the threat of her majesty succumbing to illness, and are more likely to be looking for a place to turn.” Tartah nudged the boy's feet off the tabletop. “It’s slimy, but it’s not unreasonable.”

“Um… there's another thing.” Euini hesitantly spoke up. The rest of the group turned to face him. “When the king became sick, similar flyers to these went around.” he hugged his arms to his chest. “A rumor went around when he passed that the Brimcloaks had something to do with his death. Some even say the royal family was *cursed.*”

“Stuff and nonsense.” Tartah waved him off. “No one knows what caused the king’s ultimate passing, but he was *sick.* Viruses, bacteria, contaminants, toxins…those are all real, tangible things. No such thing as magic or curses.”

Coco ran her finger along the wood grain of the table. Tartah was right…curses were nothing more than make-believe. What was happening to the royal family was *real.* Even still, something about it didn’t sit right with her.

“Well, yeah, duh.” Custas folded his arms on the table and rested his head on top of them. “But what if Euini is onto something? Just because it wasn’t a curse doesn't mean the Brimcloaks are innocent in all this. You heard Coco, she said she heard ‘em wishing *death* onto the queen.”

“I fail to see how that connects Euini’s idea to all of this. What they said is high treason, but that doesn’t mean they have their hands in this illness.”

“A mysterious illness that no medic could identify. I’m not saying it was a magical curse.” He wiggled his fingers dramatically, “But cmon. It’s not a good look for them. Is there really no way the Brimcloaks could be somehow making the royal family sick?”

Tartah paused and rubbed his chin. *A way to make people sick…*

“That’s enough.” Ermile put her hand on Tartah’s back. “You lot ought to start heading home. No more of this curse nonsense.”

“It’s been a long day for all of you, so be sure to get home safely.” Sinocia gently began to escort them out of their chairs and towards the tent flaps. “We’ll walk you to the festival entrance.”

~~~

Richeh and Coco waved their goodbyes as they parted ways with the group. Sinocia and Ermile had stressed that they would take great care to stick to the main road and head straight home. As they walked, only the light from a few street lanterns illuminated their path.
~~~

Coco's head snapped at every sound she heard coming from the woods. Even the usually comforting hoot of an owl made her hair stand on end. Richeh did her best to rub her back comfortingly.

"We're nearly home, just keep walking."

Coco nodded and tried to keep her head down. Just as they turned a corner, she saw movement coming from the edge of the wood. From between the trees, Coco swore she saw a young girl.

"Someone's in the forest." She whispered to Richeh. The other girl shook her head.

"Even if there is, we need to get home."

"But they look young…what if they're scared?"

"Coco." Richeh cautioned, but her friend didn't listen.

"I'll be right back, I promise. Just wait here."

Coco pushed a few branches to the side and stepped down off the path and onto the soft dirt of the forest floor. She approached where the movement had come from, and sure enough, there was a young girl sitting on a rock.

'Hello," She smiled warmly, "Are you alright? It's not safe to be in the woods at night, you know."

The girl looked her up and down, unimpressed. "Ininia knows"

"Oh, so your name is Ininia? I'm Coco. Here, we should probably go back to the main path. My friend is waiting for me." Coco extended her hand. Ininia scoffed and turned up her nose.

"Oh? What's this?"

Coco turned around sharply. Standing behind her was a man in a dark cloak, his eyes fully covered.

"A young one stayed from the path? Don't you know it's dangerous to come into the woods alone?"

Coco slowly backed up away from him. Their attire… the way they were hiding in the woods…

Brimcloaks.

Coco tried to run, but another man stepped out from behind a tree. “Easy now. Can’t have you running off. Who knows what could happen if you happened to let it slip what you saw here?”

“I won't tell anyone, I promise. Please, let me go.” Coco tried to keep her voice steady. Panicking wouldn’t help.

“Always so pragmatic,” The man standing behind Coco put his hands on her shoulder. “There’s no need to frighten her. Besides, the young ones tend to be a bit more receptive.”

Coco shivered as she was turned around. She couldn’t make out the details of the man’s face, but she could somehow tell he was *smiling.*

“You wear very simple, plain clothes,” he hummed as he looked her over. “A commoner's daughter, I have no doubt. Tell me, little one. Do you tire of the differences between our worlds? Of how the upper class seem to be so untouchable? They live in a completely different reality, and yet it seems they get to dictate our very livelihood.”

Coco said nothing, swallowing thickly.

“Must you give your whole spiel? Ininia is tired.” The young girl on the rock kicked her legs.

“I won’t be long.” The cloaked man assured. He turned his attention back to Coco. “You’re still small, but as you grow older, you will come to realize our world is unjust. While the nobility host lavish banquets, our great nation faces the threat of instability. Our crops don’t grow, our livestock sicken, and the queen doesn’t utter so much as a word. Meanwhile, she gets all the say in how we are allowed to live.” He reached out and gently brushed back Coco’s hair. “But, in the world *we* envision, there is no more need for a crown. A great nation where no one person dictates the rules, where we are *free.* Doesn’t that sound *truly wonderful*?”

His choice of words sent a cold shock through Coco’s body. She thought back to Agott, to their time together in the garden.

This wasn't right. These people weren’t passive.

Agott could be in danger.

“Coco!” Richeh called into the woods. The man sighed and pulled his hand back.

“She’s got company,” The man leaning on a tree mumbled. The girl on the rock sighed.

“Just what we needed. Now, how to keep her quiet?”

“Coco, was it?” A man she hadn’t noticed chimed in from the back of the group. His face was concealed in a similar manner under a cloak. “Tailor's daughter, if I’m not mistaken.”

“Insightful as always, Sasaran.” The man by the tree pushed himself forward and took one of Coco’s hands. “Pin pricks on her fingertips. A tailor's daughter, no doubt.”

“Now, Coco.” The cloaked man directly before her leaned down. “We truly mean no harm to you. It would be truly a tragedy should word of what happened here make it into the wrong hands.” He reached back out and cupped her cheek. “But you won’t say a word, right? We would hate to have to pay the tailor's shop a visit.”

Coco felt tears prick the back of her eyes as she shook her head no. The hand on her cheek pulled away.

“Very good. Now, let’s be off.”

~~~

Coco burst out of the woods, branches scratching her legs and cheeks. She trembled as she tried to steel herself.

Richeh hurried over and put a hand on her shoulder. “What happened? What's wrong?”

“It’s nothing. I ran into a fox.” Coco shook her head. Richeh frowned.

“A fox? You look scared half to death.”

Coco nodded as Richeh began to slowly walk her towards the main road. “Yeah, it tried to bite me, so I got a little spooked, but I’m ok, I promise.”

Richeh’s brow furrowed, but she didn’t press for more. Not yet, at least.

Coco’s home wasn’t much further down the road. As soon as they were inside, her mother was quick to usher the girls to warm themselves by the fire while she treated the scratches on Coco’s body.

“I heard about the festival.” Her mother gently dabbed at the wounds with a small cloth. “It seems we’re getting more and more incidents as of late. I’m only glad you girls are safe.”

Richeh curled up on the floor beside the fire, yawning and resting her head on the carpet. Coco’s mother draped a blanket over her.

“Coco, I don't want you going into town for a few days,” He mother said firmly. “You’ll stay home with me where it’s safe.”

Coco nodded as her arm was bandaged. “Okay, mom.”
~~~

The warm crackles of the fire faded into the background as Coco ruminated on the day's events. She couldn't utter a word of what she saw, not if it put her mom in danger. On the other hand, keeping to herself could very well risk endangering the royal family and Agott.

She clenched her hands into fists and gritted her teeth.

What was she to do at a time like this?

Galga sighed as he packed the last of his belongings and closed up the bag. The majority of his clothes, as well as a few personal affects had all been carefully tucked away in preparation for the next week or so.

From the corner, Atwert leaned against the doorway, a frown tugging at the corner of his lips. “There’s really no way for you to get out of this, is there?”

Galga grunted and shook his head. “Direct orders from Vinanna. Not to mention Easthies might bite my head off if I put up any fight about it. You heard what happened in town. Threats against the crown are nothing to be brushed aside, and those responsible are still at large.

“That’s disregarding the very important detail that you were *drugged.”* Atwert pushed off the wall and approached his partner's side, resting a gentle hand on his shoulder. “They really couldn’t give you so much as a day to recover? Honestly, Galga, it's a wonder you weren’t injured further. You never ask for anything to take care of yourself.”

“I was hardly out for longer than a few minutes, and as you’ve already *thoroughly checked to confirm,* I’m uninjured.” Galga slipped his bag over his shoulder. “Whatever they used, it was only to keep me down for a second. I’m not their target here, but the queen very well might be.” He turned and cupped Atwert’s cheek, pressing a chaste kiss to his lips. “It’s a week. I’ll be sure to write to you should I get the chance.”

Atwert’s lips were still stubbornly frozen in a frown. He leaned in for a second kiss.

As the two pulled back, Atwert rested a hand on Galga’s chest. “You really can’t delay this any further? I still don’t feel right letting you return to duty so soon after you collapsed.”

Glaga took his hand and gently kissed his knuckles. “I’ll be safe. I promise.”

“Somehow I find that hard to believe.” Atwert rubbed his temples with his free hand. He sighs and hands Galga a small bag. “Here, at least be sure to eat this when you get the chance. You work yourself far too hard.”

“If it’ll bring you some peace of mind.” He nodded and accepted the meal. He tucked it under his free arm before making his way towards the door.

Atwert waved as his partner shut the door behind him and made his way toward the palace.

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Qifrey knocked on Agott’s door, waiting patiently.

“Come in,” the young girl's voice came from inside.
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He pushed the door open and walked over to her bed, taking a seat as he often did. “Busy with your studies?”

Agott nodded, not looking up.

Qifrey frowned and gently patted the edge of the bed. “Spare me a moment of your time?”

She paused, setting down her pen and shuffling over to the bed. Qifrey got his first good look at the princess. Her eyes were puffy with a lack of sleep, her posture slumped, and her hands were trembling slightly. His expression softened impossibly. “Oh, Agott…”

Agott refused to meet his gaze. She was despondent and had been ever since she heard about what happened at the ball. It wasn't unreasonable; the poor child had already lost her father to illness, and now her mother was bedridden. Qifrey rubbed her back in small, soothing circles. All he wanted was to be here for her. God knows she needed a shoulder to cry on.

And yet, the duties of the crown never ceased.

“Agott,” he said softly, his hand pausing its misnistrations. “There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

~~~
Qifrey guided Agott to the drawing room, where a man with long, silver hair was seated in a chair. He had a kind smile on his face and a gentle yet playful warmth in his eyes.

“Well, if it isn’t little Miss Agott.” He chuckled, “I haven’t seen you since you were crawling.”

“Agott, this is Lord Beldaruit. He served as an advisor to the crown back when your father was still with us.” Qifrey was introduced as he sat on one of the couches. “And, as it happens, he was also my professor.”

“Such a troublemaker back in those days,” Beldaruit teased. “Why, I ought to tell her highness all about the headaches you’ve caused me over the years.”

Qifrey flushed a soft pink. “Please, do spare me.” He cleared his throat and shook his head. “As it stands, we have most pressing matters to attend to.”

“Yes, of course.” Beldaruit sighed and leaned back in his chair. He looked over at the young princess, taking note of her obvious exhaustion. “My dear…I take it you haven’t been resting well.”

Agott shook her head. How was she supposed to rest given the circumstances?
~~~

Beldaruit sighed through his nose, thinking about how best to broach the subject. “You're old enough that I feel it's best to be straightforward with you. As I hear, the queen is very ill and unable to maintain her duties to the crown. With no king and no eligible heir, the nation is in dire need of direction.”

“...A regent,” Agott said quietly. Beldaruit nodded.

“I trust it’s come up in your studies. Yes, as it stands, someone is to be appointed regent until the queen returns to health.”

Qifrey placed a comforting hand on Agott’s shoulder. “I know it’ll be difficult to get used to, but it must be done. You’re far too young to see to the responsibility of the crown. I assure you, as not only a lord, but a trusted advisor and good friend, I can vouch that Beldaruit will take on that responsibility with the utmost care and grace.”

Agott’s expression was tense. She held on to the arms of her chair. “I have to know. What happens if my mother does not recover?”

Silence fell between the two men as they exchanged a glance.

“My dear, you mustn’t think like that.”

“The physicians are doing everything they can to ensure her health.”

“Just tell me!” Agott abruptly stood from her chair. Qifrey stood and immediately tried to console her, looking over at Beldaruit for help.

Bedlaruit looked at her with an expression she couldn't quite read. Not pity, nor understanding, but a quiet acceptance. When he spoke, his tone was even and sure.

“If she does not recover, then I will remain regent until after your coronation and your coming of age.”

Agott gritted her teeth and stormed off back towards her room. She couldn't accept this.

“Agott!” Qifrey called after. Beldaruit shook his head.

“Let her go.”

“But she-”

“Give her some space to calm down. She’s already lost so much. I promise I’ll smooth things over with her, but for now, we *all* need to breathe.”

Qifrey unclenched his fists and sat back down on the couch, shoulders slumping. “I don’t know what to do. I’m at a complete loss. As if the news about her mother wasn’t enough, to think of her finding out about those *awful* flyers at the festival.”

“She’s bound to discover the truth one way or another.” Beldaruit offered him a gentle look. “Come now, you know you cannot shield her from everything.”

“She is so *terribly* young. I look at her, and I see the very same little girl I met when I first arrived at the palace.” Qifrey shook his head. “She should be enjoying these precious years, not shouldering the burdens of a nation.”

Beldaruit picked up a cup of tea from the table, the liquid long gone cold. “Children are resilient. You taught me that much when you were her age.”

“*Children* shouldn’t have to be.” Qifrey whispered bitterly.

“I agree with you.” He took a sip before gently setting the teacup back down with a soft clink. “It’s a most unfortunate situation, and I intend to alleviate some of her stress to whatever extent I can. Be that as a regent or as a mentor.”

“Your services are most appreciated.” Qifrey picked the teapot and poured another cup for his professor. “I do so wish I could give her just a few moments' relief in such a difficult time. Anything to take her mind off the truth. More time with that girl from town, a day from lessons, a few more hours rest. *Anything.”*

Beldaruit blinked. “A girl from town, you say?”

Qifrey nodded and set down the teacup. “A tailor's daughter named Coco. Agott seemed to take quite a liking to her. Honestly, I hadn’t seen such a smile on her face in so long before the two met.”

Beldaruit drummed his fingers on the edge of the chair. “Well, given the circumstances, Agott is in no position to leave the palace grounds.”

Qifrey sighed and nodded his agreement.

“However,” a small smile pulled at Beldaruit's lips. “I may have an idea of a way we can help take the young princess’s mind off things.”

~~~

A knock on Agott’s door pulled her from her thoughts. She lifted her head from her pillow and turned towards the sound. “Professor Qifrey?”
~~~

“Not quite.” Beldaruit gently opened the door. “May I come in?”

Agott hesitated. She wasn't ready to face the truth. Still, it would be rude to turn him away…

“Enter.”

Bedlaruit wheeled himself into the room, stopping just shy of her bed. In his lap was a stack of blank parchment, a quill, and a sealed bottle of ink. She eyed the items skeptically.

“What’s all that for?”

“I’ll explain in a moment, but first, I have a question for you.” He smiled and set the items on her bedside table. “Your professor tells me there's someone in your life right now. Someone you wish you could see again, perhaps?”

Agott’s face burned red. She mentally cursed Qifrey’s name.

“Now now, I apologize for gossiping.” He grinned, “I promise I won’t tell a soul. That being said,” he gestured to the parchment. “How is your penmanship?”

She tilted her head and picked up one of the pages. “I’ve been practicing my cursive as of late…why?”

Beldaruit smiled and handed her the pen. “You, my dear, are going to get Beldaruit’s patented lesson in writing love letters.”

Agott bristled slightly, her face going beet red. She was quick to set down the parchment as if rejecting the very idea.

“Where on earth did you get such an idea?” She choked out.

Beldaruit chuckled and twirled the pen in his hand. “My apologies if I’ve misread the situation, my dear. I was under the impression that you had a sort of crush on this Coco of yours.”

“I don’t.” She crossed her arms, her face in a tight scowl. Then, she thought back to the garden…

“...Maybe I do? I don’t know.” She covered her eyes with her hand. “It’s besides the point. The last time I saw her, she ran away from me. I doubt now is a good time to be sending love letters.”

“Ah, ran away?” He transferred out of his wheelchair and onto the edge of her bed. “And you haven't heard from her since?”

Agott shook her head. It had only been a few days, and yet the time since she’d been able to speak to Coco seemed to stretch on endlessly. Beldaruit tapped his chin.

“Tell you what, we can send out a regular old letter to test the waters.” He handed her one of the slips of parchment. “Nothing fussy, just a simple check-in so she knows you're thinking of her.”

“That could work.” She nodded and took the supplies with her to the desk in the corner of her room. She dipped the pen into the ink and let it hover just above the paper.

A moment of silence passed, and ink dripped down onto the paper in a messy splotch. Agott sighed and let her head fall back.

“What do I even say?”

Beldaruit checkled softly. “A simple greeting would work. Then just relax and write what you’d want her to know.”

Agott set down the pen and rested her chin in her hand. *What she wanted Coco to know…*

She picked up the pen and began to write in neat cursive letters.

~~~

Coco,

A few days have now passed since we last saw each other, and I hope that you are well.
~~~

I apologize for not being able to see you off; as I'm sure you're now aware, something urgent came up. I do regret not being able to say a proper goodbye.
For what it's worth, I do hope you enjoyed the ball. It was my honor to have you as my guest, and should the situation allow it, I would love to host you once more.
Life in the palace is complicated. I find myself taking on more responsibilities with each passing day. Such is expected of a princess, though I can't help but wish I could steal away some time for myself. How are things at the tailor's shop? I'm sure your skills continue to sharpen with every passing day. I'm holding you to your offer to craft a suit for me when the time comes.

She set down her pen for a moment, deep in thought. She was yet to address the elephant in the room. It would be strange not to say anything, right? She lifted the pen once more.

As for what happened at the ball, I'm truly sorry if I caught you off guard. If I offended you in any way, I hope you can find it within your heart to forgive me.
If there is any chance you want to continue speaking with me, please don't hesitate to write me back.
Yours sincerely,
Agott Arklaum.

She finished signing off the letter before sealing it into an envelope, neatly marking it with the address of the tailor's shop. She had taken it upon herself to memorize it.

Beldaruit clapped his hands together cheerfully. "Very good! Now dont you feel much better?"

"Yes, I suppose I do," she smiled as she set the envelope to the side. Bedlaruit plucked another slip of parchment from her bedside table and handed it to her.

"If it's all right with you, I'd like you to write one more letter."

Agott accepted the paper before looking up at him curiously. "Another letter? To whom?"

"I suppose in a way, this one is also for Coco, but it's also for *you,* my dear." He gave her a wink. "I did say we'd be writing love letters."

The princess's cheeks turned rosy at the mere thought of it, eliciting a chuckle from the older man.

"Come now, I promise I won't read it, nor will it ever be sent. In all my years, I've found there's nothing quite as cathartic as a good unsent love letter."

Agott looked back at the pen and ink. "You promise no one else will see it?"

Beldaruit nodded. "I won't read a word of it, and it never has to leave this room."

Agott folded her fingers around the pen, her hands trembling slightly. “What do I even say? Where do I start?”

Beldaruit didn’t move from his spot on the bed, giving the young girl some much-needed privacy while he gently coached her. “Think of what you’d want to tell her if you weren’t worried about affecting your friendship. In other words, what does your heart want to say?”

She wrinkled her nose slightly. It was so overwhelmingly cheesy, and yet it made so much sense. Her pen glided over the paper as she began to write, words pouring out of her.

*My **dearest** Coco,*
Ever since the day we met, my world has changed in so many unexpected ways. And yet, even through the thick of it all, I find myself missing the sight of your smile. You light up every room you walk into effortlessly, and I find myself more drawn towards you with every passing day.
I couldn’t be happier that I ran into you that day at the festival. For a mere short hour, you showed me a world away from the palace; a world where I felt free to be someone outside of a princess.
If I could have one wish, it would be to get away from it all and keep exploring who I truly am with you by my side.
I regret kissing you that night at the ball, and at the same time, I wish I’d done it a hundred times more. Even then, it wouldn’t even begin to cover what I feel for you. At least, what I think I feel. I wish I didn’t doubt myself so much. Every time we meet, I find myself just a bit more certain. I don’t know what I want to be to you, but I know you’re someone I simply couldn't bear to lose. Something as simple as loving another feels so terribly complex, but I know I don’t want to lose this feeling. Not even for a second.
I don’t expect you to feel the same. I only hope that you’ll come to understand just how much you mean to me.
As I prepare to one day take on the crown, I pray you remain a steady source of hope in my life.
With love,
Agott Arklaum.

Agott neatly folded up the letter and slid it into an envelope, marking the corner with a small heart so she could tell it apart. Beldaruit hummed and nodded.

“Very good. Did it help at all?” He asked as he lowered himself back into his wheelchair. Agott nodded and capped off the inkwell.

“I suppose I do feel a bit…lighter.”

Beldaruit grinned. “That’s the spirit. Wouldn’t want you bottling all those feelings. Do that, and before you know it, you'll be older than your dear professor and still keeping everything tight-lipped. It’ll eat you up if you don’t let it out.”

Beldaruit wheeled over and reached for the letter with the little heart on the corner, but Agott hurriedly pushed the correct letter into his hands. “Not that one.”

“Oh, I’m so terribly sorry. My mistake. That could have been a bit of an ordeal.” He set the letter on his lap. “You do want the regular one delivered, yes?”

Agott thought about it before nodding. “Yes, that one can be mailed.”

“Very well then, I’ll see that it is.”

A knock at the door pulled them both from their thoughts as Qifrey poked his head in. “Professor, are you in here?”

Bedlaruit made his way over to the door. “My boy, I do believe enough time has passed that you can simply call me Beldaruit.”

“*Lord* Beldaruit,” Qifrey compromised, “You’ve been summoned. If you don’t mind, I’ll escort you there now.”

“Yes, Yes. I’m coming.” He sighed and turned back to Agott to smile. “I’m terribly sorry to cut things short, but I do believe we were just wrapping up here anyway.”

Agott nodded and watched as her professor ushered the other man down the hallway. She turned back to the letter on her desk before tucking it into her drawer for safekeeping.

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As the pair arrived outside of two heavy doors, Beldaruit turned his attention to his past student, handing him the envelope. “Would you kindly see that this is delivered? I fear these summons lead to terribly long meetings, and I’d like to have it sent out before sundown.”

Qifrey nodded and accepted the parcel. “Consider it done. Best of luck to you.”

“I’ll be just fine. Thank you for your concern.” Beldaruit offered his former student a thoughtful look. Qifrey bowed slightly before taking his leave.

As the doors opened, Beldaruit found himself in a room with three men inside. A physician, an apothecary, and a knight.
~~~

Coco sighed deeply and rested her head in her arms. It had been a long and slow day at the tailor shop, with only one or two customers stopping in to look around. Despite it being the social season, the incident at the summer ball had significantly delayed any orders that they otherwise would have had to work on. She kicked her legs under her desk as she looked out the window in search of something to entertain herself with.

In the distance, she saw a man approaching and recognized him as a courier. That was strange; they weren't expecting any fabric deliveries that she was aware of, and even if they were, he only carried a small letterbag.

Well, that was interesting enough.

Coco slipped out of her chair and hurried down the stairs, running over to the window and pressing her hands against the glass.

"You know, if you leave fingerprints all over the place, I'm going to make you clean them all off." Her mother chuckled as she folded some laundry. Coco giggled softly and stuck her nose up against the glass as well.

The courier didn't knock, nor did he look up long enough to acknowledge the young girl watching him work. He slipped a single letter through the slot in the door before turning around and going on his way.

Coco hurried over to the door and scooped it up in her hands.

"What did you get?"

She jumped as she felt a hand on her shoulder, looking up to face her mom. "Are we waiting on any letters?"

Her mother thought about it and shook her head. "Not unless someone wanted to place an order."

Coco looked down again at the envelope, turning it over in her hands. She nearly gasped when she saw the royal seal on the back.

"It's from the palace! It's from Agott!"

Without so much as another word, she ran past her mom and straight up the stairs to her room. Once she was alone with the door closed, she dove onto her bed stomach first and broke open the seal, kicking her legs behind her.

As the letter slipped out of the envelope, she took great care in unfolding it.

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“Coco?” Richeh yanwed as she opened the door. “I was in the middle of a nap…”

“Sorry! I’m sorry! But it’s urgent.” She thrust the letter out to her friend. “Can you read cursive?”

~~~

“I don’t understand. Wasn’t the invitation to the ball in cursive, too?”

“It was, but I didn't actually read it.” Coco scratched her cheek as she sat on the edge of Richeh’s bed. “I just knew Agott was sending one, and my mom did the RSVP…”

Richeh held one of her stuffed animals in her lap. “So why not ask your mom to read it to you? No need to run across town just to show it to me.”

“I couldn't do that! She still doesn’t know that Agott *kissed me!* What if she mentions it in the letter? I’d never hear the end of it.” She shook her head. Richeh nodded and tapped her chin.

“I see…that makes sense. I know if I heard my daughter caught the eye of the princess, I’d be worried she’d be swept off her feet and taken straight to the palace.”

“No one is sweeping anyone off their feet!”

“You say that now…”

Coco slapped her cheeks to calm down. “Just tell me if you can read it!”

“Riliphin sometimes writes letters home in cursive, so I can pluck out most of the words.” Richeh unfolded the letter, “You don’t mind me reading it?”

“We’ve been best friends since we were babies. Anything Agott says to me, you should be able to hear too.” Coco shrugged.

Richeh nodded slightly. “Okay, but if it gets gross and sappy, I’m going to make a face.”

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Beldaruit settled into a chair and looked at the group of men. “Thank you all for waiting. I expect there is news?”
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The first man, the palace physician, nodded solemnly. “It’s as we feared. Despite continuous rest and supportive care, her Majesty’s condition has not shown much improvement.”

Beldaruit sighed and gave a curt nod. The main question on his mind is yet to be uttered. He looked over to the knight, a man he recognized as someone who had served the late king when he was still acting as an advisor.

“Easthies,” he began cautiously, “You were present during the late king's decline. I trust you know exactly what I’m going to ask you.”

The red-clad man looked down for a moment, mumbling something that sounded like ‘rest his soul,’ before addressing him directly.

“The queen's symptoms do unfortunately bare some resemblance to his majesty's, but are not to the extent that his were at the time of his passing.”

Beldaruit folded his hands. “Then there is still time. It is imperative that we don’t lose hope, for the queen, the nation, and Agott’s sake.”

The apothecary and the physician nodded sharply, and Easthies grit his teeth. All four men knew very well what was at stake.

“As acting regent, I will take care of our great nation and its people. I leave the care of our queen in your capable hands. If there is anything needed from me, I will make myself readily available.” Beldaruit put his hand over his heart and bowed his head. “God save the queen.”

“God save the queen,” the three men echoed.

The physician stepped out to return to the queen's side, and the apothecary followed shortly after. Easthies turned to Beldaruit.

“Your lordship,” he handed him an envelope sealed in red wax. “A letter has arrived from the neighboring kingdom to the west. Seeing as her Majesty is incapacitated, I leave this matter to you.”

Bedlaruit accepted the letter and set it in his lap. “I shall see to it promptly, thank you. You are dismissed.”

~~~
Coco was blushing and giddy by the time Richeh had finished the letter.

“Agott wants to see me again! I didn’t mess it all up!” She squealed and giggled. Richeh set the letter aside and looked at her friend.
~~~

“It sounds like she was more worried that she had offended *you* than anything. Hopefully, now you can both clear the air.”

Coco sat up and began looking for a pen and paper. “Right! I should send a letter back straight away and let her know what really happened.”

The young girl hummed happily under her breath, softly singing ‘Agott wants to see me’ as quietly as she could.

Richeh dug through a drawer and handed Coco a pen and ink. “There's some paper on my desk if you’d like.”

Coco was quick to start her own letter, writing as neatly as she could despite her hands shaking with excitement.

Agott,
I’m so happy to hear from you again, and I sincerely hope you are doing alright. Please do not worry about the ball, I got home safely with my mother and Richeh. I would love nothing more than to be your guest once more, but I understand that may not be for a while. I do remember my promise, and as soon as we are able, I’d love to get some more measurements to tailor a suit for you! Things are slow at my mother’s shop despite the social season, but we have enough in savings that we aren’t going to struggle. I do hope business returns soon.
There is absolutely no need for an apology for what happened in the garden. In fact, I’m glad you kissed me. I only wish I could have done the same.

Coco blushed at her own words and quickly scratched the last line out.

I hope my letter finds you well, and if there is any way I can provide you with some comfort in your difficult time, please let me know. You mean so much to me, and I hate to think that you’re struggling right now.
Yours,
Coco.

Coco sealed the letter into an envelope and looked around. “Do you have any wax?”

“We have wax, but no fancy seal.” Richeh rummaged through the drawer and handed her a stick of beeswax.

“That's okay! I have an idea.”

Using a match, she carefully melted the wax so it dripped over the fold of the envelope. Once it dried and hardened, she carved a small heart onto the surface with a tiny ‘C’ in the middle. “There, perfect!”

Richeh peeked over her shoulder. “Nice touch.”

“Thank you!” She giggled and tucked the envelope into her bag. “Now I just need to get this to Agott…I think there are a few merchants in town that deal in postal services for nobles. I think I have some pocket money I can use to get this sent!”

“Good luck.” Richeh gave a thumbs up as Coco hurried off towards town.

Coco hurried through town, having only briefly stopped by her house to bring what little pocket money she had jingling in her pocket. She rushed along the main road leading towards the shops, hoping to get there before the merchants began taking down their stalls.

As she arrived at the edge of town, her eyes landed on a stall she knew offered postal services for a small fee. The palace wasn't too far away, and if she was lucky, she might even have copper leftover for a second letter.

Coco made a beeline for the stall, and was so focused on her mission that she didnt see someone back up from another stall directly into her path. The two collided, knocking her to the ground.

“Oh! I’m so sorry, I didn’t see you there and I-”

She looked up and froze at the sight of a long cloak. Her body locked up, and a shudder rippled through her muscles. *Not them. Anyone but them.*

The man turned around, revealing not a hooded brimcloak, but Dagda.

“Coco,” He smiled softly. “Terribly sorry, I was just picking up some food for Coustas and me. It’s my fault, shouldn’t have backed up so abruptly.”

Dagda reached down and extended his hand to help her up, but paused when he saw the look on the young girl's face. He knelt down to be level with her.

“Sorry to give you such a start, but what’s with that face? Looks like you’ve seen a ghost.”

Coco hurriedly snapped out of it and shook her head, taking his hand and standing up before brushing off her skirt. “I’m ok, Mister Dagda, sorry. I was just a bit startled, is all.”

Dagda shook his head. “No sorry needed, but are you sure you’re alright? You’re awfully pale.”

Coco hesitated, briefly considering whether she should tell the truth. She didn’t know Dagda well, but he was an adult, and he might know what to do.

No, the brimcloaks had made themselves clear. Not a word about what she saw. Or else…

She shook her head again and plastered on a smile. “I really am alright, I promise!”

‘Well, if you insist.” Dagda sighed and rubbed his neck. He looked down and saw the letter Coco had dropped upon the impact and picked it back up for her. “There we are. Sending out a letter?”

Coco nodded and smiled a bit more genuinely, her fear momentarily fading to the back of her mind. “Yes, I think that stall behind you can mail it for a few copper.”

“Can’t say I would know, what with all the moving around of travel. I do hope you find what you’re looking for.” He gently patted her on the back. “Best be off then before they close up shop.”

She smiled and waved goodbye before hurrying off to the stall. Dagda sighed and shook hs head. Something was definitely a bit off…

~~~

Beldaruit closed the door to his chambers and moved into a chair at his desk, setting the letter on the table in front of him. He slit the very top of the envelope with a letter opener and slid out the note inside.

The family crest pressed into the parchment was one he hadn’t seen in years, not since the late king was still with them. Despite himself, a frown caused his brow to crease.

King Deanreldy.

He skimmed the letter first, then went back again and hung on to each word. Of all times to request an audience, he chose now. Surely that was no mere coincidence.

On the surface, Deanreldy was your ordinary beloved ruler. He regarded his subjects with respect, personally led many wars, and brought great prosperity to his kingdom.

Behind closed doors? Beldaruit saw straight through him.

There was something that simmered below the surface, something that could only be described as hungry.

The last time Beldaruit had seen the man was at the funeral. No one would believe him if he spoke up, but he *swore* the look in the man’s eyes was nothing short of *satisfaction.*

A shiver coursed through his body despite the relative warmth of his chambers, fireplace crackling with life a mere few feet away. If it were in his power, he'd toss the letter straight into the hearth. Nothing good could come from meeting with such a man.

Still, even the late king had called Beldaruit paranoid, and it wasn’t his place to muddle with foreign affairs. He was simply to maintain good relations until the queen returned to health. A quick meeting, then. Simple pleasantries, then send him on his way. No use giving him any ammunition while the queen was ill.

He sighed and picked up his quill to draft a response.
~~~

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A knock on her door roused Agott from sleep. She blinked and rubbed her eyes as a small yawn passed her lips, sitting up in bed. She shuffled over to the door and opened it just a crack to see who was there.

“Good morning, your highness.” Qifrey smiled, holding a letter in one hand and the doorframe with the other. “Sorry to wake you so early, but I do believe your lessons start in an hour.”

“Not dancing, I should hope.” She blinked before eyeing the letter. Qifrey handed it over to her.

“History with Professor Olruggio, *then* dancing.” He chuckled and crossed his arms. Agott sat on her bed and turned the letter over in her hands. Her vision was still foggy from recently having woken up, and she had to rub her eyes again just to clear away the remaining fuzz.

As soon as she lowered her hand, her vision focused on the little seal that held the letter closed. A tiny ‘C’ was engraved on the back, shallow, but just deep enough to be made out.

Coco, no doubt.

Her heart fluttered as she hurriedly went to break the seal, but she could still see Qifrey out of the corner of her eye. She shooed him off with her hand, eliciting a chuckle from her professor.

“I know where I’m not wanted. I’ll see you tonight for your etiquette lecture. Do try to eat something.”

The door clicked shut once more, and Agott slipped her thumb just beneath the seal, breaking it loose from the parchment. Inside was a neatly folded letter.

Coco’s handwriting wasn’t cursive, but it carried its own sort of gentle and timeless elegance. Her lines were straight and neat, like the careful cuts of a craftsman with their fabric. Agott ran her fingers over each line as she read, not daring to risk missing a single word.

Her heart thrummed the more she read, heat rising up to her cheeks. Suddenly, she was all the more glad she’d dismissed her professor. Her finger stopped at the end of a particular line.

In fact, I’m glad you kissed me. ~~I only wish I could have done the same.~~

She nearly choked. The first line was enough to stop her heart in its place as is, but the second one, hastily scratched out and still just barely legible. *I only wish I could have done the same.*
~~~

She covered her mouth with her hand to hide a smile no one else could have seen anyway. Coco wasn't upset with her. In fact, she was *happy* about the kiss. That alone brought her so much ease.

Now more than ever, Agott longed to have the other girl by her side. But with the situation… Suddenly, the light, fluttery feeling in her chest dropped. A chill ran up her spine beneath her nightgown. Despite the time passing, she was yet to be allowed to see her mother.

She shook her head. The rest of the letter needed reading.

She continued running her finger over the parchment as she read, and her expression softened. Coco's gentle yet insistent offer that she wanted to help was written out in determined letters. Oh, what did she do to deserve her?

A letter in return would (unfortunately) have to wait. Her stomach rumbled loudly. Qifrey was right to mention breakfast.

Agott groaned and stretched her arms above her head. Dance lessons were exhausting enough, but she still hadn't gotten a solid night of sleep in the past few days. Luckily, Olruggio seemed to notice her glaring fatigue and let her nap through half of her history lesson. Unfortunately for her, that meant now she had a bit more to review in her free time.

Despite her professor's insistence that she focus on keeping herself healthy, she wouldn't feel right leaving half a lesson unlearned.

She slipped into the library, her preferred place of study outside of her room, and cozied up with a book on one of the more recent wars. She was only a few pages in when the sound of a teacup clattering against a saucer caught her attention.

Qifrey set down two steaming cups of tea on the table in front of her before taking a seat on the opposite side. "Care for some company?"

Agott nodded and tucked a bookmark between the pages, setting things aside so she could take a sip of tea while it was still hot. Qifrey picked up his own teacup and smiled.

"Olruggio suspected I may find you here. I'll have to thank him for the tip next time I see him. As it happens, I was looking for you."

"Well, I suppose you've found me." Agott set down her tea and folded her hands in her lap. "Is everything alright?"

Qifrey hummed and set down his teacup as well, folding his hands in a way that mirrored her mannerisms. After all, it was a habit she had likely picked up from him in the first place. "There are a few things I'd like to discuss, the first being your mother."

Agott paused, unsure how to react. She nodded for him to continue.

"She appears to be stable for the time being, and is coherent enough that she's asked for you." Qifrey explained. His tone was even, not enthusiastic, but not wary either. He knew very well that this could just be an eye in the storm. Agott gave a small, hesitant nod. Seeing her mother could be hit or miss, even when she was well, but at the same time, she had been anxiously awaiting the news that she could visit.

A mother was a mother.

"The second thing," Qifrey gently nudged his teacup with his finger, "was simply a curiosity. That letter you received, it was from Coco, was it not?"

Agott flushed slightly, but didn't deny it. "How could you tell?"

“I hear it was delivered from a merchant's service rather than a royal courier.” He hummed. “And it’s infrequent for a letter to arrive addressed specifically to you.”

A merchant's service? Agott admittedly didn’t know much about them, but she could only assume it had cost a fee. Suddenly, she felt a bit more conscious of her decision to make Coco her pen pal. Perhaps she’d see if she could send a courier the day following a letter to see if there was one to be mailed back.

“Yes, it was a letter from Coco.”

“How wonderful.” Qifrey smiled warmly. “I trust you’re getting along well. Cleared up your little miscommunication?”

Agott nodded, her blush deepening as she thought back to Coco’s letter. Qifrey smiled knowingly.

“You remember Princess Tetia from the summer ball, do you not?” He asked.

She nodded. Tetia had taken a carriage home early in the morning after the incident, not giving much space for a proper farewell.

“Perhaps you should send her a letter as well. I do think the two of you have more in common than you may think, and it’s important to surround yourself with allies,” Qifrey suggested.

Agott drummed her hands on the arm of the couch. It wasn't a bad idea. Tetia was kind, if a bit excitable. It couldn’t hurt to reach out.

Qifrey slowly stood and gathered Agott’s book under his arm. “I hate to interupt your studying, but if you’re up for it, I think it’s best to visit your mother so she can rest when we’re done.”

The princess nodded and stood to follow after.

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“I trust you’ll handle things cordially.”

Beldaruit lingered by the Queen's bedside and nodded in response. Adina was propped up in bed, her parlor slightly improved, but still quite pale.

“Of course, he will be treated with the utmost respect.”

Adina sighed and leaned back against the headboard. “Good, I know you have your grievances with that man, but he’s an important ally.”
~~~

Beldaruit held his tongue. For such an ‘important ally’, he only seemed interested in conversation when it would benefit him. Such was a common truth in politics. “My personal feelings on the matter will not interfere, I assure you.”

“Then I trust you will report back when the meeting concludes. When will he arrive?”

“Two days' time.”

A soft knock at the door caused both of their heads to turn. As Agott poked her head in, Beldaruit turned to the queen and bowed. “I’ll be taking my leave, then.”

As Beldaruit passed by Qifrey and Agott, he gave each of them a comforting pat on the shoulder. Qifrey gave Agott a final comforting smile. “I’ll be waiting at the door. Take your time.”

The door clicked shut, and Agott approached her mother's bedside quietly. Adina reached a hand out from under the blanket, and Agott hesitantly took it in her own.

“How are you feeling?” Agott whispered.

Adina sighed and gave her daughter's hand a gentle squeeze in a rare display of quiet affection. When was the last time she’d held Agott’s hand? Not since before the king passed, she was certain. “Better today. The physician says I’ve regained some strength.” She gestured to a chair that the physician had left next to her bed for her daughter's impending visit.

Taking a seat, Agott looked back up at her mother. “Do you think you’ll recover soon then?”

“It’s difficult to say. I’ve been poked and prodded relentlessly, but still no sign of the root cause.” Adina looked her daughter over. “You're slouching.”

Agott strained her back. “I’m sorry, I’m very tired.”

“Not sleeping well? A princess should strive to maintain both health and appearance.”

“My mother suddenly collapsed, and I was unable to speak with her for *days.* Surely not even a princess could be expected to be at her best.” Agott said bitterly.

Adina shook her head. “You know I won't accept such an excuse. I expect more from you.”

A sinking, bitter feeling began to swirl in Agott’s chest. “Don’t lecture *me* about my health. Not when you collapsed.”

“You’re my daughter, and heir to the throne. It is well within my right to lecture you.” The queen’s expression soured slightly. “It’s unlike you to talk back.”

“I’m not talking back. I’m speaking my mind, is that such a terrible crime?”

“With children, there is no difference.” Adina’s voice was firm despite its strained quality.

Agott gritted her teeth. “Yes, mother.”

“Good.” The queen released her hand and pulled it back under the covers. “How are your studies?”

“They’re going well. Professor Olruggio gave a lecture today, and I’ve just had my dance lessons.” Agott fidgeted with her hands.

“And you’re keeping up?”

“Of course.”

“Then you shouldn’t have much issue when I have them doubled.”

Doubled? Agott looked up sharply, confusion etched into her features. Adina barely acknowledged her. “Starting as soon as the professors have time to adjust their lesson plans, you will begin taking five lessons per day instead of three.” She looked over at Agott’s dismayed expression. “You should be grateful. If I were to truly double them, it would be six.”

“That’s completely unreasonable. When am I to eat? And you just said yourself how important it was for me to rest.” Agott protested firmly. Adina shook her head.

“You’ll still have time for breakfast and dinner. Take your lunch while lessons are in session if you must. Honestly, Agott, you need to take this seriously. What I’m asking for you isn’t impossible.”

“Not impossible, but perhaps just shy of it,” Agott spat. “What could possibly be the reasons for this? Why ramp up my course load so suddenly? What are you trying to prepare me for?’

Adina responded with harsh silence, letting her expression do the talking. Agott’s breath hitched.

“You think you're going to *die,* don't you?” She choked out. “You think you're going to die as father did, and you’re trying to prepare me for the throne. I won’t accept that!”

“Agott,”

“*No.* The physicians said you were stabilizing. You're sitting up, you’re *talking to me.”*

“You were too little to remember how it was with your father. You wouldn't understand.”

“Then help me understand!” Agott reached for her mother's hand again, but found only blankets. Adina did not soothe her, nor did she make an effort to reach back.

“Agott, you cannot fault me for making preparations. Beldaruit can only act as Regent for so long. This is how I can best prepare you for your future.”

She didn’t want to be told the truth. Agott wanted her mother to comfort her, promise she’d try and be strong. She wanted to be told it would all be all right somehow. Instead of asking for what she needed, she stood abruptly and stormed out.

Adina watched her daughter go and sighed before a cough seized her.

~~~

“Agott, please.” Qifrey chased after the girl as she stormed down the hallway. The young girl burst out into the garden before he could catch up. He hurriedly looked around before finding her ducled behind the gazebo.

“Oh, Agottt…” He knelt down beside her. “I’m so sorry.”

The princess wiped tears off her cheeks as she sat in the grass. “Were you listening?”

“Only at the very end, when I heard shouting. I didn’t want to intrude.” He gently took her hand in his. “Do you need a hug?”

Agott threw her arms around his neck and hugged him tight, quiet sobs muffled against his neck. Qifrey gently rubbed soothing circles on her back as she cried. “It’s alright, my dear, you’re going to be alright.”

The poor girl looked miserable. Her mother was sick, her father gone, and the pressure of the throne looming overhead. If only there were a way he could help take her mind off things.

“May I ask what she said that made you so terribly upset?” He pulled back and cupped her cheek.

Agott sniffled softly. “She’s increasing my lessons to prepare me for an early ascent to the throne.”

Qifrey’s expression softened at the implication. Agott was smart; she must have understood. An uptick in lessons would likely be implemented within the week. He didn’t have much time…

An idea struck him as he withdrew his hand. “Let’s go back inside and write a few letters, shall we? I think I may have an idea.”
~~~

“A tea party?”

Qifrey nodded and slid two sheets of parchment across Agott’s desk. “I don’t quite understand your reluctance. Tea parties are a perfectly acceptable way for noble ladies to socialize. I simply thought it might be a nice way for you to relax a bit before your increase in studies. Besides, her highness Tetia seemed to enjoy having tea with you when she was over.”

Agott huffed and twirled the pen between her fingers. “It’s not that im entirely opposed to the idea, I just don't understand how I’m supposed to indulge in something so frivolous at a time like this.”

“Sometimes, my dear, the most frivolous of things are what we need most when things look bleak.” Qifrey patted her shoulder. “I won’t force you, but I do ask that you take the time to consider.”

The princess bit her lip as she gripped the pen, eyeing the parchment like it was a traitor.

“It’ll give you your best excuse to see Coco.”

Agott snapped her head towards her professor, taking in the smug look on his face. “That’s not playing fair.”

“When have I ever been known to pay fair when it involves your well-being?”

She let out another huff, her body all puffed out like an indignant cat. “You can be so insufferable.”

Qifrey placed a hand over his heart. “Insufferable? I’m wounded.” He chuckled and leaned over to gently nudge the pot of ink and inch closer to her hand. “Well? What will it be?”

~~~

“I see. So you’ve told Agott to host a little get-together?” Beldaruit set a book back on the table in front of him. Qifrey had come rather suddenly to his chambers bearing the news.

“I trust that won't be an issue?” The younger man smiled, the slightest touch of mischief in his expression.

Beldaruit sighed. Boys grew up into men, but goodness, they didnt change all that much. “You’re aware you should have informed me of this plan before putting it into action. With heightened security, I’m not so sure it will be allowed. Even with her highness Tetia being a princess, the knights are denying entry to most everyone.”
~~~

“Ah, yes, of course. Nothing says ‘threat to national security’ like a gaggle of twelve-year-old girls.”

“*Qifrey,”* Beldaruit cautioned. “You know very well that in a time of crisis, everyone is treated as a suspect, regardless of their age.”

“For goodness sake, they’re *children*, not a radical group.” Qifrey waved his hand with a flourish. “If we cannot offer her highness the slightest bit of relief during this difficult time, what good are we?”

Beldaruit turned himself around to face his former pupil. “I understand your frustration, truly, I do. But this is ultimately a decision for the knight's moralis.”

Qifrey narrowed his eyes. “You’re not suggesting I talk to *him,* are you?”

“If by ‘him’ you mean Easthies, then yes. Captain Vinanna as well.” Bedlaruit confirmed with a firm tone. “You want to do this for Agott, you’ll have to arrange it through the proper channels. That includes discussions with the knights.”

A groan passed Qifrey's lips as he ran a hand through his hair. If he must, he would.

~~~

Qifrey sat across from the two knights, a pained smile plastered on his face. Vinanna was rubbing her chin while Easthies looked just short of furious. The former spoke up first.

“Well, I can’t say I'd be comfortable letting two girls from town into the palace so soon after what went down at the festival.” Vinanna crossed her arms. “I understand they’re children, but no one has seen the brimcloaks since that day. There's no telling what could happen should we open the gates for anyone other than the absolute necessities. Besides, once we start making exceptions, the line starts to blur.”

“I say it’s just plain foolish,” Easthies spat. Vinanna shot him a look, and he backed down.

Qifrey crossed his arms. “Has there ever been a time when you didn't think a proposition from me was foolish?” He challenged.

“That says far less about me than it does your propositions.”

“Boys.” The captain said firmly, causing both men to stiffen before looking away from one another. She sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose. “Letting outsiders into the inner workings of the palace where the queen is resting is absolutely out of the question.”

Easthies smirked triumphantly, but Vinanna kicked his shin, eliciting a yelp. “However,” she continued, “I believe we can come to a compromise.”
~~~

Qifrey perked up slightly, leaning forward to listen. The captain paused for a moment to think before speaking once more.

“The gardeners and landscapers are still allowed access to the gardens through the back gate. I presume that’s where you intended on hosting tea, correct?”

“Yes, you’d be correct. In the gazebo, to be precise.” Qifrey explained.

Vinanna nodded. “If it's heavily supervised, I don’t see why the girls couldn’t use that same gate to have a brief get-together in the garden itself. Just as long as no one enters the palace that isn't her highness herself.”

“You’re serious?”

“That would be wonderful, thank you.” Qifrey nodded before giving Easthies a triumphant smirk of his own. Vinanna rolled her eyes at the childish antics.

“One day, the two of you ought to stop behaving like you’re petty schoolboys.”

Qifrey pointedly ignored her comment and continued on. “I suppose we should discuss arrangements for the upcoming event then, that is, if everyone is on board?” He looked back to Eathies, who begrudgingly sighed and nodded. “Wonderful! It seems we have a tea party to plan.”

~~~

Tetia was sitting in her room, humming a song under her breath as she read a book. A knock on her door caused her to perk up. “Come in!” She happily chirped.

A maid bowed respectfully before entering and handing her a letter. Tetia turned it over in her hands before squinting at the seal. “Oh! It’s from Agott!” She turned back to the maid with a smile. “Thank you, you're free to go~.”

Tetia hurried back to her bed, the plush mattress giving way to cradle her like a large cloud as she curled up and opened the letter, hurriedly reading it over. When she saw the words ‘tea party’, she squealed with delight and jumped back out of bed. “Oh! Where’s that pink dress? It’ll be perfect!”

~~~

Coco and Richeh were in Coco’s room, both doing their own separate tasks while enjoying each other’s company. The sounds of footsteps coming up the stairs broke the girls from their thoughts momentarily.

“Coco?” Her mother smiled, a letter in hand. “Another message from the palace arrived for you.”

Coco scurried over to look at the letter, opening it in a hurry before realizing all at once she still couldn't read it. “Stupid cursive…”

“I’ve got it.” Richeh plucked the letter from her hands. Coco’s mother chuckled and shook her head.

“You sure are getting more letters these days, and from the palace no less. I didn't realize my Coco was so popular with royalty.”

“Mom!” Coco blushed. Her mother patted her head before turning and heading back downstairs to give the girls some privacy.

Once they were alone, Richeh and Coco sat on the floor together, the former reading aloud while the latter hung to every word. When the letter was done, Richeh blinked slowly. “What exactly does one wear to a tea party?”

Coco's mother read over the letter with a sigh before looking back up at her daughter, growing slightly at the hopeful sparkle in her eyes. "I thought I told you I didn't want you leaving the house until things calmed down."

"I know," Coco sighed and wrung out her hands, pouting like a sad puppy. "But we'd be supervised by the royal guards themselves. Isn't that super safe?'

Her hair was gently ruffled as her mother crouched down to meet her at eye level. "In theory, yes, the palace is very secure. But from what I heard, the royal family is currently a target. I don't want you getting mixed up in the crossfire. This family will have nothing to do with the Brimcloaks."

Coco had to hold her tongue so as not to say, '*It's too late for that, so just let me go see my friend.'* She clasped her hands together in a pleading motion. "Please, Mom? It'll be daytime, and I'll come back before it's even close to dark. I promise I'll be careful. Besides, it's been a few days without anyone even seeing a Brimcloak."

Her mother sighed and furrowed her brow. "You're a smart girl, and I want to trust your judgment, I really do. But it's also my job to keep you safe." She slowly shook her head. "I'm sorry, honey, but unless I can talk to a trusted adult that will be watching you, the answer is no."

~~~

Agott was slumped over her bowl, a pout on her face. Qifrey immediately took notice and approached her. "You look positively glum. What's troubling you?"

The princess pushed her spoon around the bowl and sighed. "Coco wrote back. Her mother says she isn't allowed to come unless there's a 'trusted adult' she can talk to."

"A trusted adult, hmm?" he touched his chin. "Well, aside from a few of the knights attending, I'll be there personally. Perhaps I can offer some persuasion."

Agott perked up slightly. "You'll write to her mother then?"

He smiled and squeezed her shoulder. "I'll do you one better. There's still some time left before our lesson together this evening, I think a quick trip into town is in order."

~~~

Coco was curled up by the window, still upset that her mother had turned her down. She was looking out into the distance when she saw a carriage approaching. Another letter so soon? Her heart sank to think of what Agott's reply might be. She hoped the princess wasn't too disappointed…

To her surprise, when the carriage door swung open, the man who stepped out was one she'd seen before the day Agott had first visited the shop. He certainly didn't look like a courier.

The door to the shop opened with the soft chime of bells, and the white-haired man stepped inside. “Ah, Coco. We meet again.” He offered her a kind smile. Coco’s mother lifted her head from her sewing and stood to greet him.

“Professor Qifrey, to what do we owe the pleasure?”

“I do hope I’m not overstepping, but I came to discuss Agott’s tea party proposal with you a bit further. I thought perhaps a conversation between us adults may ease your mind.”

Coco’s mother sighed and put her hands on her hips. She looked between her daughter and the professor. “Well, a conversation wouldn’t hurt.”

A small, excited squeal slipped past Coco’s lips despite her hurried attempts to conceal it. Qifrey chuckled, and he mother sighed. “No getting your hopes up, it’s just a conversation.”

The adults made themselves comfortable in the corner, and it took all of Coco’s restraint not to eavesdrop.

~~~

“Can I get you anything? Tea perhaps?”

Qifrey politely shook his head. “No, thank you. I appreciate the offer, but I don't want to occupy too much of your time.” He folded his hands and relaxed his shoulders. “I’ll get directly to the heart of the matter. I understand you have some reluctance in allowing Coco to pay the palace a visit.”

Coco’s mother nodded and sighed. “You are correct. I don’t mean any offense by it; I simply worry for her, given all that has occurred recently.”

“I assure you no offense is taken. I feel a great deal of worry regarding the matter myself.” Qifrey agreed. “Though I came to ask what you would need as a mother to help ease your mind, even slightly. I understand that seeing one another means a great deal to the children.”

She thought about it for a moment, drumming her fingers on the arm of her chair. “Where is this event being held again?”

“The palace gardens. Multiple knights will be supervising the affair, as well as I. Should you like, the invitation extends to you as well, so you may personally ensure your daughter is well looked after and comfortable,” Qifrey explained. Coco’s mother gave another nod, her rigid posture easing ever so slightly.

“I should like that, thank you. The palace grounds are monitored?”
~~~

“By the Knights Moralis, yes. I assure you, it’s very secure. Though if you still hold reservations, I can explain further. Of course, I respect your right to decline altogether as well.”

“Thank you.” She looked over at her daughter, expression softening at the hopeful gaze that met her own. “Well…alright. A brief get-together in a secure place.”

Qifrey smiled and stood. “Wonderful. Please don’t hesitate to reach out with any questions you may have. I’ll arrange for a carriage to pick the three of you up on the afternoon of the occasion.”

As he left, Coco ran over and hugged her mom. “Did I hear him right? I can go?”

Her mother chuckled and leaned down to kiss her forehead. “You heard right. Go bring down that nice white dress I made for you last spring. I think it should still fit, and I’ll iron it for you.”

Coco giggled and hurried off to grab the garment.

~~~

When Agott returned to her room after her lesson, she found Qifrey waiting by the door, a smile on his face.

“Better pick out something nice to wear. Your little tea party is back on.”

~~~

Agott could barely pay attention to the rest of the day’s lessons with the excitement that was building up. She was finally going to see Coco again, and not only that, but it would be the first time she’d seen her since they exchanged letters confirming they had some sort of *feelings* for one another. She didn’t know if she should be overjoyed or absolutely terrified.

That night, sleep eluded her for the longest time. She was up so late that she very nearly overslept her first lesson of the day.

“What did I say about getting enough rest?” Olruggio gently scolded when he first saw her. Agott rubbed her eyes and shook her head.

“Sorry, Professor.”

Her mother would never have allowed her to miss lessons for something like a tea party, so it was arranged to occur during what would have been her lunch. She waited outside as the first of the two carriages pulled up to the gate.

As the door swung open, Tetia practically leaped out and hurried up to the door, flowy pink dress billowing around her. She threw her arms around Agott the second she saw her.

“Agott! I missed you so much! Are you ok? I’m so sorry we didn't get to say a proper goodbye last time. How is your mom?” The princess rambled on as Agott hesitantly patted her back.

“Hello, Tetia. It's good to see you too. Im glad you could make it.” She smiled softly.

Tetia pulled back and looked her over. “You look so tired! Are you not sleeping well?”

“I’m alright, just a bit less sleep than usual lately.”

Before Tetia could press her further, a second carriage began pulling around. She gasped and clapped her hands together. “That must be them! Hey, over here!” Tetia began waving enthusiastically.

Agott’s breath caught in her throat as she first caught sight of Coco. No matter how many times she looked at her, she found herself more captivated each time. Following close behind were Richeh and Coco’s mother. Once the group had gathered, Qifrey stepped forward.

“Thank you all for coming. Forgive me, but no one but her highness is allowed inside the palace at this time. If you all follow me, I’ll take you around to the garden.”

The gate to the garden swung open, and the group made their way inside one by one. As soon as she stepped past the hedges, Agott heard a soft gasp from Coco. All around them, the flowers were still in full bloom. Leaves seemed to almost glitter in the light after having been recently watered, their vibrant flowers like hundreds of little jewels.

At the center of the gazebo, a large white tablecloth had been laid out, and an array of chairs was arranged in a circle. Small towers of sweets, sandwiches, and decorations were placed all across the length of the table.

Qifrey smiled and gestured to the gazebo. “Please, have a seat wherever you'd like. Tea is being prepared inside and will arrive shortly.”

The girls took their seats first, Richeh sitting closest to a tower of scones, and Coco just beside her. Agott blushed faintly as she sat directly beside Coco, and Tetia chose the seat to Agott’s left.

Richeh wasted no time piling her plate with berries and scones, and Tetia hurried to keep up before they would surely all be eaten. While they focused on food, Agott’s attention was fully captivated by the girl beside her.

She cleared her throat and tried to keep her posture in check. “I’m very glad you could make it.”

Coco turned toward her, a warm smile on her face. “I’m so glad I could make it too! I thought it would be a lot longer before we had the chance to speak face-to-face again. As much as I loved your letters, I like being able to see your face.”

“Ah, thank you. I like your face too.”

Agott’s face flamed. *Really? I like your face? Great!*

Coco giggled slightly, covering her mouth with her hand. “Thank you. Oh! Before I forget, do you think we’ll continue to be pen pals?”

“Well, would you like to be?” Agott asked as she flipped her teacup right side up in preparation. Coco nodded eagerly.

“I’d like that very much! I’ve kept both the letters you’ve sent as well as the invitation pinned to the board in my room! You have such beautiful handwriting, by the way, it's so swirly and elegant. There’s just one teensy tiny problem.”

Agott raised an eyebrow. “What kind of problem? Is everything alright?”

“Everything's fine! Well, it’s mostly fine?” Coco waved her hands. “It’s just, well, I don’t know how to read cursive.”

Agott blinked once, then twice. Her hand came up to her forehead.

“You haven’t been able to read a single thing?” Oh, she was so embarrassed.

“Don’t worry about it! Richeh has been my translator, right Richeh?”

The two girls turned to look at the mentioned girl, only to find her dual-wielding scones, mouth full, and bites taken out of both of them. Richeh swallowed and nodded.

“Somebody help me stop her! Agott, take some food before she eats them all!” Tetia reached for a scone herself, only for Richeh to hurriedly put it on her own plate. “Richeh!”

Coco couldn’t help but giggle again as she reached for a cookie from the tower. Agott reached for a sandwich, but their hands brushed before either one could grab what they were after. Both girls immediately startled.

“Oh, Im so sorry I-”

“My apologies, I didn’t mean to-”

They paused and looked at each other, cheeks going red. Coco smiled and pulled back her hand.

“Suddenly I’m feeling a bit too nervous to eat.”

“I won’t hear of it. Here, is this what you were after?” Agott gently picked up a cookie and set it on Coco’s plate. The green-haired girl smiled and nodded.

“Yes, thank you, Agott.”

The princess nodded and smiled. Her name never did sound sweeter than when it came from Coco’s lips. She took a sandwich for herself set it onto her own plate.

“Thank you all for your patience.” Qifrey emerged with a teapot and a triumphant smile. The girls all turned over their cups, and he poured for each of them. As the girls began adding sugar and taking their first sips, Qifrey turned to Coco’s mother. “None for you, then? Are you sure?”

“Quite sure, thank you.” She smiled and shook her head. “I don’t want to get in their way. Thank you again for being so accommodating for us, I feel more at ease knowing I’m close by should they need me.”

Qifrey nodded and set down the tea pot in the center of the table. “Of course, I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

“The gardens are quite beautiful. We have a few blooming plants by the shop, but nothing on this scale.” Coco’s mother smiled and nodded towards the flowers.

“They are quite a spectacular sight this time of year, yes.” As Qifrey took a look around for himself, he spotted a familiar red cloak by the entrance closest to the palace. “Oh, pardon me for a moment. We have a visitor.”

Agott watched as her Professor stepped away, but paid it little mind. She dropped a single cube of sugar into her tea and watched in awe as Tetia added *five.* “Care for a bit of tea with your sugar?”

“Hey! The best things in life are sweet!”

Coco smiled and added two cubes to her own. “Agott, I stir with this spoon here, right?”

“Ah, yes, that's the one.” She nodded before taking a sip from her teacup. As she set it back down, she offered Coco a teasing smile. “Look at you, practically ready to be a princess yourself.”

Another small blush spread across Coco’s cheeks. “I wouldn’t go *that* far.”

“I’m serious. You have an elegance about you, and you’re very friendly and kind. I regretfully am yet to share a dance with you, but I’m willing to bet you’re a natural.” Agott picked up her sandwich. “All the makings of a princess”

Coco leaned over and nudged her with her shoulder. “You think I’m elegant?”

A cough as Agott momentarily choked on her sandwich, followed by a sip of tea to clear her throat. “I meant what I said.”

“Ooo~” Tetia giggled quietly. Agott shot her a look.

“Shouldn’t you be more focused on defending your food?”

“What do you mean? I’ve got my scone right-” She looked down to an empty plate. “*Richeh!”*

“The blueberry ones are even better than the lemon…”

“Give it back!”

“I already ate it. What do you want me to do?”

Agott rolled her eyes and sighed, a small smile on her face despite herself. Coco gently reached under the table and took her hand, causing her to stiffen and turn red.

“You look like you’re having fun. I’m so glad.” Coco’s smile was just as warm as it was impossibly fond.

Agott regained her composure and gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “I suppose I am. Thank you again for being here.”

Coco squeezed back before beginning to pull her hand away. Before she could retract her arm fully, Agott caught her hand again. “Wait.”

Coco flushed bright red, but made no move to pull away. Agott took a deep breath before speaking once more. “Not yet. Just another moment.” She looked up and met Coco’s gaze. “*Please?”*

How could she say no to that? Coco nodded and swallowed the lump that was forming in her throat.

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Across the garden, Easthies checked his pocket watch. It was drawing near the end of Agott’s lunch period. He moved forward to retrieve her, but felt a hand on his shoulder.

“Not another step.”

Easthies whipped his head around, coming face to face with Qifrey. “Is that a threat?”

“Care to find out?”

“Qifrey,” Olruggio interrupted, a hand on his shoulder. “That’s enough. No need to go causing trouble.” He turned to give Easthies an unamused look. “That being said, Agott’s next lesson is with me, and It’s scheduled to be short today. She can spare a little more time. Shouldn’t you be with her Majesty?”

Eathies gritted his teeth before turning on his heels and heading off back towards the palace, leaving Qifrey with a triumphant smile on his face. Olruggio elbowed him in the shoulder. “You know better than to go picking fights with the Knights Moralis. Behave.”

Qifrey pointedly ignored his last remark and spared a glance at Agott. “Look at her. Isn’t young love just so precious? Oh, we used to be so innocent ourselves.”

“I seem to remember it a little differently. Kissing someone and disappearing for months until we end up working at the same place doesn’t exactly scream young romance.”

“Let me pretend.”

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“About the letters.” Agott picked up her teacup with the hand that wasn’t currently holding Coco’s. “Would you prefer I start writing in print?”

Coco hurriedly shook her head. “No, no! I love your writing exactly the way it is! I just wanted to let you know since I’ve been having Richeh read for me, and I didn’t want you to feel I’ve invaded your privacy. You don’t have to change anything for my sake.”

“I see…in that case, if you’d like, I can send you a book on cursive? I’d hate to make you do homework just to read my handwriting, though,” Agott suggested.

“That sounds great! Maybe I can start practicing my cursive, too!” Coco nodded eagerly, causing Agott to smile again.

“Very well then, when the tea party concludes, I shall retrieve one of the books I first used to learn from my room.”

The tea party continued, idle chatter amongst the four girls as they enjoyed each other's company, plenty of good food and warm tea to go around, and Agott’s fingers interlaced with Coco’s beneath the tablecloth.

Sadly, as all good things must, the party soon began to near its conclusion. Richeh leaned back in her chair, one hand on her stomach. “I’m so full…”

Tetia finished off her scone, having finally got her hands on one, and grinned. “I wonder why.”

The two girls giggled before glancing back towards their friends. They stared for a moment before Tetia leaned over to whisper to Richeh. “I feel like I’m interrupting something.”

Richeh nodded and whispered back. “So many extra wheels, it’s a full carriage worth.” The pair had to hold in their snickering, and Agott shot them a sharp look.

“What’s so terribly funny?”

“Nothing!~”

Qifrey came back over and began to help clear plates. “Well, this was delightful. I’m sure I speak for all of us when I say I certainly hope we can do this again sometime.” He smiled and looked to Agott.

Words of agreement and enthusiastic nods came from all four girls. Agott reluctantly released Coco’s hand as she stood. “If you’ll excuse me, I’ll quickly go get that book for you.”

“Okay, I’ll be here!” Coco smiled as she watched the princess leave.

Coco’s mother approached her and gave her a kiss on the top of the head. “Did you have fun?”

Coco nodded and smiled. “Mhm! Thank you so much for letting me come.”

“Well, I’m glad it made you so happy.”

Agott returned with the book tucked under her arm, slightly out of breath from running. She held it out to Coco. “Here, as promised.”

“Thank you so much! How should I go about returning it to you?”

“Oh, there’s no need to worry about it, I’ve learned just about all I could from that old thing.” She assured her. Then, after a moment, she rubbed her neck. “Though it shouldn’t matter even if you did need to return it. You could just bring it back when I see you again.”

Coco’s heart fluttered at the way Agott said it so plainly, as if seeing one another were the most natural and obvious thing in the world that could occur. She gave a sharp nod. “Of course, when I see you again.”

Qifrey and Agott escorted their guests back out the gate and around to where carriages awaited. Tetia whined and hugged Agott a bit longer than usual.

“Don’t be a stranger! If Coco gets to be your pen pal, I want to be pen pals too!”

Richeh poked her head into the conversation. “Can we be pen pals too?”

“Of course! We should *all* write to one another. Quick! Give me your address!”

“You don't have a pen…”

Tetia crossed her arms. “I’ll repeat it the whole way home!”

Coco smiled as she looked at the other three. Slowly but surely, the four of them felt like they were becoming a group. As for her and Agott…warmth lingered in the palm of her hand.

The girls piled into their respective carriages after saying their goodbyes, and the horses began to move. Coco let her hands linger on the window as the palace slowly got smaller and smaller

in the distance, the book from Agott a gentle weight in her lap. Richeh tapped her on the shoulder. “So, how was your date?”

Coco paused, then turned to her friend. “...date?”

Coco was abnormally quiet the entire way home. Even as Richeh waved goodbye and headed home, she barely uttered a single word. Her mother frowned as the door clicked shut and put a hand on her daughter's shoulder. “Coco, honey? Are you alright?”

She quickly snapped out of it and offered her mom a reassuring smile. “Of course! I’m fine, everything if fine. Why wouldn't I be?”

A small furrow creased her mother’s brow. “It’s not like you to be so quiet. Did something happen? You were so chatty at the tea party.”

Coco bit her bottom lip and rocked back and forth on the balls of her feet. In truth, she couldn’t get Richeh’s words out of her head. Had this really been a date? Did Agott *want* it to be a date?

Did *she?*

A red tinge dusted her cheeks as she pulled away and hurried up the stairs to her room. Once her door was shut, she collapsed onto her bed and screamed softly into her pillow. Why was this so stressful?

She didn’t have long to dwell on it, as she heard a knock coming from her bedroom door. By the time she made it across the room and cracked it open just a sliver, her mother had already come and gone. Left behind on the floor was the book Agott had gifted her.

She scooped it up in her arms and retreated quietly back into her bedroom, letting the door shut more gently this time. She walked over to her desk and set the book down before dusting off the cover with the back of her hand. It looked old and definitely well-loved. Agott could be so thoughtful…even if it was just an old book, the gesture was touching.

As she opened the cover, her eyes wandered over the slightly yellowed pages and faded letters. Despite its age, it seemed to be in a usable condition. For the next few hours, Coco distracted herself from thoughts of their little garden date, focusing only on the swoops and curves of the letters.

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At the palace, Agott was struggling.

Just over a full day had passed since the tea party, and her increased lesson plan had taken effect. Her professors seemed to notice the toll it was taking on her and took what little pity they could, offering breaks, re-explaining terms that would go over her head due to the encroaching
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brain fog, and trying to accommodate her needs as best they could. Even still, it was abundantly clear from day one that it was far too great a course load for a young girl.

By the end of her first day on the new schedule, it was 9 pm. Not unreasonably late, but later than she usually got herself to her room. It left much to be desired in regard to free time. Even so, it was manageable.

At the end of the second day, she stumbled back into her bedroom at 9:30. Alright, fine. She had been sleepy during her last two lessons and had to stay a bit longer to make up for it. No big deal, she could handle it.

The third day came and went. It was 9:45 before Agott even got the chance to take a deep breath.

Then came the fourth day. She felt she very well may faint.

A glance out the window told her all she needed to know. It was well past 10. Her movements were sluggish as she changed into her nightgown and freshened up. She was just about to collapse into bed and try to sleep off her woes when she noticed an envelope was waiting on her pillowcase.

Rest be damned. Suddenly, she was full of energy.

She ripped open the envelope without much grace (she was far too exhausted) and began to read. However, only a few seconds in, she had to stop.

She was so tired she'd barely registered the letter was, in fact, written entirely in cursive. It wasn't *illegible,* but it wasn't exactly easy to read either. Still, the fact that Coco had made the attempt at all brought a smile to her face.

Dear Agott,

I'm sorry it took me so long to write you again. I wanted to take some time to practice my cursive first, and it's proven to be more difficult than I anticipated. My lines keep coming out wobbly, and my hand keeps cramping up. This is probably my third draft of this letter, so I hope it's up to standard!

Thank you again for having me at the palace. Seeing you again was nothing short of wonderful, and I'm holding you to what you said about seeing each other again. Until then, I'll be counting down the days! I'm happy we can keep in touch as pen pals in the meantime.

There is one thing still weighing on my mind. I hope this isn't a foolish question, but was the tea party a date?

Yours,

Coco.

Agott sighed and blushed. Even in writing, Coco had a way of getting her flustered. Still, she made a good point. While it hadn't been her original intention, the chemistry was undeniable. The stolen glances, the hand holding beneath the table, the words they'd exchanged? It all screamed, 'This is a date.'

In the back of her mind, she wanted it to be one. But at the same time…

Agott shuffled over to her desk and began drafting a reply. As much as she'd love to get some rest, she wouldn't have the time tomorrow morning before her lessons began. She pulled out her supplies and lit a second candle for some extra light.

Dear Coco,

Please do not apologize for the delay; it's a pleasure to hear from you in your own time. Your attempts at cursive are admirable, and not to worry, I was able to read your writing just fine. I do look forward to seeing your improvements as time goes on.

As for your question, I wouldn't consider the tea party to be a date. Not because I didn't enjoy our time together, but because, should I ever court you, I'd like to do so properly and take you somewhere just the two of us.

I apologize in advance for my shaky handwriting; my lessons have increased in rigor, and I find myself quite fatigued. I look forward to your next letter.

Yours sincerely,

Agott Arklaum.

As she finished, she found her face feeling quite hot. A glance at a nearby mirror told her everything she needed to know. She was visibly a *mess* over this silly little crush.

After the letter was signed, sealed, and addressed, Agott finally allowed herself the luxury of snuffing out the candles and climbing into bed.

Tomorrow would bring another round of lessons, and only the lingering hope of another letter would pull her through.

Coco held Agott's letter to her chest, eyes sparkling as she stared up at the ceiling. She laid in bed flat on her back with her pillows built in a little fortress around her. After taking a deep breath, she extended her arms out above her so she could read the letter again.

Should I ever court you,

She squealed as she reread that line again and again. There had been little signs here and there…the hand holding, the little remarks, and that kiss on the cheek in the garden. But still, seeing it laid out in writing that there was a chance Agott felt the same way? That was magic.

It didn't *technically* mean anything on its own. She hadn't said "*when* I court you," just "should I ever." An open door, a gentle implication. It was more than enough to send her heart fluttering.

How would courting even look between the two of them?

For starters, they were still very young. It wasn't like a union at their age was unheard of, but it was certainly not the standard. She also didn't see women doing the courting very frequently, but it wasn't as if that made things impossible. There was also the fact that the process of courting could be months to years in length. Then, of course, there was the most glaring issue.

Agott was a princess, and she was a commoner.

Her heart sank ever so slightly. Even putting their age and gender aside, their class set them worlds apart. It wasn't just an issue of being a noble and a commoner; this was a princess. She hugged the piece of paper back to her chest as she thought about it further.

Well, it seemed there wasn't much use in stressing about it now. Agott hadn't even explicitly said she *wanted* to court her. She turned her attention back to the rest of the letter. A tiny frown crossed her expression as she noticed the usually clean letters were slightly shaky from where an exhausted hand had written the letter in haste. It seemed Agott's new schedule was taking its toll on her….

Coco swung her legs over the side of the bed and shuffled over to her desk to draft a response. This time, her cursive was slightly cleaner and more confident.

Dear Agott,

I hope you're getting as much rest as you can! Please take good care of yourself. I wish I could be there to better support you, but just know im cheering you on from the village! I'm not exactly sure what to talk about, but I know when I'm tired, I like to hear about how someone's day was to calm me down.

As for me, my day has been good so far! We finally got another order, so I helped out my mom with a bit of the sewing. She says my skills are improving every day now. As nice as it was to lie

around all day and relax, I'm happy we're getting business again. It's just my mom and me, and one day I'll be expected to take over the shop. I'm sure the pressures of filling your parents' shoes are ones you'll understand.

I don't want to make this too long since I know you need your rest, but I'm thinking of you, and I hope you're well!

Sincerely,

Coco.

She made sure to seal the letter before setting it aside for the time being, getting up to go about her day. As she made it to the stairs, she turned around.

Coco hurried back over, picked up the envelope, and pressed a gentle kiss to the paper. She blushed and quickly set it down before hurrying down the stairs.

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Agott's muscles were starting to ache. It started as a dull throb in her arms and legs that she presumed was from dancing lessons, but it had begun to take root in the rest of her body. Heat began to gather just behind her eyes as she slowly blinked, expression almost dazed. Qirfey frowned the second he saw her.

"Agott, are you quite alright?" He leaned down slightly to get a better look at her, eyes narrowing as he scrutinied your appearance. Agott nodded and stretched slightly.

"I'm alright, just a bit sore."

Qifrey rubbed his chin and pulled back. "Sore? Any other symptoms? A cough, perhaps, or unusual fatigue?"

Agott shook her head and brushed him off. "Not any more fatigue than is to be expected given the circumstances. It's only a touch of soreness, nothing to be concerned about."

"You say that knowing full well it will not ease my concern." He reached forward and pressed the back of his hand to her forehead. His brow furrowed even further. Not hot…but just slightly warm. He closed the textbook she was poring over with a quiet snap. "That's quite enough. I think you should get some rest."

"Professor-" Agott reached for her book, but he tucked it under his arm and gave her a firm yet caring look.

"Not a word about it. Your mother is ill, and I won't stand to see you under the weather as well."
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Agott looked down in frustration. How was she supposed to keep up with her work if she was sent to bed? Didn't he understand this would only make things worse for her? Still, she knew he wasn't one to back down easily when it came to her health. "It really is nothing. I'm fine to keep going."

Qifrey knelt down again and put a hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry, you know I can't take that risk. Not when your mother is in such a condition."

"It's not like what mother has."

"I'm not willing to gamble with it. Bed."

~~~

Back in her room, Agott quietly changed into something more comfortable. She could feel that her face was growing warm, but even still, rest seemed like a waste.

A gentle knock on the door signaled the arrival of Olruggio, a letter in his hand. He glanced at Agott and sighed. "Thought Qifrey told you to go get some rest."

"I was getting to it." She held out her hand for the letter. Her professor raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, sure you were." He held onto the envelope a second longer. "If I give you this, you'll read it from bed?"

She narrowed her eyes at him slightly. "I don't recall my professors being allowed to hold my mail hostage as leverage."

"I've got something you want; you do something I want. What'll it be?"

Agott huffed and extended her arm further. "Fine then, just let me see it."

Olruggio handed over the letter, giving a sharp nod toward her bed. She rolled her eyes and shuffled across the room. Once she was under the covers, he gave a satisfied nod and let the door click shut.

She began to read the letter in the soft light of the candle beside her bed (Qifrey insisted she draw the blinds, saying it would help her rest). Coco's writing began to show small improvements already despite the short timespan, and it brought a smile to her face. Once she finished reading, she looked around her room. It didn't seem like Olruggio was lingering by the door.

Quietly, she slipped out of bed and took the candle to her desk. Her hands trembled slightly as she wrote out a quick reply.
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Dear Coco,

I'm taking as much care of myself as I can, but my lessons continue to weigh on me. Seeing another letter arrive with your name on it is a welcome relief. I'm glad to hear that work has found your family once more, and I hope that more opportunities come your way. You're a wonderful tailor; your clients are in capable hands.

I do understand what it's like to have expectations weighing down on you, and I also understand what it's like to grow up with only your mother. In a way, it seems the two of us aren't so different. Thank you for telling me about your day. It's a nice break from palace life to get a glimpse into yours.

My professor has always been one to fuss, but he's insisting I take some rest. I don't believe it to be entirely necessary myself. At any rate, I presume I'll be back on schedule come morning. Do get some rest yourself where you can, and I look forward to your next letter.

Yours,

Agott Arklaum.

She set the letter aside for the time being. If Qifrey expected her to be in bed, she couldn't very well step out to see it delivered to the courier now. That left only one thing to do: rest.

She leaned over to snuff out the candle, but her gaze landed on the stack of textbooks on the table. Qifrey had confiscated her etiquette book, but he hadn't been so thorough as to remove all her study materials from her quarters. He trusted her.

Perhaps that was his first mistake.

Agott slid the textbook at the top of the stack to the center of her desk and cracked it open.

“Agott?”

Qifrey knocked and waited outside her door, a hot cup of tea in his other hand. He did feel a bit bad about sending her to bed in the middle of her lesson, but it was for a good cause. Still, he hoped his peace offering would smooth things over. “Are you awake? It's nearly time for breakfast. I come bearing gifts.”

Her lack of answer caused his stomach to twist. She had felt a bit warm, but nothing too terribly serious. What if she had suddenly worsened?

What if she were ill with the same affliction as Adina?

“Agott,” he called again, voice laced with worry. “Can you hear me?” That sinking feeling in his stomach grew with every passing moment, and he began to anxiously tap his foot. “Agott?”

Another few seconds passed with no answer, and he suddenly could no longer bear it. “I’m coming in.”

He pushed the door open and looked around, only to find darkness. He rushed over to her bed and set down the tea on her nightstand, still careful to be quiet in case she was in pain and trying to sleep. He drew back the curtains to the window just enough to see what he was dealing with before looking down at the bed.

Agott wasn’t there.

That sick feeling in his stomach lurched as he feared for the worst. She wouldn’t have snuck out, right? No, the blinds were drawn and the window locked. In his worry, he neglected to look behind him.

Agott stirred slowly at her desk with the introduction of light to the space. She blinked and rubbed her eyes groggily as she pulled her face off the page she had fallen asleep on. She looked over to see what was causing the commotion, only to see a very frantic-looking Qifrey. Before she could even reply, a single cough slipped out.

Qifrey whipped his head around to face her and clutched his chest. “Oh, thank *god.* You very nearly worried me into an early grave. Honestly, Agott, what were you thinking? Shouldn't you still be in…” His eyes narrowed at the textbooks. “You cannot be serious.”

He marched over to her desk and gathered the books in his arms one by one. “Absolutely *not.* I leave you to your own devices with the simple instruction to rest, and what do you do? Return to your studies.” He pressed a hand to her forehead and let out a strangled noise of distress. “You are positively *scalding!* What on earth went through your head to make you believe studying when you already felt run down was a grand idea? Now look at you! Well and truly sick, I should think. **Bed. Now.”**

Agott opened her mouth to object, only for another cough to cut her off. The sheer look of horror on her professor's face was enough to send her shuffling back towards her bed. In all honesty, she wasn't feeling very well at all. The heaviness in her limbs morphed into a true ache. Her nose felt stuffed, her throat sore, and her cheeks pink. She snuggled into bed with the blankets pulled up to her chin.

Qifrey continued on and on about how reckless she was being as he confiscated any trace of her lessons from her room, including her quill and ink. She looked over at him and rubbed her eyes. "Why are you taking those?"

He paused his rambling to face her head-on. "You've gone and proven you can't be trusted with study materials, so I'll hold them for you until you've recovered."

"It's only a quill and ink, what's the harm in letting me keep them?" She protested. If he took them with him, she'd have no way of writing Coco.

Qifrey gave her an unimpressed look. "With how you are, I can't trust you won't go and exhaust yourself practicing your penmanship or writing out your textbooks by memory. I won't take another risk, not with your health at stake." he swept the room again for any remaining textbooks when his eyes landed on the letter, still without an envelope. "Is that what this is about?"

Agott blushed, but nodded. No use lying to him. Qifrey let out a sigh and set down his stack of contraband to place the letter safely in an envelope. "I shall see this to the courier for you, but that'll be the end of it until you've recovered. Do I make myself clear?"

The princess said nothing, sniffling and almost pouting as she lay in bed. Qifrey sighed and tucked the letter into his pocket before approaching her bed, picking up the mug of tea, and offering it to her. "Drink."

As she took a sip, he reached out and gently rubbed her shoulder. "You know, this isn't punishment."

"It feels like punishment."

"No, this is care. Even if it doesn't feel great now, I'm only doing what I see to be best to ensure you recover." He gently cupped her fever-warm cheek and ran his thumb gently over the flushed skin. "Do try and get some rest. I'll be sending for the physician to come and have a look at you straight away. Don't worry about your lessons, I'll handle everything."

Agott sniffled again as she curled up and watched him stand to leave. Before he could make it to the door, she called out to him. "Might I at least read something if I'm to be laid up in bed?"

He turned back and smiled knowingly. “You may not. So help me, Agott, if I come back to find you so much as sitting up in that bed, I’ll have Olruggio only lecture you on the most dull treaty I can think of for a week straight.”

“You wish for me to be bored to death.”

“Oh, how terrible. Such a cruel professor I’ve become indeed.” He smirked and paused at the doorway. “Do you need anything while I’m gone?”

Agott shook her head. She couldn’t think of anything she could want right now. Well, perhaps one thing, but she knew it was unobtainable.

Qifrey offered her a soft look. “Should the physician give his approval, perhaps I can find you something light to read when your fever has broken.”

That got her to perk up a tiny bit, and Qifrey shook his head fondly before stepping out.

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“A cold,” The physician explained as he began to pack up his tools. “Combined with a fair bit of exhaustion, it would seem, though I can imagine what the cause of that is.”

Qifrey exhaled with visible relief, a hand rubbing his temple. “Yes, that one is no mystery. I’ll have a word with her majesty about her schedule…it seems it's a bit too much strain for a young girl. Although personally, I could have said that with confidence from the start.”

Agott coughed and pushed herself onto her elbows. “Only a cold? I won't be on bed rest then?”

“Easy.” The physician gently pushed her back down by the shoulders. “Normally, a cold isn’t cause for alarm, but given how exhausted your body is, I think you ought to take some bed rest anyway. Besides, in light of recent events…” he shook his head as he thought about the queen. “We can’t take too many precautions.”

Her spirit deflated at his words. Qifrey offered a supportive hand through the covers. “It’s for the best. Just because it’s a cold doesn’t mean you can’t go making it worse. You need to rest.”

It was obvious from the look on her face that his words weren't at all what she wanted to hear. She rolled over onto her side to face away from them both.

“Cold shoulder. Harsh, but fair.” The physician smiled and pulled some herbs from his bag. “Some of this twice a day. You know the rest of it. Fluids, light foods, and lots of sleep.” He stood and bowed before leaving the pair alone.
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Qifrey sat and watched her for a moment, seeing if she'd acknowledge him first. When she didn't, he chuckled and pulled out a book from his bag. "I know you're mad at me, but perhaps this makes a case for my forgiveness?"

Agott looked over her shoulder briefly, eyes landing on the book. She turned to face him fully.

"I thought that might get your attention." He opened to the first page before beginning to read aloud quietly.

It wasn't long before Agott's breathing evened out, and she fell back asleep. Qifrey quietly set the book on the nightstand and rose from his chair. "Sleep well, your highness," he whispered into the darkness before drawing the blinds once more and leaving her to rest.

With Agott safely asleep in bed, Qirfey got straight to work, ensuring she wouldn't be disturbed. Servants were informed, professors rearranged their lesson plans, and Qifrey himself made sure to adjust his schedule to give the girl at least a few days to recover. All that remained was to inform the queen.

Surely word had already reached her by now, if not from the physician than as passing gossip. It still wouldn't feel right not to do his due diligence in attempting to ease some of Agott's workload. He owed her that much, as a professor and as someone who cared for her deeply.

As he approached the queen's chambers, the two knights positioned outside gave him a wary look. He offered a small smile before he bowed. "Is her majesty awake? I come with news regarding her daughter."

"Her majesty is resting. What news?" one of the two knights whom he recognized as Ekoh looked him up and down.

Qifrey rose from his bow and nodded. "Yes, I understand she is resting, and I promise to make it brief. Her highness Agott seems to have come down with something."

"We can pass along a message. No need to disturb her." The other night, Etlan nodded.

I assure you I won't make any trouble. It really is imperative that I speak to her. Please, may I at least request an audience?" Qifrey furrowed his brow in slight frustration. Before the two knights could send him away, a voice came from inside.

"Let him in."

The twins sighed and stepped aside, and Qifrey quickly adjusted his robes to ensure he looked presentable before entering. Adina lay in bed, still sitting up against the headboards. The fatigue still lingered in her expression, but more color had since returned to her face, and she didn't appear to be trembling. Qifrey bowed deeply before he spoke. "You're looking well today, your majesty. I trust you're feeling a bit better?"

"For the time being, at least." She nodded. "Though I trust ensuring my recovery is hardly the reason for your visit. You come bearing news?"

"Yes, it regards her highness Agott. She seems to have come down with a cold. I've arranged for her lessons to be postponed for the time being."

Adina nodded, unimpressed. "So I've heard from the physician. If that'll be all, I trust you have duties to attend to."

"There is one more thing, if I may speak freely." Qifrey insisted. Adina raised an eyebrow, but nodded. He stepped a bit closer so he could speak without being overheard. "If I may, it seems

this new workload is quite taxing for your daughter. As her professor, I've noticed a decline in her performance, as well as an impact on her health. I do not believe this current approach to her schooling is maintainable."

"She has a *cold.* She'll recover, and she will adjust." Adina waved her hand dismissively. "As her professor, it's up to you to see that she learns to manage her duties as well as the curriculum."

"A cold this time, pneumonia the next." Qifrey shook his head. "I've seen too many students in my own time at university push themselves this hard, and nothing good has come of it. I worry for her-"

The queen was quick to cut him off. "Your worry is misplaced. Agott is my daughter, and as such, I have a better understanding of what is best for her. If she cannot handle an uptick in her lessons, how can she be expected to balance the weight of a nation?"

Qifrey had to clench his jaw to keep himself from speaking his mind. Honestly, his blood began to boil at her words alone. Such dismissal of her own child's well-being, and for what? "Forgive me, your majesty, but I have to disagree. If we are truly deadset on adjusting her schedule, could we at least make it more gradual? I'm sorry, but to me it feels unreasonable. "

He wasn't a fool. He knew exactly what Adina was getting at with her recent behavior and the sudden shift in Agott's schedule. Preparing her own daughter to face a world without her in it was noble, but her methods were just short of cruel.

"Everything I do, every inch I push her, it's all for a cause. I wouldn't call it unreasonable." She narrowed her eyes.

Qifrey's expression morphed to match hers. "What exactly would you call it then?"

"Love."

~~~

Qifrey practically stormed down the hallway. He'd kept his decorum until he was well out of sight of the queen and her guards, but he simply couldn't hold himself together any longer. Anger coursed through his veins, white hot and searing. She had the audacity to package her own righteousness and expectations as a twisted version of *love,* one she would force onto her own kin in the name of 'best preparing them for their future.' What of how that would make Agott feel? What of her childhood?

"Qifrey." A familiar voice pulled him from his thoughts, and he looked up to see Beldaruit passing him in the hall. He paused and turned to face his former professor. "Lord Bedlaruit, I'm terribly sorry. How rude of me not to acknowledge you."
~~~

Beldaruit shook his head and offered a kind smile. “Not a word of it, your thoughts were clearly elsewhere. Come, do you have a moment to accompany me? I would appreciate a conversation partner.”

“Of course, where are you headed?” Qifrey began to match his pace as they headed towards the palace gates. It was the opposite direction to where Qifrey was headed himself, but in truth, it might help him clear his head a bit to speak to someone he cared for.

“The palace gates. I’m to meet his Majesty Deanreldy shortly.” Beldaruit kept his expression perfectly neutral, years of practiced nonchalance proving themselves useful. If it hadn’t been a subject the two had previously discussed, Qifrey wouldn’t have known for his distaste.

“Of course, that's today.” Qifrey sighed and pinched the bridge of his nose. He leaned over so he could whisper. “Did he clarify what it was he was getting at in his letter?”

Beldaruit allowed himself an eyeroll. No one was around to see it anyway. “Of course he didn’t. In all my years as royal advisor, that man has always made a grand show of making his point. If I knew what he wanted, it would have been too easy to turn him down.”

The pair arrived at the entrance, and Beldaruit turned his head to face him. A gentle touch on Qifrey's shoulder caused him to release the tension he was holding in his muscles. “Whatever it is, let it go for now, and tell me all about it later. I promise we can work through it.”

Qifrey gave a slight nod. His former professor always knew how to ease his worries, if only temporarily. “I should like that.”

“Good.” Beldaruit smiled and squeezed gently. “I hear Princess Agott isn't feeling very well today. That’s such a shame, do tell her I said to get well soon.”

“She has a cold, yes. I’ll pass along your well wishes.” Qifrey placed his hand over his.

Beldaruit nodded and hummed. “I trust you’re not too terribly busy then?”

Qifrey nodded and tilted his head. “I’m not, aside from a few personal chores and lesson planning. Why?”

“Good. Go to her.” Beldaruit said gently. “She won’t ask for it outright, but I’m willing to bet she’s in need of some comfort.”

Qifrey softened at his words. He had a point. Agott was terribly stubborn and didn’t like to ask for help, but she was also still young and sick. Given her recent fears surrounding her mother’s illness, it wasn't unlikely for her to be distressed. “I’ll go check on her then.”

“See that you do. I’ll come find you when I’ve finished with his Majesty, and we can put on some tea.” Bedlaruit smiled. “Oh, I do so look forward to a bit of gossip~.”

It was Qifrey’s turn to roll his eyes, though his expression remained fond. “Less so gossip than a discussion of critical interpalace affairs.”

“Gossip all the same. Now, off with you.”

~~~

Agott coughed, curling up on herself further as she hugged her pillow to her chest. It hadn't been terribly long since she’d woken back up, but Qifrey was no longer in the chair beside her bed, reading to her. Of course, he wasn’t. He had better things to do than babysit her.

Why did she have to go and get sick now? She should be studying and preparing, not lying in bed feeling sorry for herself. It was unbecoming for a princess to show such weakness. Still, somewhere deep in her heart, she longed for contact. Comfort.

Agott closed her eyes and let herself imagine she wasn’t alone. She envisioned the embrace of her mother and father, one long goen and one distant enough she may as well be. She thought of her professors gently tuckign her in and assuring her not to worry about her lessons. Lastly, she thought of coco…how worried she might look should she see her in this state. The gentle kindness of her touch, and the softness of her expression whenever they locked eyes.

She was so absorbed in her thoughts, she didn’t hear a knock, nor the sound of the door gently swinging open as Qifrey approach dher bed side. His voice was soft and low as not to disturb her. “Are you awake?”

“Professor?” she croaked tiredly as she rolled over. Qifrey clicked his tongue.

“You sound a mess. Is your throat hurting?”

Her hand came up to touch her throat as she nodded. “It’s a bit worse than this morning.”

Qifrey sighed and reached for the medicine the physician had left on the nightstand, the herbs already prepared. “This probably won’t taste very good, but it should help.”

Agott nodded and accepted the medicine, wincing at the bitterness on her tongue. Her professor chuckled as she made a face. “Awful,” she mumbled.

Qifrey shrugged. “Good medicine usually is.” He leaned down to feel her forehead. “Still running quite a bit hot. Not to worry, with some rest I’m sure you’ll be on the road to recovery in due time.”
~~~

The princess looked down at her bed, avoiding eye contact with him. Qifrey took notice and reached out to rub her arm through the blanket. “What’s the matter?”

As Agott looked back up, she struggled to keep her voice steady. Stupid fever was making her emotional. “You came back.”

“Of course I did. I only left so I could make sure everyone knew not to disturb you.” he whispered and gave her arm a gentle squeeze. “Believe me, it pained me to leave your side while you’re so ill.”

Agott reached out and took his hand in her own, pulling it to her face. A silent sort of comfort. Qifrey was quick to catch on and gently stroked her cheek. “You’re alright. I’m here.” He hummed as she closed her eyes again. “Try to rest.”

~~~

As Beldaruit watched the carriage approach, a familiar feeling of dread settled over him. Nothing good could possibly come of this meeting, but he was simply in no position to decline. Welcome him, keep it brief, see him on his way. That was it. He plastered a smile on his face as the horses came to a halt and a servant opened the door to the particularly lavish carriage.

“Your Majesty,” Beldaruit bowed, “Welcome to our kingdom. I trust the journey treated you well?”

Deanreldy smiled as he approached, though he did not bow. Naturally. He nodded his greeting and clapped his hands together. “Lord Beldaruit, it’s been too long.”

“Yes, indeed.” He grit his teeth as he smiled. “Please, do come in.”
~~~

Beldaruit and Deanreldy settled into their respective chairs, facing one another with only a table between them. The knights had left them alone for the sake of privacy while they remained at their posts just outside the door.

A pot of tea was waiting in the center of the table, but neither man moved to pour themselves a cup. They remained locked onto their goals, unwilling to risk losing focus for so much as a single moment.

Politics, in a way, was chess.

“You’re looking well, all things considered.” Deanreldy made his opening move. A friendly enough remark on the surface, but a slight jab at the state of palace affairs. *All things considered.*

“As are you.” Beldaruit cast a glance at the window behind him. “I hear of your victories in the north. That can't be easy, leaving your kingdom for so long to see to the battlefield.” His gaze returned to the man before him, unwilling to let him out of his sight for long.

Deanreldy laughed and shook his head. “Yes, I suppose you could say that. Though my wife and council take good care of things, my son is always quite eager for my return.”

“Prince Eoleo, correct? I hope his studies are going well.” Beldaruit offered. Of course, he knew of the boy; He was born not long after Agott. Still, Deanreldy wasn’t a sentimental man, not from what he knew. If he was mentioning his son, he had an underlying reason.

“As a matter of fact, they are. The boy takes after me in a way. He shares a love of medicine and handles a sword well.” Deanreldy moved forward to pour himself some tea as he kept his tone casual. “Princess Agott is around the same age, is she not?”

Beldaruit narrowed his eyes. Just what was he getting at? “Yes, nearly thirteen now.” He reached for his own cup. He made an attempt to change the subject. “Summer has been particularly mild this year. Is that true in your kingdom as well?”

“A mild summer, yes. Tell me, how is Princess Agott these days? It must be a difficult time for her, given the unfortunate circumstances.” His fingers curled around his cup, eyes glinting slightly.

Seems it wasn't enough. Beldaruit made a soft *tsk* sound as he took a sip of tea. “It’s a difficult time for her, but she’s a strong girl. Always diligent in her duties.” *Not that it’s any of his business.*

“Strong, you say? Glad to hear it.” He smiled from behind his cup. “You know, my Eoleo and your Agott, they ought to meet.”

Beldaruit narrowed his eyes. “I trust they’ve already been acquainted.”

“In passing, yes.” Deanreldy waved his hand. “But perhaps it would be a good idea for the two of them to connect more… intimately.”

“Your words dance around their meaning. Speak honestly if you wish to make such a proposal.” Bedlaruit said coldly. He didn't like this, not at all.

“Come now, surely you’re wise enough to catch my drift.”

The sharp clink of a teacup being set back in its saucer punctuated the silence. “If you cannot say what you mean, plain and simple, you cannot expect me to entertain it.”

Deanreldy looked *amused.* He was under the other man's skin, and it clearly pleased him. “Our nations are strong, but war is always looming from any given angle. Our kingdom's children are only a few years from when marriages begin to be arranged. I’d be a fool not to make the suggestion.”

“And you mention this to me, not her Majesty herself?” Beldaruit leaned back in his chair, brow furrowed. “I’m not in the business of marrying off other people's children.”

“Your queen is sick, and your king departed.” Deanreldy tilted his head. “Is it not high time to make such arrangements?”

Beldaruit’s anger continued to simmer. “If it’s truly something you wish to discuss, you could have had the courtesy to wait until her Majesty was able to hear the words herself.”

“Assuming she recovers.”

“Watch your tongue.” Beldaruit gripped the edge of his chair.

Deanreldy hid his smile behind his teacup, but he made no true effort to conceal his expression. Only enough to maintain deniability. As he set the cup back down, he rolled out his shoulders. “Do at least consider it. My offer still stands, and I’m a mere letter away.”

Beldaruit scoffed and narrowed his eyes further. “I think it may be time for you to return to your kingdom.”

“Yes,” Deanreldy stood, “I think it is. If you wouldn’t mind, I should like to freshen up before the carriage ride home.”

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Deanreldy turned a corner as he emerged from a room across the one where he had just bet with the Regent. His hand slipped into his pocket before dropping a small pouch behind him on a nearby ledge. He kept walking as though nothing had happened and opened the door to where Beldaruit awaited.

“Thank you for your patience. If you wouldn’t mind seeing me to the door, I’ll be on my way.”

As Beldaruit and Deanreldy disappeared behind a corner, a man dressed in a servant's uniform pocketed the pouch.

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Not long after Deanreldy had departed, Beldaruit reported back to the queen. She was quietly reading in bed when he entered. “Your Majesty.”

Adina set down her book and folded her hands in her lap. “Beldaruit. I trust things went well with His Majesty. Will he be staying the night?”

“He’s departed, and perhaps for the best.” Beldaruit stopped his wheelchair at the edge of her bed, his expression firm. “He made a most ridiculous proposal.”

“Ridiculous how?” She asked skeptically. Beldaruit sighed and continued.

“He proposed an alliance of marriage.”

“Between Agott and Eoleo?”

“Yes, precisely.”

Adina raised an eyebrow. “She’s still a bit young to be married off, but the idea itself isn’t entirely ridiculous. In fact, I’ve considered it myself.”

Beldaruit stiffened, his gaze darkening slightly, though he bit his tongue. “Is that right?”

“It would strengthen our alliance. Not to mention it would give Agott someone to support her should something happen to me while she is still young.”

“I see,” Beldaruit pushed himself back slightly. “It’s a difficult decision, and one you should consider thoroughly when you are well.”

Adina picked up her book once more. “You don’t approve.”

“No, I do not.” He confessed. Adina spared him a final glance.
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“I’m hardly incapacitated. In the end, you act as a temporary Regent. It’s my decision to make.”

Beldaruit made his way to the door. “Of course, your Majesty. Rest well.”

As he left, he passed a servant holding a tray of food, nearly bumping into him. “Oh, pardon me.”

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In the end, tea with Qifrey did not occur until the following morning. Beldaruit was far too on edge and needed time to cool his head. He sat across from Qifrey as he poured himself tea.

“How is Agott feeling?” He asked his former pupil, trying to distract himself.

“Let me; your hands are shaking.” Qifrey reached to steady the teapot before taking it into his own hands. “Agott is alright; her fever is lower, but not yet broken. She is still quite symptomatic, so she’ll need some rest for a while longer.”

Beldaruit leaned back and sighed. “Is that so? Is someone attending to her?”

“Olruggio is with her at the moment.” Qifrey set down the teapot and handed him his cup. “You look stressed. I take it things didn’t go over very well yesterday?”

Beldaruit shook his head. “No, they did not. Deanreldy proposed a *political marriage.”*

Qifrey choked on his tea, nearly spitting it out. “Tell me he didn’t mean Agott.”

“I’m afraid that was the implication.” The regent sipped his own tea. “What’s worse is her Majesty isn’t entirely opposed.”

“You’re joking.” Qifrey ran a hand over his face. “Should Agott find out it was even suggested…”

“She’s smart; I’m sure she knows the possibility exists, the same as it does for any heir.” Beldaruit set down his cup. “The good news is her Majesty seems to be feeling marginally better. I don't think she’s the kind of person to marry Agott off so young without good reason. The way I see it, it’s her last resort to ensure the kingdom's safety.”

Qifrey nodded and relaxed slightly. Small blessings.

The pair continued to chat idly about palace affairs and their personal lives, conversation ranging from Agott’s current curriculum to light teasing about Qifrey’s relationship to another particular professor. They had just about finished when an urgent knock came from the door.
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Qifrey got up to answer, but as soon as the door opened, one of the Knights burst in. “Regent Beldaruit, I have urgent news. The Queen’s condition has suddenly deteriorated. She’s asked to see you.”

A chill ran down both men’s spines. Qifrey snapped his head to his former professor. “You said she was doing better.”

“She was.” Beldaruit discarded his tea and hurried out into the hall.

Despite himself, Qifrey hurried after Bedlaruit as they were rushed down the hall. After a seemingly endless route of winding turns and stretching hallways, they arrived at the queen's quarters. Just as they arrived outside her quarters, the physician stepped out.

"How is she? What's happened?" Beldaruit's expression was hard and serious.

The physician shook his head. "I'm not sure. She was feeling much better just yesterday; she even began to eat more. It seems her illness has suddenly taken a turn once more."

"What kind of symptoms?" Qifrey stepped forward. The doctor shot Beldaruit a look. *Is he allowed to hear this?* Upon the regent's nod, he began to explain.

"Primarily severe abdominal pain. Vomiting blood. Swelling in her throat." He shook his head. "Not like the cough or dizziness she's experienced."

Qifrey shook his head."Then it wasn't her illness. Has she eaten anything out of the ordinary?"

"Nothing that she hasn't eaten before, nor did there appear to be anything off about the meal. I watched her eat. Why?" The doctor furrowed his brow.

Beldaruit put a hand on his pupil's shoulder. "Doctor, if you could excuse us for a moment." He pulled the other man along a few paces back before beginning to whisper. "What you are implying is a *serious* accusation. While her symptoms are out of line with what she's exhibited so far, they are *consistent* with what afflicted the king."

"Then perhaps the king's illness wasn't entirely organic in nature either." Qifrey pulled his hand back. "What kind of illness causes such a wide range of symptoms? Not to mention, no one else in the palace seems to be *sick.* Think about it, I implore you. Is there anything that comes to mind? Anyone who could possibly wish for her Majesty to become *mysteriously ill?"*

Beldaruit thought about it, his expression darkening. Qifrey gave a nod. "You understand then."

"Deanreldy." "The Brimcloaks."

Both men paused, then shot each other a look of disbelief.

"His Majesty?" Qifrey asked incredulously. "I understand you have a personal grievance with him, but we're discussing a matter of the queen's very life. How could you make such an accusation?"

"You didn't see his behavior. He has a motive, and he's ruthless in battle. I wouldn't be so quick to dismiss him," Beldaruit insisted.

Qifrey shook his head. “The Brimcloaks have made a public threat towards the crown. They’re known to make trouble.”

“Trouble, not an *assassination plot.”*

“And you suggest the king of an allied nation would do so?”

“Qifrey, *please.”* Beldaruit pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m being serious. I don’t trust him, not one bit. The marriage proposal, the queen’s ailment worsening not a day after he leaves…”

“As am I,” Qifrey insisted. “But the fact of the matter is, neither of us has the evidence to back up such a claim. It doesn't matter who’s doing it, the fact that it could be happening at all is troubling enough.”

“I can’t very well raise any red flags about his Majesty, not to the queen.” Beldaruit rubbed his chin. “But we should at least alert the guards to maintain a higher vigilance with her food.”

“Alert the guards to what exactly now?”

Qifrey snapped his head to face the voice, glowering at Easthies. “Eavesdropping? That’s so very like you.”

“I should think I have the right, given the topic of conversation.” The knight stood with his spear tucked close to his side. “Speak.”

Qifrey said nothing, but Beldaruit nodded. “Easthies, did you notice anything off after the queen ate? Anything about her food that seemed different?”

“Her food?” He lowered his brow. “You don’t mean to imply you suspect foul play is to blame for Her Majesty’s ailment?”

“Caution is our ally. Can you blame me for raising some degree of suspicion when she deteriorated so suddenly?” Beldaruit folded his hands as he tried to keep himself from saying anything further.

Easthies seemed to mull it over, but eventually nodded. “I’ll see that her food is monitored and check for improvement. Though I must suggest you don’t mention this little theory to anyone else. It’ll only cause an uproar.”

Both Qifrey and Beldaruit nodded, satisfied for the time being. Easthies clutched his spear. “That being said, Lord Beldaruit, the queen has asked to speak with you.

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The door clicked shut, and Beldaruit approached the queen's bedside once more. She was pale and lying back down. As soon as she saw him, she gave a weak nod. "Beldaruit. Send a letter to His Majesty Deanreldy at once. Tell him I want to discuss his proposal."

"You're very weak; now is not the best time to be-"

"No," she winced at the pain in her throat as she spoke, but pressed on. "No more waiting. I don't know how much time is left. *Write to him."*

Beldaruit gritted his teeth. This could very well be *exactly* what he wanted. But without any proof…

"As you wish, your majesty." He left her room without so much as a word. As he rejoined Easthies and Qifrey, he didn't make eye contact. "Easthies, see that her majesty obtains a food taster. If anything seems amiss…alert me immediately."

The knight bowed and left to rejoin the queen. Once they were alone, Beldaruit let his head fall into his hands.

"What is it?" Qifrey asked carefully.

Beldaruit shook his head. "Talks of the marriage are going forward after all. Agott is going to be *most* distressed."

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Qifrey shut the door to Agott's room, a short novel in hand. "Agott, you're awake. How do you feel?"

"A bit better today. The cough seems to be improving. Is that for me?" She tilted her head as she looked at the book. Qifrey gave a nod and a smile, sitting beside her bed and handing her the book.

"Was Olruggio good company?" Qifrey leaned back in his chair as he watched her skim the first page of the book.

Agott set the book down in her lap for the time being. "He's certainly a fair bit less talkative than you are."

"Yes, well, perhaps that's for the best. Better someone to keep an eye on you quietly while you sweat out your fever. Speaking of which." He pressed a hand to the back of her forehead, a satisfied click of his tongue following after. "Much cooler today, that's good. If this continues, perhaps I'll return your quill and ink."
~~~

Agott perked up, causing Qifrey to chuckle. “You truly are eager to return to your pen pal, aren’t you?”

“Can you blame me? I’ve been so terribly bored for days now.” Agott hid her blush by turning her head away.

Qifrey’s smile slowly fell as the realization dawned on him. He was yet to break the news to her about the marriage. His heart sat heavy in his chest as he reached out, wanting to offer physical comfort when the words came out. “Agott…”

She turned to face him, and his heart sank lower. The girl he’d watched grow up all these years, so clearly in love with a girl she would have to be told she could not have. How could he break her heart while she was still so young?

He let his hand rest on her shoulder, but did not speak. The marriage wasn't set in stone. Perhaps, if nothing else, he could buy her a little more time to be a child. More time to be in love.

Instead of honesty, his lips formed comfort. “I’m glad you’re starting to feel better. I hope the book is to your liking; it’s from my personal collection.”

Agott nodded and picked up the book once more, and Qifrey folded his hands, content to stay with her for the time being and shield her from the truth just down the hall.

“Well? How is she?”

Qifrey hovered over Agott’s bedside as the physician checked her pulse and temperature. The doctor hummed and smiled softly. “Her fever seems to have broken, but I would still exercise some caution until it's been another twenty-four hours. Illness like this has a tendency to sneak back up on you if you aren’t careful.”

The professor exhaled with relief, shoulders sagging as he rested a hand on his chest. “Thank goodness.”

“It was only a few days,” Agott grumbled from her spot in bed. “You’re being dramatic.”

“I reserve that right after all the stress I endure for your sake.” Qifrey nudged her shoulder with the back of his hand, though his gaze remained affectionate. He turned back to the physician. “Regarding her schedule, Her Majesty seems adamant she return to her usual duties as soon as possible. How can we best avoid this happening again?”

The doctor thought about it for a moment before shrugging. “Well, a heavy workload combined with stress is a recipe for illness. If nothing changes, I wouldn’t be surprised if she ends up back in bed before the month is out. Ideally, her schedule would decrease in rigor. But if we are to respect Her Majesty’s wishes, I would start enforcing a hard cutoff for daily lessons. No more staying up to catch up to your work. If you don’t finish a lesson, it can be completed the following day. Staying up until ungodly hours won't do her any good.”

“A hard cutoff…thank you, doctor.” Qifrey nodded before taking his seat beside Agott’s bed once more. The physician bowed before taking his leave. After a few moments of calm silence, Qifrey pulled an envelope from his pocket. “Might this be of interest to you?”

Agott bolted upright in bed, reaching for the letter only for Qifrey to jerk his hand back. She huffed in frustration. “Why show it to me at all if you won’t let me read it? That’s cruel.”

“Patience. I have every intention of letting you read this once we've covered a few ground rules.” He smiled and set the letter in his lap. “First of all, you heard the man: no more staying up to finish your work. Your lessons are intense enough without you stressing yourself further.”

“Is that all?” Agott reached for the letter. Qifrey pulled it away again and held it in the hand furthest from her.

“Not quite. Additionally, I expect you to be more honest with your health. Goodness knows we can’t afford to ignore the slightest sign of illness.”

Agott sighed and nodded. “Alright. No more late nights and no more dishonesty, I *promise.* Now can I please read the letter?”

Qifrey smiled and chuckled, ruffling her hair (eliciting a groan) before handing over the envelope. “I’ll give you some privacy. Your ink and quill will be outside your door. Please, Agott, don’t make me regret this. I’ll send Olruggio to pick up your letter soon.”

The princess nodded and broke the seal, pulling out the letter and slowly beginning to read as she savored every word.

Dear Agott,
I’ve only met your professor a few times, but I can tell he deeply cares for you. If he’s telling you to rest, I’m sure it’s for good reason. Besides, I can’t think of anyone more deserving of a break than you are.
Admittedly, something has been weighing on my mind recently. I can’t seem to get our time together in the garden out of my head. I know it wasn’t a date, not by the typical definition, but I wish it was.
I suppose what I want to ask is if there was a world in which you’d consider a proper date, just the two of us? I know we come from very different worlds, but I want to spend time by your side. I want to see more of you.
Of course, I’m happy being your friend. I want to be someone you can count on regardless of what we are. I’m sorry if this is coming off too strong. Please try not to work too hard!
Yours,
Coco.

Agott flustered as she reread the letter. The distance was *killing her.* How she longed to be able to explain her feelings face to face…it was as if the universe was playing a cruel trick on them both.

Considering they usually received each other's letters within a day, and it had been three days since then, an anxious thought began to creep into Agott’s mind. What if Coco perceived her lack of response as rejection?

Damn it!

She tossed off her blanket and hurried to her door. Sure enough, her writing components were there as promised. Thank *goodness.* Agott rushed to her desk and began drafting a response. As she wrote, she tried to play it cool. Coming off too eager may scare the other girl away…

Dear Coco,
I’m terribly sorry for the delay in my reply; I seem to have caught a cold. I’m feeling much better now.
I too find myself thinking about our time together in the garden often. It was a rare moment in which I found myself feeling relaxed. I often find I associate the feeling of comfort with being by your side.

I would love to find a way to spend more time together just the two of us. As soon as I find some leniency in my ability to leave the palace, I promise I'll find my way back to you. Until then, I continue to treasure your letters.
Sincerely,
Agott Arklaum.

Good. Not too forward, not too dismissive. She sealed the letter and placed it neatly on her desk. A knock on her door signaled the arrival of Olruggio.

"Your highness? Qifrey told me to come get you. Says there's some food waiting if you're up for it."

Agott stood and met him at the door. Olruggio never came inside without permission, unlike Qifrey. As she crossed the room, she neglected to notice her letter fluttering to the floor and slipping under her desk. "Thank you. Did Professor Qifrey tell you about the letter?"

"He did. I'll get it; not to worry. You go on and eat; you need to get your strength back." He grunted.

"Thank you, you're free to come in."

As Agott left and made her way down the hall, Olruggio shuffled inside her room. He made his way to her desk and looked for the letter. Nothing on the desk…odd. "Agott, where did you set it?"

Upon receiving no answer, he rubbed his neck and sighed. No point in chasing after her; surely he could find it on his own. Maybe she left it in the drawer for safekeeping. Sure enough, upon opening the top drawer, he found an envelope with a small heart on the corner. Yeah, that was probably it. No address on the envelope though…well, she was getting over being sick. Probably forgot. He knew where to send it.

He tucked the letter into his pocket and turned to leave, the envelope on the floor going unsent.

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Coco lay in bed, her heart heavy and expression glum. It had been a few days since she'd sent her letter to Agott, and she was still left awaiting a reply. Logically, she understood Agott was probably just busy. Still, doubt lingered in the back of her mind. Was she being too pushy? Had she been too forward with her request? Having a crush was so hard…

"Coco," her mother called from downstairs. "You got a letter."

She perked up almost immediately and hurried down the stairs. As she made it to the front door, she hugged her mother and accepted the envelope. "Thanks, Mom!"
~~~

Coco raced up the stairs faster than she ever had before, diving into bed and opening the seal. To her surprise, the greeting was different than usual. A few simple words, and her heart stuttered in her chest.

*My **dearest** Coco,*

It was late, and Agott was resting in her room as promised. The worst of her cold had subsided, but she still felt slightly run down. Qifrey had absolutely insisted she get back to bed after eating. Boredom crept up the edges of her mind as she allowed her gaze to sweep around the room for something to distract herself with, only for her eyes to land on something beneath her desk. Odd.

She slipped out of bed and crossed the room, kneeling down to inspect whatever it was that had fallen. Her heart sank in her chest as she pulled the item out from where it was wedged. Her letter.

That wouldn't do; Coco hadn't received a letter from her in some time now, and she refused to let that continue a moment longer. She gathered her strength and made her way down the hall to Olruggio's quarters.

After a knock on the door brought no answer, she rolled her eyes and crossed the hall to Qifrey's. Sure enough, the door opened and revealed both professors.

"Agott," Qifrey laughed nervously, running a hand through his hair to fix it. "You should be resting."

The princess glanced between the two men incredulously, but her irritation triumphed over her curiosity. She thrust out the envelope towards him like an accusation. "Professor Olruggio was supposed to mail this hours ago."

"Mail what?" Olruggio peered his head around Qifrey. He took the letter and turned it over in his hands. "You wrote another one already? Give the girl a chance to reply."

What on earth was he talking about? Agott's scowl deepened. "There's nothing for her to reply to; you clearly haven't sent it."

The professor shook his head. "I did mail a letter today. It was in your drawer. I had it sent off some hours ago now."

"A letter in my drawer? The letter was on the *floor.* There was…no…" Agott froze. A letter in her desk.

Her face positively *flamed* red. The love letter she'd written with Beldaruit. He had **sent it.** Agott stammered with embarrassment, unable to form a single coherent thought. Without so much as another word, she raced back to her room.

Olruggio and Qifrey stood there, dazed. The latter turned to the former with an unimpressed expression. "Olly, what did you do?"

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Agott panted as she let her door slam shut behind her. No time for propriety; this was an absolute emergency. She broke open the seal on the letter in her hands as she prayed that somehow they'd gotten mixed up. No luck. Maybe it hadn't reached the tailor's shop yet? Or maybe Coco hadn't had the chance to read it?

She looked around for her cloak and spotted it on the chair. As she tugged it over her head, she glanced to the window and the guards waiting below.

Well, at least she was fast. No time to lose.

In that moment, the promise to Qifrey was forgotten. She wasn't a princess right now, nor was she an honor-bound daughter. She was only desperate.

The latch on her window clicked open, and she climbed out onto the closest branch as she had so many times before. The rustle of the leaves caused the guards to look up, and she held very still.

"You hear something?" One of the guards asked the other, who shook his head.

There was no time to wait around for them to lose interest. She swung her legs over to the next branch and shifted her body weight until she was safely across the canopy. Once she was on the other side of the trunk, she held her breath and jumped down with a quiet *thump.*

The guards remained on high alert. They'd most definitely heard her now. Before they could come to investigate the tree, Agott picked up the closest rock she could find and threw it in the other direction.

One knight took the bait an dhurried over to see what caused the sound. The other, however, must have noticed the direction the rock had come from and approached the tree. Just as he leaned around the edge of the trunk, Agott shifted to the other side, just barely out of his sight. She held her breath and didn't move a muscle. Please work, please.

The knight gave up and went to join his partner in investigating the sound, and Agott exhaled. Without wasting another second, she dashed off towards the outer palace walls.

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Her legs had never carried her faster in her life. The stupid skirt made it hard to move as is, and it only served to get in the way. By the time she arrived on the tailor's doorstep, she was wrecked and gasping for breath. She didn't even get the chance to knock before the door clicked open.

"I'm sorry, we're closed for the night." A sweet, soft voice greeted her. Agott lifted back the edge of her cloak to reveal her face.
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Coco gasped softly, her own cheeks going pink. The princess stammered out what little words she could as she gasped for air. “Please…need to talk to you…inside.”

Coco asked no questions about how or why she was here. She only nodded and guided her inside. “My mother is already asleep, so we’ll have to be quiet.”

The pair of girls were silent as they crept up the stairs, both out of consideration as to not wake Coco’s mother and the obvious tension between them. Once they were inside her bedroom, Coco lit another candle and turned back to Agott.

The princess was still catching her breath, sweat shimmering on her brow in the low light of the flame and moon. Still, Coco’s heart hammered in her chest as she set the candle down on her desk and turned to pick up the letter she had received. “Are you here because of this?”

Agott’s eyes locked onto the offending slip of paper, the very one she hoped would never leave its envelope. “You’ve already read it?”

“Was I not supposed to?” Coco’s expression fell slightly. “You sent it to me after all.”

“No, this was the letter I meant to send you.” Agott held out the correct envelope. Coco’s heart ached.

“Oh…” She fought back a wave of tears. Agott never meant to send that letter. Maybe she never meant the words either.

Agott tensed and began to panic when she noticed the sadness hanging around Coco’s shoulders. She shook her head. “No, it isn’t that I didn’t…I just…I wanted to…” She threw her arms around the other girl in a tight embrace.

Coco stiffened, a thousand thoughts racing through her head at once. Agott finally caught her breath enough to properly speak. “I didn’t want you to read that letter. Not at all. Those were words that, should they ever make their way to you, I wanted them to come from my throat.”

Both girls flushed, but neither pulled back. They continued to hold one another in the quiet stillness of the room. Agott was the first to continue.

“I don’t know entirely what you think of me.” She pulled back and took Coco’s hands in her own. “I don’t know what I entirely think of myself. Not since I met you. I thought I was so sure, and yet…” She trailed off and shook her head. “All I know is that I want to keep discovering those pieces of me, and I want you to be a part of it. I want you to understand just how much you’ve come to mean to me, not from a piece of paper, but from my heart.” Tears began to well in her own eyes, both from fear and from how emotional it was making her. How silly it all was to get so worked up.

Coco was terrifyingly still, though the little light in the room illuminated her blushing face just enough that Agott could see she was beginning to cry too. “I was so scared at first. I thought maybe you came to deny the letter even existed.” She squeezed the princess’ hands. “Agott…when I read your letter, I was so happy.”

Tears began to flow down both girls’ cheeks. Agott swallowed a lump in her throat. “You were?”

Coco nodded sharply. “Agott, did you mean what you said? Every line you wrote?”

“Every letter,” Agott replied breathlessly.

Coco squeezed her hands again to try to contain her nerves. “Even the part about kissing me a hundred times?”

The princess flushed deeper, but nodded. “Yes, even that part. Why do you-”

Lips were on hers. Arms wrapped around her waist. She didn’t dare move.

She only kissed back.

It was clumsy and hesitant, but it was *real.* Agott let her hand come up to cradle the back of Coco’s head for a few moments. By the time they pulled back, neither could even make eye contact.

“I’m so sorry, I should have asked you if that was ok,” Coco stammered. Agott silenced her worries with another gentle press of lips.

“Please don’t apologize,” she whispered as she pulled away. Coco nodded stiffly as she laced their fingers together.

Agott was quiet as she considered her next words very carefully. She knew exactly what she wanted to say, but she was also painfully aware of the nuances it would bring. Still, she could deny her heart no longer. “If you’ll have me, I should very much like to court you. Properly.”

Coco’s eyes widened. She’d thought about this before, and from her understanding, it would be difficult if not impossible for love between a princess and a commoner to ever have the chance to bloom. Even so, she was just as weak when it came to Agott. “I should like that.”

The last lights of the town began to dim, and Agott was suddenly more conscious of how late it was getting. She’d need to return to the palace, and quickly. How she loathed to leave Coco’s side so soon.

“You need to get back to the palace,” Coco stated despite the hint of disappointment in her voice.

Agott scowled and nodded. “I do.” She looked back up to meet her gaze. “But I’ll return to you as soon as I am able. Will you wait for me?”

Coco blushed and nodded. “Of course I will. As long as you ask me to.”

The girls quietly made their way downstairs and stepped out onto the path that led up to the tailors. The sound of cicadas drowned out their quiet footsteps as Coco escorted her towards town. Just as they made it to the edge of the street, Coco leaned in for one last kiss before pulling Agott’s cloak back over her head. “Be safe.”

‘I will.” Agott nodded and handed Coco the second letter. “Here, for you. It answers your question about whether I would ever consider a date with just the two of us. Although I’m sure you can guess my answer.”

Coco giggled softly and tucked the letter under her arm. “I’m sure I could, though I’ll treasure your words all the same.”

Agott spared one last glance at the girl she’d come to love so terribly. “Goodnight, Coco.”

“Goodnight, Agott.”

Agott could hear voices through the glass, and her heart dropped in her chest. She waited in the branches of the tree to try to figure out who could be waiting for her.

“You don’t just go through someone's desk! What were you thinking?”

“I was *thinking* I was being helpful.”

“Helpful? I have half the mind to revoke all late-night snacking privileges from you.”

“I’m a grown man. You don’t control my snacking.”

“Well, I won’t help you cook any then!”

She sighed with relief. Just her professors. Agott brushed leaves out of her hair as she carefully maneuvered off the branch and onto the edge of her window, sliding it open and carefully creeping inside. As quiet as she was being, it wasn’t quiet enough to avoid Olruggio's sharp ear.

“There you are. We’ve been making excuses for your absence for the past while. Where did you get off to?” Her professor crossed his arms.

Qifrey sighed and rolled his eyes. “Don’t ask silly questions. She went to see Coco, where else?” He turned to face the young princess, a firm expression on his face. “I thought we’d learned our lesson about sneaking out without telling anyone. You’re lucky your recent illness has resulted in less frequent check-ins on your whereabouts.”

“I’m sorry, but I had to go.” Agott balled her fists at her side. Her professors exchanged a knowing glance. The princess took a seat on her bed and gestured for them to sit down as well. Olruggio occupied the chair beside the bed while Qifrey perched himself on the mattress beside her.

Olruggio rubbed the back of his neck and sighed. “I want to start by apologizing for sending out that letter. It was a mistake, and an invasion of your privacy. I hope whatever it was, it hasn’t caused you too much trouble.”

Agott shook her head. “It’s alright. In fact, I’m glad you sent it. This whole ordeal has helped me make up my mind.”

Qifrey furrowed his brow and gave the other man a questioning look, but Olruggio just shrugged. He hadn’t the faintest notion of an idea either.

“I’ve decided,” Agott took a deep breath, “That I should like to start courting Coco.”

Silence fell over the room. Agott looked up to see why they weren't responding, and was met with Qifrey's conflicted and guilty expression as well as Olruggio's confused one.

“Courting?” Olruggio raised an eyebrow as he turned to the white-haired man. “Qifrey, you haven’t told her?”

“No, I haven’t.” Qifrey gripped the edge of the bed as guilt ate at his heart.

Agott looked between them once more. “Told me what? What’s going on?”

Olruggio nudged Qifrey's foot with his own. “Are you telling her? Or am I?”

“The news is my burden to bear. I said I would; I only wished it would be under better circumstances.” Qifrey shook his head. He rested a hand on her shoulder. “Agott, you won’t be courting Coco.”

It felt as if a dagger had been plunged into her heart and twisted violently. Of all the people she expected to shoot her down, he wasn’t one of them. Qifrey, the man who had helped her understand her feelings. The one who nurtured her through her difficult hours and supported her unconditionally was turning down what she wanted most. “And why not? I’m aware that it's considered scandalous, but a marriage between a royal and a commoner isn’t unheard of. I could-”

“You can’t.” Qifrey’s voice wavered. “I’m so sorry, Agott. If I’d known sooner, I would have never permitted things to go this far. You cannot be with Coco, as your hand has been promised to another.”

The knife in her chest twisted once more. “Since when? To whom? Why wasn’t I told?” Questions poured out one after another, tears welling in her eyes.

“Nothing’s been solidified, but the talks seem absolute from what I hear.” Olruggio chimed in. “Prince Eoleo from the northern kingdom.”

“I’m so sorry,” Qifrey choked out. “It was selfish. I thought if I could preserve some hope for you, it would spare you some of the pain…”

Agott jerked her shoulder away from his touch. She couldn’t even look at him. “How could you?” She hissed under her breath. “How long have you known? How long have you kept this from me?”

“Easy,” Olruggio tried to mediate. “He didn’t mean harm by it.”

“That doesn’t mean there was no harm done!” Agott pushed herself up from her bed. “I’m not a child, and this is my future we’re talking about. My *agency.* I had a right to know the moment the decision was made, did I not? You kept that from me. You took away my voice!”

Qifrey continued clutching the sheets of her bed, gaze cast downward. All he had done to try to shield her from the world came crashing down, and there was little he could do to soothe the wound he had inflicted. Any words he could speak would merely be bandages, or worse, they could further the damage. As Agott stood, he didn't chase. He couldn't shield her anymore. So, he let her go.

Agott kept her cloak on as she hurried down the hall and out into the garden, the very same place where her professor had comforted her so many times when she felt unsure. The same place where she'd first kissed Coco's cheek. All the wonderful things felt so distant as she collapsed to her knees beneath the gazebo and began to sob.

She was angry; of course she was. But it wasn't entirely directed at her professors. They had his the truth from her, but they weren't the ones who made that truth a reality. A cold mother, a deceased father, professors that kept secrets under the guise of it being for her own good. Wasn't there anyone in the world she could turn to?

Anyone but the one person she could not have.

Her hands were cold against the stone beneath her, fingernails dragging against the ground as her breath hitched and tears slowed. "Coco…" she whispered into the night, knowing it would not answer.

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It was a long while before Agott made her way back to her bedroom. It had begun to rain outside, and she could no longer remain outside, despite her longing for solitude. She noticed a figure slumped against the outside of her door, and as she approached, she recognized it to be Qifrey.

Her instinct was to snap at him. Tell him to leave or give him the cold shoulder. Even so, she couldn't bring herself to turn him away. Something deep down longed for his comfort more than ever.

Qifrey lifted his head, his own expression deeply troubled as he took a deep breath. "If you want to be alone, just say the word."

Agott thought about it, but shook her head.

The two entered her room, and Qifrey was quick to fetch a towel and hold it out to her so she could dry her hair. "You'll catch a cold again if you leave it wet," he whispered.

She began to dry herself off, but struggled to gather all her hair. Qifrey hesitated to reach out and help.

Agott sighed and turned to him. "Would you mind?"
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Qifrey nodded and smiled softly, guiding her to sit as he gently helped dry her hair. “It’s gotten quite long.”

“If I could cut it, I would,” Agott grumbled. “It gets annoying.”

Qifrey paused his ministrations. “Would you like to?”

“Like to what?”

“Cut it.”

Agott turned over her shoulder to search his expression for any hint of teasing or dishonesty. Before she could respond, Qifrey continued. “I can’t changecancelt he engament, but if I can bring you even the tiniest bit of comfort, I will. You know that.”

“You’d really let me cut it?” She ran her hand down her curls, the length reaching down her back.

“I’ll take the blame.” He nodded. “Just say the word.”

For a moment, Agott considered it. “Can we trim it? Just slightly? I want to see how it feels.”

Qifrey smiled as he stood. “Of course. I’ll get the scissors.”

When he returned, Agott was twirling the end of her hair around her finger. She looked up at him with red eyes from crying, and he softened instantly. “Come sit on the chair; I wouldn't want any to get in your bed.”

Agott shifted onto the chair and waited, glancing at the mirror across the room on her vanity. She watched as Qifrey took a section of hair and trimmed it, not even an inch. Hair fluttered to the floor.

“Feel alright?” Qifrey whispered. Agott nodded and looked up at him.

“If it’s alright…can you trim it a bit more?”

The professor smiled and handed her the scissors. “You show me where.”

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“I think we’re done here.” Qifrey stepped back and wiped off the scissors. “How does it feel?”

Agott slowly approached her mirror, running a hand through her now short curls. A small smile pulled at her lips. “Lighter. More like me.”
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Qifrey chuckled and stood beside her, a hand on her shoulder. ‘Well worth the trouble then. I’ll clean up; you get ready for bed.”

She nodded and went to change while Qifrey swept up the floor. His heart still ached with the weight of the secrets he had kept from her. A proper apology was certainly in order, but for now…

He watched the quiet joy on Agott’s face as she admired her reflection.

He would apologize, and he would work hard to make things right. But for now?

This was enough.

The following morning, Agott was well enough to resume her lessons. It was to be expected that word of her sudden shift in appearance would make its way to the queen, but she didn't expect it to be so soon. It was during her dance lesson that a servant approached the doorway.

"I'm so terribly sorry to interrupt," they said as they rose from a deep bow. "Her Majesty the Queen has requested Her Highness Agott's presence as soon as her lesson concludes."

"Very well, I'll send her down when we've finished." Her instructor nodded.

As the lesson concluded, Agott felt a sense of dread beginning to build in her chest. Cutting her hair felt freeing in the moment, but in the aftermath she had begun to second-guess herself. Was it truly worth invoking her mother's wrath, especially while she was still ill? She didn't want to be a bad daughter; she only wished to grant herself a bit of freedom.

As she made her way down the hall, flanked by a guard on either side, she twisted one of her short curls between her fingers. The weight off her neck allowed the cool air to brush against the skin of her neck. It was as calming as it was strange.

The guards stepped aside to allow Agott to enter her mother's room, and she immediately paled at the sight. The last time they'd spoken, the queen seemed to have been improving. Now? She was lying back down completely.

"Agott," Adina spoke quietly, gaze sweeping over her daughter's form before landing on her hair. "So what I've heard is true. Is there a reason for the sudden change?"

The princess took a seat at her mother's bedside an dshook her head. "I've wanted to do so for a while, and it's getting hot now that it's summer."

"Who helped you cut it?" Adina reached out and gently ran her fingers through her curls. The touch was unusual, though not unwelcome.

Agott leaned into her hand beside herself. "No one, I did it myself."

"Lies pass your lips far too easily these days. At least show a hint of remorse when trying to deceive your own mother." Adina pulled her hand back. "Was it Qifrey? Or perhaps Olruggio this time?"

Agott sighed at both the statement and the loss of contact. "Qifrey. Please, it was my own choice."

"I'm not going to punish him, nor will I punish you."

"You won't?" Agott furrowed her brow. She'd braced for a scolding at the very least. Her mother was rarely gentle, at least, not without strings attached.

“No, I won’t.” Adina turned away and coughed. “I should like to leave my daughter with at least some fond memories of me.”
‘
Agott stiffened and shook her head. “You mustn’t say such things. Mustn’t so much as think them either.”

“You’re a smart girl. I’m sure you’ve noticed a shift in my condition. Without much rhyme or reason to the illness, it’s difficult to predict my days.” Adina rested a hand across her forehead. “Besides, your hair isn’t my primary concern as of the moment. Have you recovered from your bout of illness? I hear you had a cold.”

“I’ve recovered, yes.” Agott folded her hands in her lap. “But I doubt that’s what you meant by having a primary concern.”

Adina nodded and exhaled slowly. “Correct again. Agott, surely news has made its way to you by now about your engagement.”

Agott scowled. “I’ve heard, though somehow it feels more bitter coming directly from you. Is it set in stone then?”

“Negotiations are being made.” The queen waved her hand as if she were merely talking about a trade.

“Am I something to be negotiated on then? No more than an object?”

Adina spared her an unimpressed glance. “Don’t be so difficult. If I didn’t care, I wouldn’t have so much effort put into ensuring the marriage would be sound. You’ll be well off, and so will the kingdom.”

The princess let her expression sour further as she shook her head. “I won’t go along with it so easily.”

The queen raised an eyebrow. “Oh, but you will.”

“I won’t.” Agott’s voice was firm, and her shoulders set. The expression on her daughter’s face made Adina soften, if only for a moment before continuing.

“You *will*.” She folded her own hands on top of the blanket. “If you’ll recall, the day you were caught sneaking out with you rproessors aid, I agreed to overlook his transgressions in exchange for your word. You made your oath: obedience when I asked it of you.”

Agott *laughed*, as if it were nothing more than a sick joke. “You mean to imply those two things are of equal weight? The rest of my life, my *agency,* all because you overlooked my disobedience?”

“Oh, Agott. You’d do it even without that little precaution.” Adina smiled bitterly.

Agott’s face twisted with anguish. “Just what is that supposed to mean then?”

“I raised you. I *know* you. You’ll do it not for your professor or for any oath I could lay out, but because you know it’s the only path that was ever laid out for you.” Adina turned her head to look her in the eyes. “Your honor binds you more than any promise ever could.”

Agott stood from her chair, biting back her anger. “That may have been true a year ago. Maybe even a few months ago, maybe even *yesterday,* but it’s not true anymore. I found something; I found *someone* that makes me want more than my honor.”

Adina laughed coldly, but there was a touch of hurt somewhere deep in her eyes. “You’d leave your kingdom behind? Turn your back on your family when they need you most?”

“I will.” Agott choked over her words, a layer of conflict holding her back. It was as if there were chains around limbs that kept her from fleeing.

“You won’t.” Adina reached out and cupped her cheek. Her touch was tender, but the warmth of her hand was lost through the coldness of her words. “I know you won’t let me down.”

Agott’s breath caught, and for a single moment, she allowed herself to pretend this was comfort. The moment ended, and she pulled herself away. As she turned to leave, Adina spoke once more.

“I’ll remind you that going back on your word gives me every right to go back on mine.”

As the door clicked shut, Agott noticed Qifrey standing by the doorway. He took note of her expression and was quick to offer comfort in the form of a hand on her shoulder. “I presume her majesty will want to speak with me, seeing as I am the one who aided in your current haircut.” He smiled softly. “But before that, are you alright? She wasn’t too hard on you, was she?”

Agott bit her lip. She had been so angry with him for keeping secrets, and yet…she couldn’t bring herself to tell him the truth. His livelihood and life within the palace depended on her now.

It wasn’t a sacrifice he would want her to make.

Qifrey loved her, possibly more than anyone ever had. He raised her in a way neither of her parents could, and supported her unconditionally. That was exactly why she couldn’t bear to *lose him,* not even if it would be something he would have wanted.

It was an impossible choice. A chance at life with the girl she loved and freedom from an arranged marriage she never agreed to, or a world with Qifrey still in it. How could she ever decide something so heavy in a matter of minutes?

She hugged him, not knowing what else to do. Despite his confusion, Qifrey hugged back, as he always did.

The marriage wasn’t set in stone yet. No one had to leave. No promises had to be kept. Not now, not yet.

As the next few days went on, negotiations for Eoleo and Agott's marriage continued. Bedlaruit became increasingly irritable in his brief interactions, and Agott grew more closed off by the day. Qifrey found himself in bed after another long day of lessons where Agott had barely uttered a word.

"Her Majesty said something to her, I'm sure." He frowned as he rolled onto his side to watch Olruggio as he got ready for bed. "I just can't put my finger on what."

"And you're sure this isn't about her hair? A princess' image is very important. It's not unreasonable to imagine she got scolded for it." Olruggio sat down on the edge of the bed and stretched, his joints popping.

Qifrey reached out and gently pulled him closer as he sought comfort and warmth. His arms wrapped around his waist as they lay together. "I got reprimanded, but only slightly. I can't imagine she'd be any harsher with Agott than with myself, though admittedly it's hard to say. You'd think she'd go easier on her own flesh and blood."

Olruggio only shrugged. "The Queen has always had high expectations."

"I'm not so sure that's what happened here. Something deeper is bothering Agott, shes keeping something from me. It's eating me away." He buried his face in his lover's shoulder.

"We all have our secrets and burdens. I know you want to help, but she'll come to you when she's ready. Give her time." Olruggio closed his eyes, though he could feel Qifrey's restlessness radiating off of him in waves. "Try to get some sleep. We're no good to her exhausted."

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Tea with Beldaruit turned into a tradition, if only as a way for Qifrey to keep tabs on the situation with Deanreldy. He smiled as he poured for his former professor. "How are the negotiations?"

"They're going about as well as you could imagine. There's no need to put that smile of yours on for me; you know I can see through it." Beldaruit lifted the teacup and blew on it before taking a long sip. "How is Agott herself?"

Qifrey set down the teapot after pouring for himself. "Cagey, and she's not the only one." He dropped a cube of sugar into the steaming hot liquid and mixed it slowly. "I'm having a difficult time reading either one of you these days."

"We have good reason to be putting up our walls. I can only imagine how difficult it must be to process the situation, let alone come to terms with it. Having your hand given away like that…I can't imagine that's simple for a young girl to process. As for myself, I've come to a dead end."

"You're referring to the situation with the food taster? They haven't found anything then?" Qifrey sipped his own tea and narrowed his eyes over the rim of the cup.
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Beldaruit shook his head. “No unusual taste, nor new symptoms. Still, that doesn’t entirely disprove that her food was tainted; it just means it hasn’t been tainted since. That’s not to say it didn’t happen, or rule out it happening again.” He rubbed his chin. “But the queen is still sick…”

“I’m not going to lie, the thought has crossed my mind as well. But say we are dealing with a case of poisoning and someone within the palace has the intel to know a food taster was brought in. How would they know when it would be a good time to act?” Qifrey shook his head. “It isn’t the sort of thing one can easily prove.”

“My knowledge of poisons is slim, and only covers the sort of plants curious students could get into while on adventures.” Bedlaruit shot him a look. *You’re the reason for that.* “And her symptoms don't align with anything within my realm of expertise.”

Qifrey gave a long-winded sigh. “A true dead end then…it’s something to keep our eyes on. I’m near certain her ailment is no mere coincidence.”

“I’m inclined to agree with you.” As Beldaruit finished his tea, his expression hardened. “Regarding Agott’s marriage…”

Qifrey set down his own cup, not trusting his hands not to shake with rage at the mere mention of the topic. “Go on.”

“Her Majesty has outlined that the betrothal will become official as soon as possible, and the marriage itself will occur when Agott comes of age. That being said, in the event of her death, things will be hurried along sooner. Additionally, Agott is to continue preparations for an ascent to the throne as we prepare for the worst.”

“Ideally, she has a few years before her marriage then. The smallest of mercies. Perhaps there's time to sort this mess before it truly begins.” Qifrey gripped the edge of his chair.

Beldaruit's expression softened. “I hate to be the one to dash your hopes, but I’ve known this world longer than you have. It’s beyond unlikely that once the betrothal is finalized, it will ever be nullified.”

Qifrey tried to keep his face from twisting, but the words felt sour. Was there truly nothing to be done? No way to give Agott the future she so desperately wanted?

“I understand you must be frustrated. Perhaps even angry.” Beldaruit reached out and rested his hand on top of his student’s. “But you cannot protect her forever; not from this.”

“If only I held more sway. If only her own voice could save her from all of this.” Qifrey choked out through gritted teeth.

Beldaruit patted his hand before pulling back and rubbing his temples. “Thank you for the tea. Honestly, things keep piling up. Not only do I have another letter to compose to Deanreldy, but Her Majesty has insisted on hiring a new set of staff for the palace to ensure that Agott is looked after. More maids, a live-in tailor….the whole nine yards. Fulfilling all her demands is proving to be most troublesome.”

“A tailor, you say?” Qifrey perked up slightly, a hint of hope creeping into his voice. He cleared his throat in an attempt to conceal his growing optimism. “What I mean to say is, how troubling indeed. At any rate, you’re most welcome. I’ll clean up now if you don’t mind; there’s an urgent matter that needs my attention.”

“Hmm.” Beldaruit hummed and raised an eyebrow, though he said nothing further.

Qifrey hastily and rather clumsily gathered the porcelain before hurrying off into the hall, leaving Beldaruit to mull over the situation at hand.

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“Agott,” Qifrey greeted as she stepped out from her history lesson. “Might you spare me a moment of your time?”

The princess blinked in surprise, but nodded. He was sure he imagined it, but her expression looked slightly conflicted at the mere sight of him.

“I’ve just heard word that your mother intends to bring on more staff, including a *tailor*.” He emphasized his words as he looked around to see if anyone was listening in.

Agott tilted her head in confusion. “That’s…news to me.”

“Yes, yes.” Qifrey waved his hand. “Your mother was never one to want a crowded home, but it seems her anxieties over best preparing for your future have adjusted her lens. I’m at a complete loss for where to find a *tailor* on such short notice.” He coughed around the word ‘tailor’ this time.

That seemed to do the trick. The gears in Agott’s head clicked, and she grabbed onto his sleeve. “You’re serious?”

Qifrey looked around once more before nodding. She tried not to let her hopes get too high, but the implication was there. It might work. It didn’t solve everything, but it was an excuse to be near her again. He leaned down and began to whisper.

“It’ll be far too obvious to recommend her outright. We need a way to prove her skill discreetly, and make them think it was their idea. Any propositions?”
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Agott nodded confidently. “Just one.”

Qifrey smiled and raised his eyebrows. ‘And what might that be?”

“We hold a competition.”

~~~

“Oh? Back so soon?” Beldaruit opened the door and moved aside so the other man could enter.

Qifrey nodded and closed the door behind him. “I apologize for the sudden intrusion. It’s the funniest thing; I was suddenly struck by an idea of how we could best select a tailor to fill the role Her Majesty has requested.”

“Oh, I’m sure you have.” Beldaruit rolled his eyes fondly, but nodded for him to continue.

“What would the queen think of making it into a bit of a competition? Artisans enter their work, and it’s selected based on skill alone rather than reputation or title.” Qifrey took a seat on the couch in the center of the room, a hand waving with a flourish towards the window. “There are plenty of skilled craftsmen in town, but we may be overlooking some true hidden gems if we go based on standing alone. Besides, it may help lift the spirits of the townsfolk. Everyone loves a good bit of fun.”

Bedlaruit nodded and smiled. “I’m to believe you propose this with no underlying intentions? No particular artisan in mind?”

“Even if I did, it wouldn’t matter, now would it?” He grinned. “The best of the best will be selected no matter what I want. It’s completely fair. So? Did I manage to catch your attention?”

The older man sighed and shook his head. “I’d be lying if I said you didn’t. Alright, a friendly competition then. I’ll begin to make arrangements. Now, off with you then; I’m nearly certain there’s someone you need to inform.”

~~~

Agott sat anxiously through the remainder of her lessons, legs bouncing and fingers drumming on her desk as hours ticked by far too slowly. Once she was finally free to return to her room, she wasted no time in drafting a letter to Coco. Her excitement over the possibilities was overshadowed by the weight of having to break the news of her engagement. She had put it off long enough…Coco deserved to know.

My dearest Coco,
I write to you first with unfortunate news.
I had every intention of truly courting you, and yet I returned home only to be informed my hand has been promised to another. I am truly devastated, and found myself unable to send word right away. I apologize for that.

Agott clenched her hand around her quill. Writing out the words made them feel all the more real, the sting still fresh in her mind. Even so, there was a fire within her that told her it wouldn't be the end.

That being said, I do not intend to give up so easily. Should you be willing to wait for me, I will find my way back to your side. On that note, there is more news.
I've recently been informed that my mother intends to hire a new wave of palace staff. This lineup would include a personal live-in tailor. I don't expect you to be on board immediately, but I ask you to give it some thought. There will be a competition hosted soon to determine who will fill the aforementioned role, and should you wish to enter, I have every bit of faith that you will exceed all expectations and claim the title as your own.
That being said, please don't make the decision in haste. It would mean the world to me and more to have you closer to my side, but I don't want to disrupt the life you're building either. That said, should you live at the palace, I will ensure you and your family are well taken care of.
I'm so sorry I had to leave your side so suddenly the other night, and know that no matter your decision, I will continue to bide my time.
With love,
Agott Arklaum.

The envelope was signed and sealed before she set it aside and made her way over to the window. The moon was just as bright as it had been that night on the hill. As she climbed into bed, she tried to imagine the girl she'd come to love was right there beside her, and that the sound of the wind through the trees was her calming voice.

Coco must have read over the letter ten times now. On her first read, her vision was splotchy with unshed tears.

Agott was promised to another. The hope that lingered in her heart diminished slightly at the mere thought. Of course, she was the princess. How could she allow herself to get so swept up in her own feelings that she could forget that one simple fact?

It took the next three or so reads to calm herself down. Agott wanted her to wait; she was holding out hope regardless of the circumstances. Coco dried her eyes with her sleeve and sniffled. She wasn't ready to give up the rest of her hope, and if Agott could wait, so could she.

The rest of the letter, however, was intriguing. So much so her heart stuttered in her chest at the implications that were being made. A competition to select a tailor. If she won…

If there were details about it, they'd be on flyers in town by now. Coco threw on her cloak and hurried down the stairs. "Mom, I'll be right back!"

~~~

As Coco approached the town square, she and Richeh chatted quietly amongst themselves. Richeh looked around at the various people holding and reading flyers, and her heart sank for a moment at the memory of the last festival. However, seeing the relaxed and cheery atmosphere eased some of her worries.

The girls found a man handing out a stack of the very same flyers, and each took one for themselves before stepping to the side so they could read.

"A tailor's competition?" Richeh squinted at the paper to try and read all the tiny text.

Coco nodded and smiled. "It's to select a live-in tailor for the palace!"

"How did you read all of that so fast? The letters are so small." Richeh held her flyer up to the light.

A shy giggle caused Richeh to look over at her friend. Coco just smiled. "Agott sent me a letter saying this would happen."

Richeh blinked and looked around. "Do you think she had something to do with this competition then? A way to get you to the palace?"

"I'm not so sure. It could very well be a coincidence, but…I'll happily take it!"

The girls continued to chatter excitedly (Half discussing what sort of garment Coco could enter, half Richeh teasing her relentlessly.)
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As they began the walk back to the tailor's shop, both girls failed to notice the shadows in the nearby woods that seemed to watch their every step.

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“Mom, we’re home!” Coco took off her shoes and cloak, flyer still in hand. Richeh trailed behind her before doing the same.

“Welcome back. Oh, good morning, Richeh.” Her mother smiled kindly as she looked up from her sewing. Her eyes landed on the flyers the two girls were holding. “What do you have there?”

“It’s-”

“It’s a newsletter!” Coco quickly spoke before Richeh could finish. Her friend shot her a confused look, but she continued on. “If it’s alright, we’re going to go upstairs for a bit.”

“Alright then, have fun, you two.” Her mom waved and chuckled before looking back down at her project. A newsletter? She’d have to go into town later to pick one up for herself.

~~~

“What was that about?” Richeh asked as they arrived in Coco’s room and let the door click shut.

Coco sighed and looked down at the flyer. “I’m sorry.” She shook her head. “I’ll tell her eventually, just not yet. I don’t know how she’d react to the idea of me considering entering something like this. After all, I’m all the family she has, and the same goes for me with her. I’ve been thinking about it ever since I kissed Agott. I think I love her, but I don't know how I’d enter her world without leaving mine behind.” She hugged the flyer to her chest.

Richeh blinked, holding very still. “Since you did *what* with Agott?”

“That’s not the important part!” Coco’s face flamed red as she waved her hand. Right, she still had so much to fill Richeh in on. In the whirlwind of processing her own emotions, she’d completely neglected to tell anyone about Agott’s confession and the subsequent kiss. “Regardless, entering alone doesn’t necessarily mean I’m going to win…is it really worth causing my mother so much stress if in the end I don’t get picked?”

“If you want my opinion, I think you have to tell her at some point.” Richeh shrugged and took a seat on Coco’s bed. “Going behind her back will only cause both of you pain later down the line. I’m sure your mom would rather support you if this is something you truly wanted than to have to accept that you’re leaving her side after it’s already gone and decided.”

Coco took a seat beside her friend and tucked her legs up to her chest. “I guess you have a good point. I hate lying to her…”

“Then don’t lie,” Richeh said simply. “Think about what you want to do first, then sit down with your mom and talk about things.”

“Alright, I think I will. Thank you, Richeh.” Coco smiled softly as her posture began to relax. “I need to think about what sort of project I want to enter…what exactly are the rules?”

Richeh pulled out the flyer once more and squinted at the text. “I believe it’s themed around formalwear. Maybe a gown? You made so many nice ones for the summer ball, I don’t think it would be difficult for you.”

“A gown…” Coco trailed off. It was a nice thought, and it was true it was within her abilities. Still, when she thought about Agott, gowns didn’t come to mind anymore. “Actually, I think I might have a better idea.”

~~~

Coco sat at her desk, the flyer pinned up on the board next to all of Agott’s letters. She dipped her pen into the ink pot before beginning to write.

My dearest Agott,

I found a flyer in town today detailing the event you mentioned. I’ll be honest, It’s still something I’m thinking through. Im eager at the possibility of having a way to be closer, and I’m apprehensive all the same. I promise no matter what my decision is, I want to find a way to be part of your life. I’m currently leaning towards entering; I just don't know how to approach the subject with my mom.

About your betrothal. I will admit, it saddened me greatly to hear that we cannot continue as we had hoped. That being said, if you’ll wait for me, I’ll wait for you. I care about you too deeply to let you go now. I only wish there were a way to talk about it in person so I could better understand. Until then, I look forward to your next letter.

Yours truly,

Coco.
~~~

Agott attached Coco's most recent letter to the row of them in her room, smiling softly as she did. Things were far from perfect, but if Coco was willing to wait, so was she. There was a knock on her door that brought her away from the butterflies in her stomach and back to reality.

As she opened the door, Beldaruit offered her a warm greeting. "Good morning, Agott. Might I come in for a moment? I understand your lessons begin shortly, so I'll only take a moment of your time."

Agott stepped aside for him to enter the room. Once he was situated, he glanced at her wall of letters. "My, it seems my little lesson to you has paid off. I must say I'd be lying if I said I wasn't pleased. That aside, Qifrey had the most interesting proposition for me." Beldaruit folded his hands neatly in his lap. "Your professor suggested a friendly competition to decide who will become the palace tailor. While that does align with something he may suggest, I can't help this nagging feeling that someone else may be the true mastermind here."

A small blush crept up Agott's cheek. "I may have suggested it; is that so wrong?"

"Not wrong at all. As a matter of fact, I think it's a wonderful idea. I'm only surprised you didn't nominate this little friend of yours outright." The regent chuckled as he looked back at the letters. "It would have been easy to insist she was the only tailor you would want, and yet you didn't. Why is that?"

Agott shook her head. "For one, my mother would never allow it. She'd likely figure me out and refuse it before it could be discussed. It doesn't matter; Coco doesn't need me to vouch for her. Her work speaks for itself."

"You have quite a bit of confidence in both her and her abilities then." Beldaruit grinned. "I'm getting excited to see what she comes up with. Now, I think I have a way to make things fair and ensure bias doesn't affect the outcome. That's true from both ends: No positive bias for Coco from you, and no negative bias from Her Majesty."

"What did you have in mind?" Agott tilted her head.

Bedlaruit drummed his fingers against the armrest of his wheelchair. "The competition itself will be anonymous. Contestants enter their work, and the selected winner will present their sketch to prove that it's theirs. No name attached to submissions, no way for anyone to know who created what. Submissions will be viewed by a panel privately, so no one can jot down a sketch and claim it as their own later. After we have announced the winner, all submissions will be displayed to be enjoyed by the townsfolk in a sort of small festival. It's fair, and it's fun for everyone involved."

Agott slowly nodded as she mulled it over. That did sound like a good solution for all parties…"Will I be allowed to attend?"

Beldaruit winced and rubbed his neck. “Well, I’m unsure. There have been no sightings of the brimmed caps, but that isn’t to say it’s suddenly become safe. With the queen still unwell, your safety is more valuable than ever.”

“Please, they’ll be my tailors. Don’t I have the right to a say?” Agott pleaded with him.

The man sighed and deflated slightly. “I’ll think on it. If I agree, you understand you will be *heavily* supervised, yes?”

Agott nodded, and Bedlaruit offered her a small smile. “I’ll get back to you. I’ve sent flyers into town, but I suppose an announcement detailing the rules will have to be made. Sign-ups will also need to be posted soon. If you’ll excuse me, I have much to attend to, as I’m sure you do as well.”

As he left, Agott continued to get ready for a day of lessons. She could only hope Coco would decide to enter after all.

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“Mom?” Coco fidgeted nervously as she made her way downstairs. A day had passed, and her mind was all but made up. She wanted to enter the competition. The biggest issue now was breaking the news. “Can I talk to you?”

Coco’s mother set down the spoon she had been using to stir and smiled at her daughter. “Of course, I’m just about done making us lunch. Go wash up, and I’ll meet you at the table.”

Coco nodded and shuffled over before taking a seat. Guilt continued to gnaw at her heart. Was she seriously considering this? The idea of leaving her mother's side, even if she’d still be able to see her, loomed over her head. She didn’t want to abandon what she’d come to know, but she couldn't deny the part of her that wanted this either.

A steaming hot bowl of soup was placed in front of her, but she made no move to start eating. Her mother sighed and shook her head. “Not hungry?”

“Not really, I’m sorry.” Coco shook her head.

“Well, that won't do. Something’s bothering you, isn’t it?” Her mom set down her own bowl of soup and sat beside her daughter.

Coco fidgeted with the hem of her dress and refused to make eye contact. “There’s something I want to tell you, but I don’t know how to say it.”

A hand came up and gently patted the top of her head. “Whatever it is, I promise I’ll listen. I won’t judge you or even say a word until you're done if it makes you feel better.”
~~~

Coco relaxed slightly. Her mother's warmth never failed to soothe her, even when things were difficult. She took a deep breath and began to speak. “There's going to be a competition to decide who will become a live-in tailor for the palace.”

True to her word, Coco’s mother said nothing. She continued to run her fingers through her child’s hair in a gentle, soothing motion.

“I think…I want to enter.” Coco tightened her grip on her dress. “I don’t know if I can win, and I’m scared to be away from you, but I dont want to let this opportunity slip past me either.” She looked up at her mom, eyes shiny with tears. “I’m sorry, am I a bad daughter?”

Her mother pulled her in for a hug first, hushing softly and rocking her back and forth. When she spoke, her tone was unmistakably fond. “You are a *wonderful* daughter. Don’t ever doubt that.” She pressed a kiss to the top of her head. “My sweet Coco.”

Coco began to cry softly as she clung to her mother, the reality of her own words settling in. She was more conflicted now than she had been before. Her mom's soft voice continued to fill her ears.

“I’d be lying if I said it wouldn't be hard to let you go.” She smiled and rubbed her back. “But I always knew you couldn’t remain only mine forever. You’re growing up so quickly, and I know you’ll become a brilliant young woman. Your talents extend far beyond our little corner of the world.” She reached up to wipe one of her own tears. “If it would make you happy, you should enter the competition. You have nothing but my support.”

“Thank you.” Coco hiccuped as she hugged her. “Thank you, I love you.”

“Oh, Coco. I love you too.” Another kiss landed on her forehead. “You’ll always have a place here, no matter what or where you go.”

Coco nodded and clung to her mother for a moment more before finally pulling back and wiping her eyes. She noticed her mom wipe her own eyes before laughing softly. “My goodness, I think we both needed that. Do you think you can eat a few botes for me? It’s no good to try and design on an empty stomach.”

“I think so.” Coco let a tiny smile tug at her lips as she sipped her spoon into the bowl. The taste of her mother's cooking combined with the overwhelming love she felt from beside her softened her anxieties about what was to come.

The pair sat in easy silence as they ate, only the sound of silverware clinking punctuating the calm.

For the next few days, Coco hardly left her room. She ate whatever her mother brought (not wanting to worry her), but sleep remained elusive. This was more than just an entry into a competition; this was the deciding factor that would determine how her relationship with Agott might play out.

Proximity alone wouldn't be enough to turn the tide, but it was certainly better than nothing. Just the thought of sharing space with her, holding her hand, or even hearing the words she poured into her letters come from her lips…

Coco's face burned red at the thought, and she accidentally pricked her finger on her sewing pin before letting out a yelp. She pushed back from her desk and rubbed her neck in frustration. It was just the base she was working on for now, but she still hadn't settled on a final design yet. Numerous sketches were sprawled about and pinned up, but none were right.

For one, most of the shop's customers happened to be women, and she was most used to making gowns. Even then, it wasn't as simple as making a suit for a man. It would be simple enough to make something textbook, but it wouldn't fit the same way. Comfort was just as important as fashion. After all, this wasn't just about making someone look their best; it was also about making them feel like themselves.

Agott didn't like too much 'fuss' in anything she did. The same could be said for her clothes. Dresses were heavy and restricting, and she was constantly fidgeting with her sleeves that night at the ball. Right, nothing too frilly. No ruffled ascots or poofy sleeves. Something functional and simple, yet timeless and elegant all the same.

Coco leaned back as she tried to think from another perspective. It wasn't as simple as wanting to dress like a prince; this was a matter of Agott wanting to be Agott. In a way, it kind of reminded her of Richeh. Her dear friend's attitude of not wanting to be stifled by others' expectations was slightly different. Agott still *cared* about how she was perceived; she just wanted to be a little freer.

A bird landed on the branch outside her window, and Coco took a moment to relax and enjoy the sight. Something about it almost reminded her of the princess. They were so beautiful, yet their appearance didn't seem to interfere with their ability to fly.

Maybe Agott didn't have to sacrifice appearances for functionality after all.

Coco lifted her sketchbook once more and began to draw, occasionally glancing back up out the window.

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A few days passed, and news of the competition spread through town like wildfire. There were a handful of tailors both in the village itself and in neighboring towns that wished to compete, and all craftsmen dove into their work with the hopes of catching the attention of the crown.
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Agott had finished with another day's lessons and was washing up when Beldaruit showed up at her door once more. He smiled and greeted her with more energy than a reasonable person could have at such an hour.

"Good evening, Agott! I trust your lessons were most fruitful? Not pushing yourself too hard now, are you? Wouldn't want you catching another cold before the big day." The regent made himself comfortable as he often did when visiting her room, transferring himself onto the edge of her bed and folding his hands in his lap. "It's been a little while since we've spoken; I apologize for that. I've been busy handling a few matters."

Agott frowned as she perched herself on the edge of her bed. "You mean my engagement?"

Beldaruit coughed and cleared his throat, waving a hand dismissively. "Yes, well, technically. But that isn't why I'm here." He took a moment to center himself before continuing on. "I've mulled things over and talked to Captain Vinanna about you attending the judging for the competition."

That seemed to get her attention. Her gaze snapped up to meet his as she froze and waited for his response. "Go on," she prompted.

"Well." Beldaruit hummed and tapped his chin. "I don't see the *harm* in allowing you to attend. You're keeping up with your studies, you're in good health, and there's been very little activity relating to the brimcloaks. That's not to say there aren't risks, but I would hate to keep you trapped in a tower like a damsel your entire life. You deserve to be part of the proceedings, especially seeing as they pertain to you directly."

Agott tried not to let her excitement show on her face, clearing her throat and casting her gaze away from him. "I'll be allowed to come and judge, then?"

"Judge?" Beldaruit raised a teasing eyebrow. "Of course not. But you can come and *look* at the entries."

"Just why not?" Agott ran a hand through her hair. "The entries are anonymous, aren't they?'

"Anonymous by name doesn't mean you don't hold bias." Beldaruit grinned. "The panel is made up of multiple people. Your etiquette professor, Qifrey, who knows what sort of garments are most acceptable. Myself, as regent, to serve as the queen's eyes in her absence. Finally, an appraiser to ensure the quality of the work is sound. You may provide us with input on what you like, naturally, but our goal is to determine who is the best fit overall. Besides, I'm near certain you'd recognize Coco's work should you see it yourself."

Agott huffed, but reluctantly nodded. It was certainly better than nothing at all, and it did give her a slim chance at seeing Coco herself. Not to mention any excuse to leave the confines of the palace walls was more than welcome.

“Do try to get some rest. I believe your professor made it clear you weren't to stay awake working any more.” Beldaruit winked and settled back into his wheelchair. “I’ll finalize details with the knights and get back to you. The competition is this weekend, after all.”

As he left, Agott sighed and climbed into bed. She *knew* how capable Coco was, but it did little to ease her anxieties. All she could do was hope the pressure wasn’t affecting her too badly. Agott’s eyes slipped close as she drifted off to sleep, her mind filled with images of Coco hard at work over her desk.

Coco was running late.

Maybe it was the stress of the competition, or maybe it was all the late nights catching up to her. Whatever the reason, by the time she opened her eyes, the sun was alright high up in the sky. Panic set in first, followed by a rush of adrenaline.

She grabbed the sketches she had made and stuffed them into her bag, then went back to gather the outfit itself. Her mother had insisted on packing everything up the night before so it would be ready for the big day.

It was a late night of frustration and hurried last-minute touches that left her with more than a few pinpricks and hand cramps, but it was finally done. All that was left to do was make it to the town square in time.

“Bye, Mom!” She called out as she bounded down the stairs with her arms full. “I’ll see you when I get home!”

Her mother smiled at her from behind the counter. “Be safe, and good luck today!”

~~~
The feeling of cobblestone beneath her shoes kept her somewhat grounded as she hurried down the path towards the center of town, passing by large stretches of woods as the sounds of chatter and music drew closer. It seemed the palace had turned the competition into a celebration of sorts as well.

“Excuse me, do you know where registration is for the competition?” Coco asked a pair of men who were leaning against a nearby building.

“Competition? Aren’t ye’ a bit young to be entering that sort?” The man on the right peered down at her with a skeptical expression. Coco huffed slightly and looked around for someone else who could help.

The man on the left sighed and nudged his friend. “Leave ‘er alone. Plenty old enough I should think. A tailor is a tailor.” He jerked his head to the side. “Registrations that way. Best of luck to you then.”

“Thank you!” She chirped as she hurried off. As she left, the two men continued their conversation over their drinks. A cloaked man bumped into one of them, causing a bit of their alcohol to spill.

“Watch it.” The man grumbled, but the cloaked figure said nothing as they continued on.

~~~

Coco paused to catch her breath as she got in line. It seemed there were more entries than she had expected, but the queue wasn't terrible. It wasn't long before she made it to the front of the line. A man with long silver hair greeted her warmly as she approached the counter.

"Oh my, are you here to enter? You're by far our youngest tailor yet." He chuckled and nudged the quill towards her. "Here is the outline for how judging will be handled. All submissions are anonymous, so you'll need to provide your sketch to prove ownership should your work be selected. Do be sure to keep it handy. Do you have any questions for me?"

Coco shook her head and nervously read over the paper before signing her name in ink at the bottom and sliding it back to him. "Actually, just one. Where do I go to set up?"

"In the building behind me. There are mannequins already laid out. Here, take a number from the box, and that will be your assigned mannequin. This way no one will know which one is yours except you." The man explained as he held out a small wooden box with a small opening.

As she stuck her hand inside, Coco felt the numerous slips of paper before pulling one out. "I understand, thank you!"

"Of course, and best of luck to you."

~~~

About an hour or so after his interaction with the young tailor, Beldaruit noticed the royal carriage approaching. Qifrey stepped out first, holding out his hand to help Agott step down.

"Good, you're right on time. The appraiser should be joining us shortly, and I've just closed submissions." Beldaruit grinned as he waved them over.

Agott was flanked by guards on either side as she looked around the town square. People were drinking and chatting excitedly, and a handful of individuals looked anxious as they waited for judging to begin. Despite the sizable crowd, she didn't see that familiar head of green hair among them. A small bang of disappointment ached in her chest, but she quickly brushed it aside. She was here; she must have been. Just out of sight somewhere.

A man she didn't recognize approached the group. Beldaruit nodded his acknowledgment. "Ah, mister Atwert, wonderful. Seeing as we're all here, how about we begin? I'm sure the crowd is on the edge of their seats!"

The group continued into the makeshift hall that had been set up for the occasion. They paused at the first mannequin: A long green gown with a unique neckline and corsetted bodice.

Atwert was the first to pick up the edge of the gown, inspecting the stitches and structure. Despite his shy demeanor, he seemed focused. "Well, it's well made, if a bit rushed. It can't completely be helped given the timeframe."
~~~

“It’s a lovely color.” Beldaruit chuckled, “That’s about as much as I can offer. I’m sure the queen would approve of it. Qifrey?”

The professor circled around the mannequin. “A corset is a bit unconventional for her age, but it isn’t unacceptable. I don’t see an issue with it from my end.” He spared a glance to Agott, who was making a face. A small chuckle passed his lips. “Though I think someone disagrees. Not to your liking, your highness?”

“The neck would be uncomfortable.” She quietly noted. “And I don’t care much for corsets.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. They are to be your tailor after all.” Beldaruit gave her shoulder a squeeze. “Shall we move on then?”

The second mannequin was another gown, this time a gaudy shade of green. Qifrey looked mildly aghast, Beldaruit giggled, Atwert sighed, and Agott looked about ready to throw up.

“It’s not exactly a flattering shade.” Qifrey managed to choke out, “I couldn’t see Her Highness wearing this…nor should anyone… perhaps ever.”

Beldaruit cleared his throat to regain his composure. “It’s certainly a statement.”

“Let's just look at the next one, I implore you all.” Atwert shook his head.

The third gown was a similar shape to the first one, though it lacked a corset. As Agott looked at the dress, she couldn’t find anything outwardly *wrong* with it. A simple blue color, a comfortable yet modest silhouette, and a regal energy about it. This was exactly the sort of dress her mother would want her to wear; it was fit for a princess.

“Neat stitching, good materials.” The appraiser smiled. Qifrey gave an affirming nod.

Beldaruit ran his hand over the sleeve. “I can see Her Majesty being quite pleased with this one. Agott, your thoughts?”

The princess was quiet. On the outside, the dress was perfect. No flaws in its make or design. Nothing outrageous to speak of, nor could she find a complaint to make. And even then… something felt missing.

There was a hole in her heart that grew every time she looked at a gown such as this. When she inevitably became queen, this was the sort of attire she would need. The tailor was thoughtful, and understood what was needed. That being said, it couldn’t be more clear to her that they didn’t understand who *she was.*

It wasn’t the sort of comment she could openly make. It was a perfect dress, and by the hands of a capable tailor. What more could she ask for? “It’s lovely.”

“A winner so soon?” Beldaruit excitedly turned to Qifrey, who shook his head.

“Come now, we owe it to all the entries to honor their work before reaching a decision. You’re far too excitable.” The professor playfully scolded his elder.

The group turned their attention to the next mannequin down the line, and immediately Agott’s heart stuttered in her chest.

The first thing to catch her eye was the color. A rich purple hue, the accents of gold that embellished the bodice. It was a color combination she recognized well from the gown she had recently worn to the summer ball. However, it was far from the same.

Upon closer inspection, gold thread had been painstakingly embroidered into the fabric in intricate designs. The shoulders were adorned with a small design that almost resembled feathers that framed the edges and curled inward. No frills or corset in sight, yet a statement in its own right. This was Coco’s work; there was no doubt.

Agott’s gaze dropped lower to the skirt, and her heart sank. Oh. A gown, of course.

It was to be expected; This was a competition to decide who would become the tailor of a princess. Even then, a small part of her had held onto hope…

“Next time, I’ll design you a suit instead, ok? Then you’ll be more comfortable.”

Agott looked down at her feet as she tried to contain her disappointment. Atwert stepped forward and narrowed his eyes as his hand found what appeared to be a small cord attached to the waist seam. “What’s this?” He asked before giving it a gentle, curious pull.

Agott looked up just in time to see the skirt fall away all at once, revealing not an empty space, but a pair of matching pants.

A suit.

Her breath caught in her throat as she reached out to touch it, afraid her eyes were playing tricks on her. As her fingers made contact with the fabric, she slowly exhaled.

With the skirt fallen away, she could fully take in the details. The bodice was attached to a small train at the back of the suit, almost the same shape as a bird's tail feathers. Even more gold detailing highlighted the waist and trim. It was as if the entire design had changed its meaning in a matter of moments. Masculine, but still somehow graceful. It was *perfect.*

Qifrey smiled as he noticed the sparkle in Agott's eyes. "This is her doing, isn't it? Coco's work?"

"Don't answer that!" Bedlaruit covered his eyes. "I'm impartial! I am an unbiased judge!"

Despite Bedlaruit's plea, Agott couldn't help the smile on her face. Coco had followed through exactly as she had hoped. Atwert got to work scrutinizing the stitching and design, gentle hands inspecting for any loose threads or rushed hemming. He shook his head and smiled after a few long moments. "It's solid work. Some of the best I've seen today."

"Wonderful." Beldaruit smiled, having finally regained his composure. "Qifrey, I suspect you may have more to say?"

The professor nodded, looking between Agott and the suit. "Well…starting with the most obvious matter at hand, this isn't a traditional gown. If anything, it's closer to that of a man's formal attire. It would be going against what is expected of her to wear such a garment. If we were to assume this was intended for Her Highness to wear, I'm afraid I cannot give it my approval."

Agott's heart dropped. Of all the people to shoot the entry down, she hadn't expected it to be him.

"Oh, dear…A disqualification then?" Bedlaruit frowned.

Before Agott could protest, Qifrey lifted his hand. "Not quite. While a suit would be improper for a princess to wear, we never specified that the entry had to be a gown to begin with. Besides, for all we know, the tailor was simply showing off their versatility as a designer. Without there being any obvious intentions, I can only take it at face value." He smiled and nodded. "It gets my okay as an entry."

Beldaruit gave a satisfied nod before he rubbed his chin. "Well, that covers etiquette and craftsmanship. As for Her Majesty's approval…"

The room was quiet as they awaited the final verdict. Eventually, the Regent smiled and shrugged. “Well, as a dress it shouldn’t raise any issue. My kudos to the tailor; it truly is a magnificent design.”

A wave of relief washed over Agott as Coco’s entry received the approval of all three judges. She spared one last glance at the mannequin before they moved on to the next one down the line. Not a guaranteed win, but not a disqualification. There was *hope,* and that was enough.

~~~

After much deliberation, the trio of judges emerged from the building. Agott had been standing outside with her knights as she anxiously awaited the news of who had been decided as the winner. Their expressions were unreadable as they approached the center of the town square. A hush fell over the crowd as Beldaruit cleared his throat.

“Your attention, please,” he spoke in an even tone. “Thank you all for your attendance, and a special thank you to all the talented craftsmen who’ve demonstrated their skills for us today. All designs will be displayed in the town square shortly for your enjoyment. That aside, I’m sure you’d all like to know what verdict we’ve reached. Professor Qifrey, if you would do the honors?”

“It would be my pleasure.” Qifrey stepped forward and cleared his throat. “After careful consideration, our choice for who would officially become tailor for her royal highness came down to two designers. In the end, it was one artisan who demonstrated not only a great deal of skill, but an obvious love for their craft.”

Agott held her breath and crossed her fingers.

Qifrey glanced to his side and offered the princess a smile. “It is my great honor to announce that contestant number four has been selected. If you would please come forward now with your sketch.”

Her heart *soared.* That was Coco’s design. She had truly ***won.***

~~~

Coco could feel her heart skip a beat in her chest, her whole body trembling with nerves and excitement.

Contestant number four. That was *her number.* They’d picked *her.*

It was a dream come true, and a staggering reality collided into one. A future as a royal tailor; a future with *Agott.* It all felt all the more possible now, and all she had to do was get her sketch to the front of the crowd.

She rummaged through her bag and pulled out the sketch she had so carefully tucked away before hurrying towards the center of the square. “Excuse me! Please, I’ ’m trying to get through! That's my design, I need to-!”

Coco stumbled and tripped, gasping as her hands shot out to break her fall. She winced in pain as she collided with the cobblestone, and the paper she was clutching slipped from her grasp. Before she could move to grab it, a gust of wind swept by and carried it just out of reach.

“No, no, no no!” She scrambled to her feet and hurried after it, the sounds of the crowd drowned out by the hammering of her heart. The wind continued to blow until it guided both her and the paper around the nearest corner and into an alley.

She had just about caught up when the paper fluttered to the floor, and a boot came down to catch it in place. Relief flooded her senses as she stumbled to a halt in front of whoever had caught it. “Thank you so much! It almost got away from me for a second there. If you don’t mind, I really need…to…”

Coco picked up the paper before looking up, coming face to face with a person in a hooded cloak.

Whispers began to rise amongst the crowd, growing louder with each passing moment as no winner came forward to claim the design as their own. Agott began to wring out her hands as she searched through the sea of people for any sign that Coco was there.

Qifrey cleared his throat once more. “Contestant number four? Please, if you could step forward.”

Agott’s search grew more desperate. If no one came forward, would they be forced to select another winner? She couldn’t allow that to happen when they were so *close.* Just as she was beginning to lose hope, something moving in the corner of her eye caught her attention. A small object fluttered along on the breeze, followed by a glimpse of familiar green hair. Both disappeared around the corner.

“Professor.” Agott tugged on his sleeve so he would lean down. She whispered hurriedly into his ear. “I think I saw her just over there, but something is wrong. Please, you have to go check.”

“Agott, I can’t just get up and leave. Everyone here has their eyes on us; I cannot very well run off to-” As Qifrey looked over in the direction the princess had gestured to, his blood ran cold. A cloaked figure dipped behind the corner.

It could have been a mistake or his eyes playing tricks on him. It could very well be the distance making it difficult to know what exactly he saw. Neither was a risk he was willing to take. A cloak with a *brimmed hood* could not be ignored. “Agott, stay close to your guards. Tell Beldaruit to buy me some time. If I’m not back in a few minutes, tell the knights to call for backup before following after me. Understood?”

Agott’s face fell, but she nodded. “Is everything alright? Is anyone in danger?”

“No danger; I’ll make sure of it. Grant me peace of mind regardless.” Qifrey plastered on a smile before turning back to the crowd. “If you’ll excuse me for a moment, I must ensure we’re announcing the correct number. My apologies for the delay, everyone!”

Bedlaruit sputtered as Qifrey hurried off in the other direction, pinching the bridge of his nose before slapping on a smile as well. “Well, this certainly is unexpected, though I suppose we cannot be too careful! In the meantime, I invite you to celebrate the hard work of all our contestants. Please forgive the slight delay!”

~~~

Coco immediately fell back, wincing in pain at the collision against the hard ground. She pulled herself back to her feet and tried to scurry away, but another person stood in her path. As she looked between them, a sense of overwhelming dread filled her body.
~~~

“Well, if it isn’t our little tailor.” The first hooded figure leaned down and snatched up her design from the ground. “Come to enter the contest, have you? Silly girl, you’d give up your life just to spend it serving *them?”*

“Oh, but not just any tailor, Iguin.” The second individual took Coco by the shoulders to keep her from running. “My dear, by any chance might this entry of yours have been our lucky winner?”

Coco swallowed thickly, but said nothing. Would denying it make this better or worse? She watched in horror as the first man skimmed her design before noting the little ‘4’ she had scribbled onto the corner so she wouldn’t forget her number.

“Well, what have we here? It would seem you’re correct. This certainly changes things for us…a little connection within the palace. Our golden key.” The first cloaked man, whom Coco registered as Iguin, gently touched her cheek. She tried to jerk away, but was still trapped by hands on either side of her. “So frightened, like a little bird caught in a trap. We don’t intend to harm you, isn’t that right?”

“No, of course not.” The second cloaked figure leaned down beside her ear. “You remember our little arrangement? It’s going to change just slightly. You cooperate with us, and everyone is happy. It will serve you well to remember what’s at stake.”

Coco’s heart was drumming in her ears as tears welled up in her eyes. Why did this always have to happen when she was so close to being happy? “I won’t, I can’t.”

“You can.” Iguin reached out and smoothed her hair. “And you will. Now, come with us for a moment, and we’ll take you somewhere safe to talk.”

“You’ll do **no such thing.**”

Coco felt the grip on her shoulders suddenly release, and she bolted to hide around the corner. As she peeked around to see what was going on, she saw the same white-haired professor she often recognized accompanying Agott. He was clutching what appeared to be a small dagger and had one of the cloaked men pinned with the blade to his neck. “What did you do to her?” He choked out, body trembling with what she assumed was fear, but slowly began to recognize it as something else. Rage. Coco ducked back behind the corner, but continued to listen

“Such pure white hair. Don't tell me…after all these years.” The voice of Iguin sounded unusually pleased.

The sounds of a struggle caused Coco to clamp both hands over her mouth, attempting to be quiet. Through the commotion, she could make out only a few words.

“…shown your face…unfinished..”

“Not yet…return…”

Hurried footsteps, then silence.

“Are you alright?”

Coco jumped and scurried back before she realized it wasn’t one of the cloaked figures, but rather Agott’s professor. He held his hand out to help her back to her feet. “Are you injured? Is wear, if they so much as laid a finger on you.”

“I’m ok, just a bit shaken up.” Coco shook her head as she brushed off her dress. As the adrenaline wore off, dread flowed in to replace it. “The competition. Is it over? Did they pick another winner?”

“Regent Bedlaruit is buying time, not to worry. I’m more concerned with the ordeal you've just gone through.” Qifrey shook his head. He noticed the slip of paper abandoned on the ground, and swiftly picked it up. “This is yours then? Contestant number four. Congratulations.” He smiled softly.

Relief flooded her body. It wasn’t over; she could still be with Agott.

“If I may ask, what exactly is it they wanted with you?” Qifrey was smiling, but something about his expression felt off. It looked more like a mask than anything else.

She wanted to tell him, really, she did. Still, Coco thought back to what the brimcloaks had told her that night in the woods. She couldn’t risk it, not even if it was the right thing to do. Not yet. “I don’t know. I just ran into them while chasing after the paper, and they didn’t let me go.” Half-truths were bitter on her tongue.

Qifrey kept a smile on his face, though his eyes narrowed slightly. “I see. I’m glad you appear to be unharmed. Those individuals are quite dangerous.”

“Yes, I understand. I’ll report what happened to the knights.” Coco smiled as well before starting back towards the town square.

The man rested a hand on her shoulder to keep her back. “I must ask that you don’t.”

Silence fell over them. Coco turned back to face him, and immediately noticed his smile was gone. “But, if I don’t tell them…”

“I understand you must be confused.” Qifrey kept his hand where it was, though he didn’t physically restrain her movements. “I also understand that you are not being entirely honest with me, Coco.”

A wave of nausea curled around her. He *knew* something was wrong. Before she could deny it, he continued.

“You have your reasons.” A gentle squeeze of her shoulder, “And I have mine. I trust we share a priority in keeping the people we love out of harm's way, so I won’t tell a soul what transpired here. In return, you do the same. My secrets and yours. Understood?”

Coco swallowed once more, the lump in her throat growing more difficult to ignore. “Yes, I understand.”

It was as if a switch had been flipped. The man’s expression lit up in a charming smile. “Very good. Now, I really must get you back to the town square. This is grounds for celebration, is it not? Come along.”

~~~

“Ah, there you are! I was beginning to struggle keeping things in order.” Beldaruit relaxed at the sight of Qifrey returning to his side, Coco in tow. “Why, hello there. By any chance might you be our master craftsman?”

Coco smiled shyly, trying to push past the unease. “Yes, number four was my design. Here, I have the sketch.”

Beldaruit accepted the paper and looked it over, a warm smile on his face. “It’s unmistakable, and I must say, quite clever as well! Congratulations, my dear.” He turned to face the crowd. “If I may have your attention, please! I’m pleased to present our winner and the next royal tailor. If I may have your name?”

“It’s Coco.” A voice from behind them caused their heads to turn. Agott stood there, a warm expression on her face and cheeks flushed pink. Coco moved to hug her instinctively, but just barely held herself back. It would be confusing to everyone else in the square for a tailor to suddenly hug the princess. Instead, she reached out a single finger and hooked it with Agott's, their hands just out of sight. A secret embrace for just the two of them.

“Our new royal tailor, Miss Coco!”

~~~

The festivities were modest, yet enjoyable all the same. Coco and Agott spent their time stealing glances at one another and giggling quietly while the crowd enjoyed viewing all the entries and sharing drinks. Nightfall came, and Coco returned home to celebrate with her mother as Agott was escorted back to the palace.

Qifrey was in his room preparing for bed, Olruggio perched on the edge of the mattress as he watched him. “How was the event? Everything go smoothly?”

“Yes, no issues to report,” Qifrey replied easily as he removed his cloak so he could change. As the fabric fell away, Olruggio saw a glint of something through the darkness, almost like metal. He narrowed his eyes and could just barely make out the shape of a dagger.

Since when did he start carrying that again?

He said nothing as his lover finished changing and climbed into bed beside him. “Is something wrong?” Qifrey asked innocently as he lay down.

Olruggio simply shook his head. “It’s nothing; I’m glad it went well. You’ll have to share the details in the morning.”

Qifrey closed his eyes and was quick to drift off into a light sleep, but Olruggio remained awake a moment longer. He studied his face the way he had so many times before, searching for a sign he was being deceived, but finding nothing. With nothing left to do, he slipped his arm around Qifrey’s waist before dozing off himself.

Coco’s return home was marked by the sound of the shop bell, followed by the latch clicking shut. Her mother was waiting at the table with dinner already laid out. “Well? How did it go?”

Coco’s body trembled with emotions as she held out the official letter from the palace. Her mom gasped as she stood, coming over so she could read it. Her eyes quickly scanned over the page before pulling her daughter into a crushing hug and kissing her head. “You have no idea how proud I am of you. That’s my Coco.”

The young girl hugged back despite the tears in her eyes, relishing the feeling of her mother's hand rubbing soothing circles on her back. “You taught me everything I know.” She choked out. “I feel like I shouldn’t be celebrating myself. You spent so much time and care to help me learn, and now I’m *leaving.”*

“Oh, honey.” Her mother kept her cradled close as she guided them to sit down. “I know you must have a lot of feelings right now, but you *do* deserve to celebrate. I taught you your basics, but your design and progress are entirely your own. Besides, you’re not going far. I’ll always be right here for you. You’ll always have this home.”

The pair sat down for dinner, sharing plans for the future and the occasional tear. They had a few days for Coco to get her affairs in order, but it wouldn’t be long before her life at the palace would begin. A mess of emotions swirling in her chest: Anticipation for her new career, excitement towards being near Agott, apprehension around leaving her mother and her own skills, and a thousand other things she could not yet name.

After dinner, she’d need to start packing. The palace may not have been far, but she’d need to bring all her sewing equipment and personal belongings. It would be a long time before she would be able to return to her mother’s side for longer than a visit.

For now, they enjoyed each other's company and gentle touch. It didn’t have to be a painful goodbye. Instead, it would be a warm ‘hello’ to new beginnings.

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In the following days, Agott was noticeably more cheerful. She could be found humming softly to herself, zoning out during meals with a small smile on her face, and curled up in her room reading over the same few letters for extended periods of time. Her demeanor caught the attention of not only her processors and servants, but also made its way to her mother.

“Her Highness seems to be in good spirits these days.” The physician smiled as he offered the queen another dose of medication. “Perhaps all she needed was that little excursion into town.”
~~~

After swallowing the medicine, Adina lay back against the pillows. “Indeed. I’ll have to see it with my own eyes before I can say for certain, but perhaps she's finally coming around. It would certainly make things easier on all of us if that happens to be true.”

“Well, she is slowly growing up. Barley a teenager, isn’t she? I remember my own daughters going through that age; She could very well become more rebellious before your very eyes.” The physician set down the bottle of medicine and looked up to see Adina’s disapproving glare. “Ah, my apologies. I was out of line. I’m certain Her Highness will be a fine young lady and a wonderful Queen. Our nation is lucky to have her.”

The queen sighed and rested a hand over her forehead. “I certainly never caused this much trouble as a girl. I can only hope she’s finally gotten it all out of her system.”

The physician nodded and began to pack up his things. “I suppose time will tell. Rest well, Your Majesty.”

~~~

Beldaruit groaned as he saw another letter from King Deanreldy waiting on his desk. The man grew more insistent with each passing day that they close negotiations despite his personal insistence that there was no need to rush. Aside from his personal distrust of the man, it was also a bit strange how pushy he was being. Would it not be better to take things slow and ensure both nations walked away happy? Why all the haste?

The regent narrowed his eyes before pointedly ignoring the envelope and continuing on with his day. Whatever he wanted, he could wait for it.

Instead of drafting a reply, Beldaruit made his way to Qifrey’s quarters. He knocked on the door and waited to be let inside.

“Ah, Regent Beldaruit.” Qifrey smiled and opened the door to allow him in. “A welcome surprise as always. How are palace affairs?’

The two settled into the room as Beldaruit made himself comfortable. “The same as always. I’ve received no less than five letters in the past week alone from King Deanreldy. He’s insistent we allow his son and Agott to meet sooner rather than later. I’d be all for it if negotiations were being finalized, but he certainly seems to want to hurry this along. I cannot help my apprehension.”

“To remain skeptical is to be wise, though I still do not fully comprehend your resistance to working with the northern king. I’m not pleased with the marriage myself, but your vendetta against him seems to run much deeper than that,” Qifrey commented offhandedly.

Beldaruit bristled. “I wouldn’t call it a vendetta, nor do you have much room to talk.”
~~~

The professor smiled bitterly. If anyone was aware of the grudges he held, it would be Beldaruit. He'd known too much of his past, perhaps more than even Olruggio did. "We each hold things close to our hearts. So long as we do not allow them to cloud our judgment."

"You should learn to take your own advice." Beldaruit tapped his fingers on the edge of his wheelchair. "At any rate, Coco moves in soon, does she not? Have accommodations been made for her?"

Qifrey's expression morphed from quiet and calculated to delighted in an instant. "Oh, yes. A room has been made up in the service quarters just outside the palace. I trust she will be quite comfortable."

"Very well then, I look forward to welcoming her upon her arrival. I'm sure our Agott shares that same sentiment?" Beldaruit chuckled softly.

"Yes, no more sneaking out into town. It brings me a fair bit of relief to know the princess won't have to travel far." Qifrey relaxed onto the edge of his bed.

Beldaruit raised an eyebrow. "I wouldn't put my money on it. Once they're reunited, who knows what new sort of trouble they may get into."

Qifrey raised his own eyebrows to match. "I suppose that's part of being young."

~~~

Coco finished hauling her trunk into her new room, eyes sparkling as she looked around at her new quarters. The palace accommodations were generous, even in their servants' rooms. Plenty of space to work, and not far from the palace itself either. It felt like a dream.

"Is that the last of it?" Qifrey asked as he set down a small box on Coco's bed.

She nodded and smiled as she started to unpack the box, pulling out clothes and tucking them into drawers. "Yes, that should be all of it. Thank you so much for your help!"

The professor chuckled and dusted off his hands. "It's no trouble. I'm not busy, and It was my pleasure to escort you. I'd offer to escort you on a tour of the palace grounds, but I think I'll leave that honor to someone else."

Coco perked up as she heard the door open. Standing at the entrance and flanked by two guards was Agott.

Qifrey's grin was barely concealed by a hand. "Well, I'll leave the rest to Her Highness." He was quick to push through the door and shut it, leaving only Agott inside as he moved to distract the knights.
~~~

As soon as they were alone, their arms were around each other. A warm embrace quickly turned into a sweet kiss.

“You’re actually here.” Agott reached up and cupped her cheek. “I knew you could do it.”

“It still doesn’t feel real. Am I really here with you?” Coco nuzzled her head against her shoulder.

The princess pulled back and took Coco’s hands in her own. “Here with me, always.”

Coco was smiling so much it was beginning to hurt. She pulled away to reach into the box on her bed, pulling out a stack of letters wrapped together with string. “I’ve kept them all. I know we get to see each other in person, but I couldn’t bear to part with them.”

“Nor have I parted with mine. They’re very special to me.” Agott looked at the letters and shook her head. “I don’t think I ever will.”

The letters were tucked away into Coco’s desk before the pair began making their way to the door. “Now, shall I show you around? You haven’t seen much of the palace yet. You’ll need to get used to it as you adjust to your new role.”

“I’d like that.” Coco linked one of her fingers with Agott’s as they made their way out of the room.

As they walked across the castle grounds, neither girl could take their eyes off the other. The world around them almost seemed to hold still in time. All that existed was each other; No marriages, brimcloaks, or expectations could keep them apart. The future was foggy and uncertain, but for now, there was content. For now, there was love.

Time continued on. Seasons changed, months came and went, and affairs within the palace continued as they always did. In fact, for almost three years, life settled into an even routine. A day of rigorous lessons would be followed by sneaking off to the servants' quarters, where Agott would spend her time by Coco's side. Life became easier, almost gentler, and soon enough the looming fear of her arranged marriage faded into an afterthought.

On one such evening, Qifrey knocked on Agott's door with a letter tucked under his arm. When he was greeted by silence, he pushed the door open and peeked inside. No one was around. How very typical.

He shut the door with a click and began walking a familiar path: two lefts, a right, then straight ahead. A gentle push on the wall revealed a passageway since abandoned by the maids and only to be used in case of emergency. Recently, it had taken on a far different service.

A candle guided his steps until he came to a dead end and pushed on the wall once more, finding himself in the hallway of the servants' quarters. He approached one of the doors and took a moment to listen.

The quiet sounds of giggles inside brought a smile to his face. It wasn't uncommon for the two girls to share a late-night rendezvous, though he was certain Agott had promised to decrease the frequency of her visits so as not to arouse suspicion. It would seem the princess hadn't listened. How very typical for an Arklaum.

~~~

"So, what are you thinking?" Coco smiled as she ran her fingers through Agott's short curls. "Is this finally the year you wear a suit?"

Agott reached up and took Coco's hand, bringing it to her lips and kissing her knuckles. "You know very well that if I had things my way, I'd wear *only* the suits you've designed for me."

The tailor blushed at the press of lips to her skin and shook her head. "First of all, I can make more than just suits! Surely a comfortable pair of everyday pants would do nicely." She huffed and pulled her hand back. "Secondly, if you want it so bad, why not wear one?"

"Because my *mother* would rather see me drowning in bustles and suffocated by my own corset than see her only daughter wearing *men's clothes."* Agott reminded. "Honestly, if she caught wind of me so much as considering a pair of pants, she'd collapse."

Coco hummed and shrugged, pulling her lover closer in her arms. She buried her face in her neck and mumbled petulantly. "I still don't understand why she's so insistent about it."

"Well, that's just the way royalty is." Agott smiled. "And for the record, that tickles."
~~~

The green-haired girl made no effort to move despite the information, keeping her head tucked into the crook of her shoulder. “How is she feeling these days? Any better?”

“It’s hard to say. I wouldn’t go so far as to call her condition stable, but it hasn’t declined much as of late. It’s still difficult for her to stand, and she’s been feeling weak.” Agott shook her head. She cast a glance over her shoulder. “You’re sulking.”

“I’m not.” Coco tightened her arms around her waist.

“You are. You’re pouting like a dog that didn't get any table scraps.” She reached up to cup Coco’s cheek. “If this is about the suit, you should just drop it. You needn’t get angry for my sake.”

Coco just huffed once more as she nuzzled her again. As she finally pulled her head back, she rested her chin on top of Agott’s hair. “Alright then. No suit…how can I make your dress more comfortable? Should I ‘accidentally’ make it without a corset?”

“You’ll only get yourself in trouble. No use sticking your neck out for something so small.” Agott leaned back further into her arms, her body relaxing as tension slowly released.

“You’re more than worth the trouble.”

“Not if it gets you *fired.* A similar gown to my last one will be just fine.*”*

“But it's for your sixteenth birthday.” Coco began to twirl one of Agott’s curls around her finger. “It should be special.”

Agott shook her head and reached up for a lock of Coco’s hair in turn. It had grown longer in the past few years, now settling over her shoulders. “It’s already special; You’re going to be there.”

“You’re very sweet.” Coco giggled. “But this is a big deal. It’ll be the first ball since a few summers ago that the palace doors will be open. You should make an impression.”

“I’m perfectly content to make as little impression as possible.”

“*Agott,”* Coco whined, “You’re so stubborn.”

The princess raised an eyebrow. “Hmm, I wonder where I could have ever picked it up.”

“Oh, stop it; you were like this long before we met, miss ‘sneaking out of the palace to see the festival.’”

“Am I now, miss ‘sneaking into a royal palace just to show a girl your designs?’”

Coco picked up the closest pillow and lightly hit Agott's side with it, causing the princess to gasp in mock offense and quickly grab a second pillow. "That's treasonous behavior against the crown."

The two girls laughed quietly before a knock on the door brought their fun to an abrupt end. For a moment, fear caused Agott to freeze up.

"It's only me," Qifrey said softly from the other side of the door. "May I come in?"

Coco looked to Agott for permission. Upon receiving a nod, she called back. "Yes, you may."

Qifrey quietly opened the door and stepped inside, making sure it latched behind him. "Good evening, girls. I suspected I may find Her Highness here. I do believe we had reached a consensus on less frequent visits?"

"You have Professor Olruggio in *your* room all the time. I fail tos ee how you have any room to talk." Agott pushed herself up from Coco's arms, a bit prickly from having been interrupted.

"Fortunately for myself and Olruggio, neither of us are princesses." Qifrey shook his head. "I do hate to put a damper on things, but this little arrangement of yours only works so long as you aren't *discovered.* I've covered for you just about as much as I can."

Agott sighed and slumped her shoulders slightly. She knew he was right, but it was difficult not to get carried away.

Qifrey smiled sadly. "Say your goodbyes, and I'll escort you back to your chambers. You can see her again soon enough."

The princess nodded and leaned down, pressing one last kiss to Coco's cheek and whispering 'good night'.

"Sweet dreams," Coco whispered back as the pair left.

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Back in her own room, Agott sulked slightly. Qifrey rubbed his neck as he stood awkwardly at the door. The letter was still securely in his hands, and it wasn't long before she took notice. "What's that?"

The professor cleared his throat. 'It's…an rsvp for the upcoming ball being held for your birthday."

Agott raised an eyebrow. That didn't explain his guilty expression. "And?"
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“And,” he spoke slowly and carefully, as if approaching an animal that may snap at any given moment. “It’s from the royal family to the north.”

“The kingdom to the north?” Agott furrowed her brow and crossed her arms. “You mean Prince Eoleo’s family? Why would there be an RSVP from them?”

Qifrey softened his expression. He knew she was intentionally acting ignorant. If there was anything she wanted, it was to know who was responsible for inviting them, and what he intended to do about it. “My dear, you are *engaged* to the boy. To leave them out of such an important affair may be interpreted as a sign of hostility.”

“I’ve been engaged to him for almost *three years* without so much as interacting on more than a few chance occasions. Why the sudden need to change that fact?” The princess sat down on the edge of her bed as she glared daggers at him.

The professor shook his head. “While turning sixteen in and of itself isn't of great significance - not that it isn't significant to *me;* all of your birthdays are - you understand that this is the first time the ballroom will open its doors to outsiders since the summer ball a few years ago.”

“I fail to understand your point. I wasn’t even consulted on the matter, and I’m just supposed to lie down and accept it?” She snapped at him.

Qifrey winced, a headache already coming on. “I’m not saying that at all. I assure you this wasn’t something I would have wished for you; I’m merely informing you so that you can better mentally prepare yourself-”

“Oh, I’m sure. You didn’t wish for it, though I’m willing to bet you wouldn’t have raised any objections either. It’s for the *good of the nation,* after all.”

“You know very well that isn’t true. I’ve been opposed to this marriage from the day it was suggested, but it’s far beyond me to meddle in diplomacy.” Qifrey began to approach her bed, but stopped when he saw the look on her face. It was dangerously close to *hatred.*

He exhaled slowly and nodded. “I understand, you’re angry. I can’t make the situation disappear, but if there is anything I can do to assist you or make this easier, please come to me.”

Without another word, he turned and left.

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“Oh, goodness! What pleasant surprise.” Beldaruit grinned as he opened the door and came face to face with Olruggio instead of Qifrey. “My dear boy, it’s been far too long. Come in, I’ve prepared tea already.”

Olruggio nodded and offered a small, tired smile as he entered. “Apologies for the sudden intrusion; I know you and Qifrey set aside this time for yourselves. If you need to discuss anything sensitive, I’ll be off.”
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“Nonsense, it’s not typically anything of the sort. I simply expect Qifrey to allow his former professor the indulgence of a good gossip.” Bedlaruit began pouring tea for the two of them. He offered Olruggio one of the cups before transferring to the couch. “So, how are things between the two of you?”

Olruggio coughed, between sips of tea, the slightest tinge of crimson high on his cheeks. “Is that the sort of thing you typically ask during one of these tea sessions?”

“Don’t get shy on me! The two of you were so terribly obvious about one another as boys; I simply want to know how that has progressed. You’re both so very busy with your work.” The Regent leaned his head against his hand, a knowing grin on his face. “Humor me, would you?’

After a pause, Olruggio began to speak once more. “Things are alright. We make time for one another where we can, and we take care of each other. If you were hoping for a grand love story, I’m afraid I don’t have one to share. We got most of that energy out when we were kids, I suppose.” He smiled softly to himself. “We’re not yet married, though I do have some hopes of asking him. It just never feels like the right time, what with all his worries for Her Highness.”

Beldaruit hummed and took a sip of tea. “Ah, I see. I understand, you don’t want your affections to be a burden on him. It’s quite admirable, though I wonder if perhaps he’s holding back for similar reasons.”

Before he could answer, the door swung open and caused Olruggio's head to turn towards the sound. A sulky-looking Qifrey leaned on the doorframe, barely even registering his lover’s presence. “Bedlaruit, how in the world did you manage to look after so many *teenagers*?”

The Regent himself was unfazed. “With great patience and difficulty. Come, have some tea.”

It was only as he sat down beside him that Qifrey finally seemed to realize Olruggio was amongst them. “Olly, I’m so sorry.” He massaged his temple. “This headache of mine leaves me failing to even see straight.”

“Not a word about it. I’m not offended.” Olruggio shook his head. He hesitated to hold his hand, but thought back to what Beldaruit had just told him.

Qifrey stiffened when he felt fingers interlock with his, but quickly relaxed and squeezed back.

“You’ve just spoken with Agott, I can tell.” Beldaruit passed a cup of tea to his former student. “It’s written all over your face. My once proud pupil overwhelmed in the face of handling the emotions of a teenage girl.”

“She is so *stubborn.”* Qifrey groaned and shook his head. “It’s not at all as it was a few years ago. The sneaking out has only worsened; she doesn’t tell me *anything* about how she’s feeling, then she acts as though I’ve slighted her personally for daring to bring up bad news.”

Beldaruit nodded knowingly as he tapped a finger on the side of his teacup. “Well, she isn’t mad at *you,* and it will do you good to keep that in mind.”

“It certainly feels like she is.” Qifrey deflated into the cushions.

“There are few things in life a person values more than their own autonomy. In her eyes, the thought of losing it may very well be the worst possible fate. She finally has access to the person she loves, and in such a short amount of time she’s expected to rearrange her life to wed another. I can only imagine how difficult that is for her, so please, forgive her on her own behalf.” Bedlaruit explained calmly. “I know you’d do anything to ensure her happiness, but this situation extends far beyond us. She has the right to be angry, and she feels safe enough to be angry with you. Perhaps she feels she can say to you what she couldn’t possibly say to her mother.”

Qifrey sank further into the cushions as he rubbed his head. “You didn’t see the way she looked at me. I wouldn’t be surprised if she resents me for failing to protect her from all of this.”

“She doesn’t resent you, nor have you failed her. You’re taking this far too personally.” Beldaruit assured him. “It would do us all some good to focus on what can be done, rather than what’s beyond our control.”

Qifrey rested his head on Olruggio’s shoulder and raised an eyebrow. “Did you have something in mind, then?”

“Perhaps.” Beldaruit’s smile morphed into a grin.

“Mom, I’m home!” Coco grinned as she opened the door to the shop. A handful of designs were tucked in her arm, and she carried a basket in one of her hands. Her mother looked up from her work and set down her project before hurrying over to greet her daughter.

“Welcome home.” Her mom pressed a kiss to her forehead before hugging her tight. As she pulled back, her hands found their way to Coco’s hair. “My, I swear that hair of yours gets longer every time I see you. I do hope it won’t cause you to overheat. You always kept it so short when you were younger.”

Coco smiled and shook her head as she pulled out the sketches to show her mom. “I kind of like it this way. Do we have any fabric like this? I want to try something new for Agott’s gown.”

The pair began sifting through bolts of fabric, occasionally pulling something off the shelf for a better look. They talked mindlessly about the show until the conversation began to shift.

“So, how has life at the palace been treating you? I trust they take good care of you, but I can’t help but worry. You’re not working too hard, are you? Eating enough? Sleeping well?” Her mother fussed as she looked her daughter over.

Coco smiled and blushed at her scrutinizing gaze as she tested the stretch of a particular fabric. “Mom, I’m alright, really. I promise if anything were wrong, I would tell you.” She began rummaging through a bin of threads to try and find one that matched the color best. “It’s not a heavy workload, and they make sure im looked after. Mister Qifrey checks in on me frequently, and Agott is by my side whenever she can.”

Her mother chuckled as she sifted through a box. “Speaking of Agott, how are things between the two of you?”

“Mom.” The blush on Coco’s cheeks only darkened. Despite it not being a secret that she and the princess were seeing each other, she hadn’t shared too many of the details. After all, it would be quite a scandal if someone were to walk in the shop and overhear. Still, she knew her mother wouldn’t be satisfied without at least some sort of update. “She’s…very sweet to me. Always makes sure I’m comfortable and spends time with me when she can slip away from her lessons.” She pushed some hair behind her ear as she smiled to herself, thinking about all the little moments she was able to enjoy by the princess’ side over the past few years.

As she handed Coco a spool of thread, she gently placed her free hand on her daughter's back. “I worry for you, you know. Ever since the announcement of Agott’s engagement to the northern prince, it’s been on my mind. Are you going to be alright?”

Coco’s heart sank slightly. She wasn't naive, nor was she oblivious to the situation at hand. The likelihood of the engagement being called off was slim, and even if it were, there was no reality in which she and Agott could publicly be together. It stung every time her mind would wander to thoughts of the future. Still, she put on a smile.

“As long as I’m a part of her life, I’m happy.” Coco began to gather a few bolts of fabric to cut off what she needed. “I knew going into this I wouldn’t get my ‘happily ever after,’ and I chose it anyway. It's a stable job, and I still get to be near her. Even if I…” She trailed off, a lump forming in her throat as she envisioned what the future held for her. Watching Agott wear a wedding dress she would sew as she walked down the aisle to another. The thought of a potential heir with Agott’s eyes or her dark curls. A sick sort of bitterness and resentment began to creep its way up her spine.

Could she really be happy with a life like that?

Her mother hugged her without being asked, as if trying to shield her daughter from the world. “I want you to be happy,” she whispered as she kissed the top of her head. “If being in the palace is going to bring you fulfillment, I’ll be there to support you. But if at any point you change your mind, you have a place to call home.”

Coco sniffled softly as she wiped her eyes, nodding without pulling away. Her mother gave her one last squeeze before turning to help her daughter finish cutting the fabric. “Have you spoken with Richeh recently? I don’t see her around much these days.”

“Richeh?” Coco paused as she began to fold the fabric. She’d sent letters and visited occasionally, but in all honesty, the two girls weren’t as close as they had been. There was something quieter about her friend's demeanor, almost a silent sort of resentment that she never could quite figure out that ate at her heart. “No, I can’t say we’ve spoken much. I invited her to the spring festival, but she said she was busy.”

Her mother hummed and put a few things into Coco’s basket. “Well, maybe you should try visiting sometime. At least send another letter. I can’t speak for her, but if your closest friend suddenly moved to the palace I might feel a bit left behind.”

Coco thought about it, realization washing over her. “Right, of course. I’ll make an effort to reconnect.”

“See that you do. She’s a sweet girl, and the two of you were so close your whole lives.” Her mother patted her head before turning away once more to put the bolts of fabric back up. “Best of luck with the dress; I know you’ll do wonderful.”

A small smile pulled at Coco’s lips as she finished packing up. “Thank you, Mom. I’ll come visit again after the ball.” She began walking towards the door, but turned over her shoulder. “I love you.”

Her mom smiled and nodded. “I love you too.”

Coco hummed softly as she started down the path back through town and towards the palace. She was so deeply absorbed in her thoughts about everything that was to come that she didn't notice the lingering feeling that she was being watched.

Agott's cheerful mood had thoroughly soured.

The mere idea that soon she'd have to face the man she would inevitably wed sat like a pit in her stomach. She barely said a word during her classes; she wouldn't make eye contact with Qifrey, and she hardly had an appetite. It got so bad she didn't feel the same desire to go see Coco anymore. Every glance at the girl she loved served as an aching reminder that she could not have her.

It seemed her mood had rubbed off on her favorite professor as well, though he was trying his best to hide it. It was always so terribly obvious when he was sulking. Still, he put on his same smile and energetic act for her as he continued to instruct her lessons as if nothing was wrong.

Perhaps she should apologize, at the very least for raising her voice with him. It wasn't his fault, and she had said things she didn't quite mean in the heat of the moment. Taking it out on one of her closest allies wouldn't make things any better, and she should know better than to push people away, but it didn't make accepting that any easier.

Holding people at a distance prevented them from hurting you, but it also prevented them from providing you any shelter or support.

"Professor," Agott spoke up just as Qifrey was stacking his books. She rubbed her neck and looked down, a bit embarrassed. 'I'm sorry about the other day. I didn't mean what I said, and it was unnecessary to shout."

Qifrey's eyes softened as he set down his stack of books, moving to rest a hand on her shoulder. "It's quite alright, Agott. Thank you for your apology. That being said, I completely understand where it was coming from, and you had a right to be angry."

"Not with you." She shook her head and held onto his sleeve. "You let me get away with far too much."

Qifrey smiled and chuckled as he ruffled her hair. "Someone ought to be." He hummed softly as he pulled away, going to retrieve what he had set down. "By the way, have you given any thought to your birthday ball? Any specific requests you'd like to make?"

"I can think of a few. Perhaps we can start with nullifying my engagement."

"If only. I was thinking more along the lines of the menu."

"A pity, it would have made a fine birthday present." Agott shrugged and slumped back down in her chair. She looked quizzically at her professor. "You had something in mind, then? You usually only mention such things when you've got an idea already."

The professor winked. “You know me well. Have you been keeping in touch with Princess Tetia at all?”

Agott tilted her head to the side. “We write on occasion, though we’ve both been rather busy with lessons. Why do you ask?”

“Well, naturally she's been invited to the ball, but I thought perhaps we could host her for a few days prior. A ball is one thing, but it might be nice to truly celebrate your birthday with some friends before you’re thrust into the spotlight.” Qifrey shrugged as he waved one of his books in the air. “Invite who you want, be where you want…perhaps *wear* what you want?”

That last bit seemed to catch Agott’s attention. “What I want? As in *whatever* I want, then?”

“Well, whatever you want within *reason,* of course,” Qifrey smirked. “I couldn’t permit anything too outrageous, but if you truly desired to dorn yourself with, say, *a suit*, I suppose it couldn't hurt in the privacy of your own palace- *oof!*”

Qifrey nearly toppled over as he was suddenly hugged from the side. He grinned as he looked down to see the princess with her head buried under his arm. “Thank you,” She whispered. “That would be a wonderful gift.”

“All I’ve granted you is my permission. Is that truly so wonderful?” He ruffled her hair once more.

Agott nodded firmly. It may not have seemed like much for him, especially given that Qifrey would give her the world if he had the chance, but his mere acceptance was groundbreaking. His permission alone to do something that made her feel a bit more comfortable during what remained of her freedom meant more to her than she could possibly describe. “Thank you,” she repeated.

Qifrey patted her back as he pulled away. “Think nothing of it. Now, I think perhaps you ought to go visit a certain tailor, yes? She’ll need your measurements to make such a garment. Besides, I believe you're long overdue for a visit.”

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Agott slipped through the secret passageways until she arrived at the usual endpoint, only to find it slightly ajar. Odd, the only people who used it were her, Coco, and occasionally Qifrey as far as she was aware. All three of them took great care to make sure the door was fully shut, lest others discover how Agott was sneaking around so easily.

Regardless, she slipped into the hall and just outside of Coco’s room before knocking on the door. She was quickly greeted by a very eager hug.

“Agott, there you are! I was beginning to get worried. I’m sure you're busy with your birthday coming up and all, but still.” Coco pulled her inside before pecking her cheek.
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“Lonely without me?” Agott teased as she sat on the edge of her bed. “I suppose it can’t be helped. Not too many people around our age within the palace, and you seldom leave these days. Tell me you at least keep in touch with some of the townsfolks? I’d hate for you to start going stir crazy.”

Coco took her seat beside her before changing her mind and lying down with her head in Agott’s lap. “I stopped by to say hi to Tartah, but he’s been acting weird around me recently. I write to Custas whenever I can, but without a permanent address it gets complicated. And Richeh…” She trailed off and sighed. “Well, I’m hoping we get to talk soon. I really miss her.”

“Perhaps we can extend the invitation for the upcoming ball to her. I know she’s not much of the party type, but Professor Qifrey suggested a small get-together beforehand she might want to attend.” Agott suggested as she ran her fingers through Coco’s hair. “I'd hate to think you're missing out on friendships just to be with me.”

“You’re important to me too, you know. Besides, it’s more than that. This is also my job now.” Coco leaned her head back under the touches. “But inviting Richeh sounds like a good idea. I don't know if she’ll say yes, but it can’t hurt to ask.” She hummed and curled up further into Agott’s warmth. “What’s this about a get-together?”

Agott smiled at the cuddles. Coco always acted so touch-starved when they were apart for too long. “Right, about that. Qifrey suggested we host something on a smaller scale so I can celebrate with friends before I have to worry about my decorum. He even suggested I be able to choose my own outfit, if you catch my drift.”

A small gasp pushed past her lover’s lips as she sat up. “You mean it? Is it finally time you get to wear a suit?”

“I think it is.” Agott smiled and kissed her forehead. Before she could say another word, Coco was on her feet and fetching the measuring tape.

Excitement around the upcoming gathering continued to build as the day drew near. After taking her measurements, Coco had been quick to shoo Agott off, claiming it would have to be a surprise.

Letters were sent to both Richeh and Princess Tetia requesting their presence the day before the ball. It only took two days before both replies had been received: An excited confirmation and a begrudging agreement.

Things were far from perfect. Lessons continued to drag on, and the ball itself approached just as rapidly as her small celebration did. The mere thought of having to be cordial with Prince Eoleo was nearly enough to make her gag.

That wasn't all that was weighing on her mind. It was at the end of one of her history lessons that Professor Olruggio spoke up.

"That just about covers it. We'll pick up where we left off tomorrow." He grunted and closed his book. "If I'm not wrong, It's about time you went and had a meal."

Agott nodded and moved to stand. "That's correct. If you'll excuse me."

"Hold on just a second then." Olruggio hesitated and sighed. "Agott, when was the last time you went and visited your mother?"

The princess stiffened and bristled slightly. He made a good point even without directly saying it; she hadn't been to visit the queen in quite some time. Ever since her engagement had been finalized, she avoided her like the plague. "I can't say I have an exact number of days in mind since I last visited."

Olruggio shook his head. "I know it isn't what you want to hear, but you should at least show your face to her once in a while. I'm not asking you to forgive her, nor am I saying it for the queen's sake. I'm not exactly in a position to see for myself, but from what I've been hearing…" He trailed off and softened his eyes. "Might be a good idea to get a visit or two in when you can. I just don't want there to come a day when you look back with regrets."

"...I'll see that I do, then. Thank you." Agott said quietly before she left.

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Olruggio's words ate away at her throughout her meal, and soon enough she found herself standing outside the queen's chambers. The two knights stepped aside for her, and she quietly pushed open the heavy door.
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Her mother was awake, though she wasn't reading like she sometimes was when she came to visit in the past. The way she was lying and staring up at the ceiling left her looking almost doll-like. Agott felt her breath hitch as she stepped forward and took a seat at her bedside.

The movement must have gotten her attention, because Adina turned her head to the side to face her daughter, a soft smile on her face. "Agott."

"Mother," Agott greeted, trying to keep her expression neutral. "How are you feeling?"

The queen hummed softly. "Tired, but not in any pain today. I'm happy to see you." She turned her head once more to look out the window. "Such beautiful warm weather; it must be summer now. Almost your birthday, I should think."

Agott nodded, balling up the fabric of her dress in her hand. This was why she hardly visited anymore. The once assertive woman she'd come to know had become so weakened, she hardly had that same fire in her anymore. Perhaps a few years ago she would have welcomed the change, but the knowledge that it wasn't necessarily a good sign pulled at her heart. She wanted her mother's love, as well as her gentleness, but not like this. "Yes, about a week away now. Preparations are being made for the ball."

"My only daughter, growing up so fast. Nearly fifteen." Adina smiled.

The princess swallowed a lump in her throat at the sting. "Sixteen," she corrected.

Her mother's memory was no longer what it used to be. It wasn't significant enough that most people took notice, but Agott was painfully aware. It started with little things here and there, something as small as misremembering the day of the week, but it had developed more significantly as of late.

"Sixteen, of course. Forgive me for the slip of my tongue." Adina corrected, though the expression on her face told Agott all she needed to know. No mere slip of the tongue. If the lie provided her any comfort, she wouldn't call it out. "You'll come visit me on the day of, won't you? It pains me to know I'm missing out on so much of your life."

Agott nodded and spoke softly. "Of course I will."

"Good." Adina smiled and leaned back against the pillows. The two sat in silence for a few moments, neither quite knowing what to say. The queen's hand twitched as if perhaps she wanted to reach out, but her arm made no move to follow. "Agott," she whispered instead, "Are you happy?"

The words hung heavily in the air as she debated her response. Did she truly want an answer, or was she seeking some sort of closure? Even if she did want the truth, what would she even say? She had Coco, yes, and she was happy. But that peace was finite. How could she bring

herself to say ‘no, I’m not, and I won’t be unless you go back on what you perceive to be best for me’?

“Yes, I’m happy.”

Neither queen nor princess looked convinced. These sorts of lies and half-truths became more common with every interaction they had, both convinced that this was the only way they could bring the other some peace of mind.

If the situation were any different, maybe Agott would have spoken up. Maybe if her mother were still as stubborn as she had been, she too would have kept the fire in her voice. It felt wrong to lash out against the woman in the bed before her, docile as she had become. So, she kept her anger inside. There was no one left to be angry with. All that remained was the inevitable knowledge that she could do little to change her fate.

“Try to rest,” Agott whispered as she stood to leave. As she walked through the door, neither mother nor daughter had the strength to whisper *I love you.*

The remainder of Agott's birthday was overshadowed by her conflicting emotions. How exactly was she supposed to feel at a time like this? She wasn't angry, although she felt like she certainly had a right to be, and perhaps even should be. Any lingering agitation had fizzled out in the face of inevitability.

She wasn't even particularly *sad.* Her mother was sick, her future was in the hands of an arrangement she wanted to take no part in, and she could feel her control slipping away with each day that passed. She should be upset, or irritated, or even at least on edge. She felt nothing. Nothing at all.

It was an unfamiliar sort of numbness that swallowed up the space around her, making it difficult to so much as breathe. Her studies passed by in a haze, and even the thought of returning to Coco's side didn't bring the same amount of warmth she figured it should.

It wasn't that she didn't want to see the girl. In fact, that was far from the truth. If she could curl up in Coco's arms and never face the world again, that would be more than alright by her. The knowledge that such comfort was impossible was enough to send her sinking lower into the sensation of emptiness.

Perhaps she ought to tell Qifrey. Then again, she wasn't quite sure how he'd react. It was a part of his nature to want to solve a problem when he saw it arise, and she didn't want to cause him any distress. She momentarily debated confiding in Coco, but found herself reaching a similar conclusion. This was likely just as difficult for the other girl as it was for her.

Her desire for some sort of comfort won out over her desire to protect her lover from her feelings, and she found herself ducking into the secret passageways once more.

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"Agott," Coco whispered with a warm smile on her face. Her usually wide eyes were heavy with fatigue, but still carried that familiar sparkle that she loved so dearly. "Good timing. I'm just about done for the night."

The two girls slipped inside and shut the door behind them before climbing onto the bed. It wasn't unusual for the pair to end their day quietly enjoying one another's company as they sought warmth through the early evening. Coco's fingers began to card through Agott's curls in a steady motion.

"I've made some progress on your suit. I really hope that you like it." Coco hummed quietly as she took in the details of the princess' face. Her lips pulled downwards slightly as pieces began to click. "You don't look very well."

Agott sighed as her muscles relaxed. It must have been more obvious than she thought. That or Coco had simply become too good at reading her. "I suppose I haven't been feeling my best."
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Coco's hand brushed her forehead and lingered for a moment. Agott shook her head and let it fall to the side. "I'm not unwell. At least, not in a traditional sense. I've no fever to explain away the lethargy or any symptom that could justify my discomfort."

"You're unwell all the same." Coco wrapped her arms around her lover. "Do you want to talk about it? Or would you rather just take in some comfort tonight?"

Agott took a moment to think about it. She didn't have the words to explain how she felt in its entirety, but she also didn't want to sit with these thoughts alone. It hadn't been her intention to confide in Coco, and yet she always knew exactly what to say to help her walls come down. "I don't know how to describe it. I haven't been feeling like myself recently. It's like everything's gone all muddled. Nothing looks as vibrant as it should."

Coco said nothing at first, but kept her arms encircled around her. The gentle sound of her heartbeat under Agott's ear was more than enough. It was safe here, and warm enough to chase away the lingering chill outside. Remaining here wouldn't make her problems go away, but it was enough to provide a momentary respite.

When Coco finally spoke, her tone was soft. "I'm sorry. I wish I could make it all better for you, but I don't think I can. With everything that's happened, I can't say I blame you. Maybe, in a way, your mind is protecting itself." She leaned down and kissed her forehead. "But I am here for you. I don't want you to feel alone right now, because you're not. You have me, and you have your professors too. You can talk to us if you want to or need to."

It wasn't a perfect solution, or a quick fix. It was comfort, plain and simple. Agott preened at the kiss and curled up further into her arms. "Thank you. I appreciate having you here."

"Of course." Coco nuzzled her cheek against the top of her head. She allowed a few moments of silence to pass between them before looking towards her sewing supplies. "The suit coat is almost done, you know. Do you want to try it on?"

A gentle distraction, and a welcome one at that. Agott perked up and nodded.

The tailor hurried off the bed and pulled the mannequin out from where it was hidden previously. Agott's eyes widened as she looked it over.

A pale blue suit this time, unlike the rich purples she was used to wearing. As she approached the mannequin, she could start to make out some of the tiny details on the collar. Little embroidered flowers and intricate vines. Subtle enough to not be flashy, but still obviously stitched with care. It was true that Coco never did anything by halves.

"Do you like it? I know royalty usually choose deeper colored fabrics, and you tend to wear a lot of purple and gold, but I thought it might be fun to change things up a little this time." Coco ran

her hands over the garment to smooth it out. “I’m not quite done with it yet, but if you’d like to try it on, you’re more than welcome to!”

Agott was eager to do so, but approached the fabric with careful hands as if it might fall apart under her fingers. It wasn't that she didn't trust Coco’s handiwork, far from it. It was that something so clearly made with love deserved to be handled as if it were made of glass.

Coco helped her slip the jacket over her shoulders, straightening here and there and fussing over how it fit. She guided Agott to the mirror when she was done.

It was hard to envision while she was still wearing a dress underneath, but the suit jacket alone was enough to bring fresh tears to her eyes. For a moment, she felt a little more like herself, if only a fraction. The sight of Coco standing just behind her in the mirror was a welcome reminder that she still had people on her side.

‘So, what do you think?” Coco asked as she rested a hand on her shoulder.

Agott wrapped her arms around her waist and kissed her sweetly.

“You’re serious?”

Agott had recently returned to her room after finishing dinner and lessons, and was just about to start getting ready for bed when she found Professor Qifrey waiting outside her room. She had invited him inside so as to have some privacy.

Qifrey nodded and smiled, his eyes bright and expression warm. “It took a bit of finesse, but all your professors have agreed that you’ve made plenty of progress; more than enough to warrant the two days off for your celebration and the ball.”

“What about my mother? I can’t imagine her agreeing to something like this.” The princess raised an eyebrow. Qifrey only chuckled and shook his head.

“It was ultimately Regent Beldaruit’s decision.” He rested a hand on Agott’s shoulder. “Two days off won’t hurt in the long run, and you’ve more than earned it. I implore you, allow yourself the luxury of some rest.”

Confliction was written all over Agott’s face. A rest would have been welcome at any point throughout her life. Normally, she’d have jumped at the opportunity. Was it really alright to indulge in some comfort at a time like this?

Qifrey seemed to notice her hesitance, and continued to gently coax her. “Come now, two days is far from the end of the world. You won't fall behind just because you took some time off for your *birthday* of all things. Besides, entertaining guests is work enough all on its own.” He grinned and squeezed her shoulder. “Think of it as some hands-on practical training if you must. You’ll be exercising all you’ve learned in your etiquette lessons, won’t you?”

He made a good point. There was only so much that could be learned from words on paper. If she thought of it as practice, she suddenly felt a bit less guilty. “Alright, if you insist it won’t cause any trouble for my lesson schedule, then I gratefully accept your offer. And professor?” She turned around and hugged him in a rare display of physical affection. “Thank you.”

Her professor hugged back, offering her a gentle hum before pulling away. “Alright then, get some rest. Only a few days until that party of yours. It’s hard to believe my little Agott has grown up so quickly. You’re making me feel terribly old.”

Agott blinked, a bit stunned at his words. ‘*My little Agott.’*

She had no time to process. As soon as she snapped herself out of her daze and looked back up, he was gone.

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The malaise that had been trailing behind Agott had not magically disappeared overnight as she might have hoped. It lingered and clung to her every movement. The promise of a gathering did help, but it wasn't a cure.

Even so, she attempted to tamp down her gloom as the morning of the party arrived. Coco was yet to deliver the suit to her room (knowing Coco, she probably wanted to reveal it in person), so she dressed herself for the time being and had a quick meal before going to the palace gates to receive her guests.

Coco was already there, as were a handful of guards. The knowledge that they had eyes on them prevented the girls from running into each other's arms. Instead, they settled for secretly linking their pinkies behind their backs.

Coco leaned over and began to whisper. "Happy birthday, Agott. I can't wait to show you the finished suit."

"Such little patience. It's not even my birthday until tomorrow." Agott teased her as she relished the feeling of their hands brushing against one another.

"That just means I get to be the first." Coco shrugged and grinned.

"It doesn't count as being first if it isn't actually my birthday."

"Is that so? I'll just have to make sure I'm the first to say it tomorrow too."

Qifrey arrived not long after, cheerful as always despite his slumped shoulder from obvious fatigue. "Good morning, Your Highness. And good morning, Coco. I'm not too late to receive our guests, am I?"

"They're still yet to arrive." Agott nodded. No sooner had the words left her mouth than the first of the carriages pulled into view before coming to a halt before them. The coachman was quick to open the door, and out leaped a familiar pink-haired girl.

Unlike Coco, Tetia did not hesitate to pull Agott in for a hug. She bounced on the balls of her feet excitedly as she pulled back. "Agott, it's so good to see you! I missed you too much; letters aren't enough."

Agott smiled despite herself and nodded. "It's good to see you again, too. I trust the journey here wasn't too difficult?"

"Not at all!" Tetia grinned and giggled. "You have no idea how excited I am! A royal ball *and* a garden party? It's more excitement than one princess can handle."

Only a few minutes passed before the second carriage arrived. Agott glanced over at Coco, expecting excitement, but found the other girl looking down at the ground and fidgeting with her free hand. It was strange. She'd have expected her to be a bit more enthusiastic than that to see her long-time best friend.

Richeh emerged from the carriage, though her expression was mostly unreadable. She curtsied before Agott and Tetia. "Your Highness, thank you for the invitation." Her tone was even and polite enough, but there was something almost cold mixed in as well.

Agott cleared her throat in an attempt to cut through the awkwardness. "Of course, thank you for coming."

The four girls began to make their way through the palace, flanked by guards on either side. The ban on having outsiders enter had been lifted long ago when Coco was introduced to the palace. Suspicious activity had decreased, and life must go on. That being said, security still lingered as it always would.

Tetia and Agott took the lead while Coco and Richeh hung back, the two princesses chatting away while the other girls refused to make eye contact first. Neither knew exactly what to say after all this time apart.

Eventually, the group came to the entrance of the garden.

The four girls settled into the table at the center of the gazebo just as they had a few years prior. It should have felt nostalgic and relieving to be able to take a deep breath and step away from the heavy expectations of everyday life to enjoy a nice, relaxing cup of tea amongst friends.

Unfortunately, it was anything but.

Qifrey raised an eyebrow as he quietly poured tea for the group. No one dared utter a word. Richeh glared daggers at both Tetia and Agott (but mostly Agott) and refused to so much as spare a glance in Coco's direction.

The young tailor in question fidgeted with the edge of the tablecloth, clearly very self-conscious of Richeh's behavior. When Agott noticed, she reached out and gently took her hands to steady them. Richeh's glare when she glanced at their intertwined fingers only intensified tenfold.

Clearing his throat, Qifrey stepped backward with the teapot. "Well then, I'll be right back with some snacks. You girls settle in. There are guards just outside the palace entrance, should you need them. If you'll excuse me." He hurried off to try to offer them some privacy to work out whatever seemed to be the issue.

Tetia nudged her teacup around on its saucer before laughing nervously. "So! Agott, are you excited for the ball tomorrow? I know you've mentioned they aren't your favorite before in your letters, but surely turning sixteen is at least," the princess prompted in an attempt to cut through some of the tension.

Her hopes were dashed when her words only seemed to cause Aggot to sulk a bit. Tetia hurriedly tried to change the subject. "Never mind! Balls are stressful, I get it. Let's see, um…" She tapped her chin before her eyes lit up. "Everything else aside, it's always fun to receive presents! Coco, you're a tailor, right? Did you get the chance to sew something, perhaps?"

Coco perked up slightly at the mention of her name, and a small smile pulled at her lips. "Actually, I did! I made Agott's outfit for today,y as well as something extra I'm saving for tomorrow." She turned to face agott and gently nudged her ankle with her foot. "You should go change, by the way. Before tea gets cold."

"If it would be all right with everyone, I'll happily do so once Professor Qifrey returns." Agott smiled and began to relax. "I'm yet to see the finished piece, but I'm sure it's wonderful."

"Oh, how exciting! Two wonderful surprises are twice as nice." Tetia giggled and took a sip of tea. She risked a glance over at Richeh now that the mood had lightened. "Well, what about you, Richeh? Did you plan anything for the birthday girl?"

Richeh's expression remained icy, and her voice was barely audible. "What? Taking Coco wasn't enough for you?'

In an instant, the lighthearted moment was gone. The two princesses froze and stared down into their tea, but Coco's brow furrowed. "Richeh, you don't mean that."

"And so what if I do?" Richeh set down her teacup with a particularly loud *clink.* "I don't see how it's rude to tell the truth."

Agott put her hand on Coco's shoulder, trying to alleviate the tension. "It's alright. There's no harm meant."

"No, it isn't." Coco kept hold of Agott's hand as she turned to face her friend. "Even if you're feeling hurt, it's not right to take it out on Agott. She didn't do anything *wrong."*

Richeh grit her teeth as she stared once more at Coco and Agott's hands. She stood abruptly from the table. "If you'll excuse me for a moment."

Professor Qifrey chose that exact moment to step back out carrying a tray of food, but was stopped short by the blue-haired girl. "Oh? Do you need a bathroom? One moment, I'll escort you there."

The tray was dropped off, and the two stepped away from the garden. Once they were out of sight, Coco squeezed Agott's hand. "I'm so sorry; I have no idea what's gotten into her. She had no right to get angry with you, even if she's upset with me. I don't understand why she came if she truly felt that way."

"I think I might know," Tetia chimed in as she popped a strawberry into her mouth.

Agott and Coco paused and turned their heads, looks of disbelief on both of their faces. The usually bubbly girl across from them spoke in an unusual tone.

"I think Richeh," Tetia hummed as she stuck her fork into another strawberry. "Hates princesses."

Coco blinked and tilted her head. "*Hates princesses?"*

"I'm not so sure I follow," Agott mumbled as she narrowed her eyes.

"Well, maybe *hate* is a strong word." Tetia shrugged and waved her fork around in the air. "But tell me this, Coco. You know her best after all. Is Richeh the kind of person who seems particularly stubborn? Doesn't like rigidity or being told what to do?"

Coco thought about it for a moment before nodding. That *did* sound a bit like Richeh. "I guess so. Richeh really values her independence if that's what you meant."

Tetia hummed and nodded. “You can correct me if I’m wrong, especially since she and I only ever got to talk at the ball a few years ago, but try to imagine you feel very strongly about your individuality. Royals and nobles pretty much control how our nations work, so they’re pretty much the embodiment of authority. Sure, they dictate lots of the rules, but Richeh probably never had to directly interact with them very much. For the most part, she was free to be herself and live a life she wanted to lead.”

The princess began organizing the fruits on her plate. Two strawberries in one corner, and two blueberries in the other. “The Agott and I are over here, and you and Richeh are over there. It’s not that we can’t talk to each other, even if it may be hard. Even so, you and Richeh are still two blueberries. But what happens…” Tetia nudged one blueberry over to the other side. “If that gets taken away? Even more so if you were to marry Agott?”

Tetia plucked up the ‘Coco’ blueberry and replaced it with a strawberry.

Coco frowned and looked down at the plate, her eyes lingering on the one remaining blueberry by itself. “Oh…I see.”

Tetia nodded and shrugged. “I can’t say for certain that’s what’s going on, but I imagine it gets a bit lonely if your closest friend moves away to that palace. If she didn’t like the idea of princesses and rules before, she probably feels more strongly now. Which definitely explains why she never responded to any of my letters.” Tetia giggled to herself.

“She didn’t write back to you? But she was the one who asked if you could be pen pals.” Coco’s eyes widened slightly.

“I don’t think it’s anything personal! Maybe she liked the idea of it at the time, but I don’t blame her.” Tetia only smiled as she spoke, “I just think that maybe because I’m a princess, she doesn’t want to get too close.”

Coco sighed and squeezed Agott’s hand absentmindedly. “I want to understand, but I’m having trouble. What about that boy, Euini? And even still, if she does hate princesses, why come to the party?”

“I suppose everyone has a different level of comfort. Euini is a noble, but he’s not a royal.” Agott chimed in. “Perhaps that makes a difference?”

“As for why she would come to the party, I think that much is obvious. She probably missed you, Coco.” Tetia took another sip of her tea.

Coco sat with their words for a moment as they thought back to the past few years. How abruptly she had to pack up and leave to move to the palace, coupled with the lack of contact with Richeh. It all probably contributed to the hurt her dearest friend must have been feeling.

Richeh *missed her.*

She missed *Richeh*.

In a whirlwind of her own emotions, she had neglected to see just how badly someone so close to her heart must have been hurting. That guilt weighed heavily on her heart. “I’m so sorry; I should go find her. I think she and I should talk”

Agott nodded and kissed Coco’s hand. “Take your time. And please, do tell if she wants to leave; I’ll take no offense. I hope I haven’t upset her.”

Coco nodded and let go of her hand before hurrying off inside in search of Richeh.

As she disappeared into the palace, Tetia picked up her fork and ate all four fruits off her plate. Agott scrunched up her face. “Did you just eat us all”

“Hey, the metaphor is over! I’m not going to waste food.”

Being the palace tailor, Coco was allowed inside the palace easily without an escort. She hurried down the hallway in search of her friend as she rounded the first of a few corners.

Richeh wouldn't be allowed to roam freely, even given the circumstances. She could only have been where Qifrey would have escorted her, not near the restrooms, but perhaps somewhere private where she could calm down.

Sure enough, she ran into the man himself, standing a few paces away from where Richeh was sitting in one of the drawing rooms. His expression was woven with light concern as he stood with his hands clasped loosely behind his back. When he heard footsteps, he looked up towards the sound. "Ah, Coco. Forgive us for the delay, but Miss Richeh seemed to need a moment to collect herself."

Coco nodded and peeked around the doorframe to glance at her friend. Richeh looked over at her before quickly looking away with a huff. The tailor sighed and rubbed her arm. "I'm really sorry about this. Would you mind if I spoke with her for a moment?"

Qifrey smiled and nodded his head. "Go right ahead. I do believe im required to escort her back to the gardens when you're finished, but I promise I'll stay right where I am. You'll have your privacy."

"Thank you." Coco sighed and steeled herself. After a moment's hesitation, she brushed past him and entered the drawing room.

Richeh had her legs tucked up to her chest, and her head kept stubbornly ducked into her knees. She refused to budge even as Coco sat down beside her on the small couch. Neither girl spoke for a few moments before Coco leaned her head on Richeh's shoulder. "Are you mad at me?"

Those five simple words were enough to earn her the slightest peek of eyes glancing up from where they were hidden. "...No. I'm not."

"Okay, then. Are you mad at Agott?" Coco pressed a bit further.

Richeh narrowed her eyes and nodded. Coco looked unconvincing.

"Are you *really* mad at her? Or is it just easier to be mad at her instead of at me?"

Silence hung between them until eventually Richeh lowered her legs. She tilted her head to rest on top of Coco's. "Does it really matter so much?"

"It does to me." Coco began to quietly fidget with the hem of her dress. "I don't want two of the people I care about most to be ill at ease with each other. And what's more, I don't want you to

be upset. I know it's a selfish ask. I can't make you like Agott, but I at least want to understand *why."*

Richeh sighed and crossed her arms. "How was I supposed to feel? One moment you're working in town close by, and the next you've gone off and moved to the palace. I didn't have the time to process that you were leaving before you were gone."

Coco tightened her grip on the fabric. It was true; the hasty goodbyes they'd shared left little room for whatever grief they might have held. For her, the excitement of being closer to Agott and starting a real career was enough to distract her from that lingering ache, but in turn, it left Richeh without much closure. Her intentions may have been pure, but that did not absolve her of selfishness.

"I'm sorry I didn't give you more notice. If I could go back, I'd have done things differently." Coco's voice was strained as she struggled to process her own emotions. Even if she didn't regret her choice, the guilt still lingered. "But, even then, would it have changed how you feel? If I had given you more time, would you still react this way?"

Richeh took hold of Coco's hand gently, though her grip was firm. "I don't think so. It might have made it easier, but I still don't like it."

The tailor nodded slowly as she thought back to a few years ago. "You always seemed so supportive of me, even when you knew about my crush. I guess I just didn't expect how badly it would impact you if it ever came to fruition."

"I wanted you to be happy." Richeh squeezed her hand. "But even so, I want to be happy too. I want to be in your life, even if Agott is as well. It just felt like…" She took a deep breath and sighed. "...Like you made a choice between us."

"I would never." Coco squeezed her hand in return. "My love for Agott is real, but so is my love for you and for the life we shared. I only wish I could better bridge the two of them. Agott's expectations of pursuing the throne and the distance between those worlds only make me feel like im trapped between two places I don't quite belong." She paused before laughing quietly. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't make it about me right now. You're the one who's upset."

Richeh pulled her into a hug before she could continue. She shook her head firmly. "I don't want you to keep that sort of thing to yourself. It's not just about me, it's hard for both of us."

Coco stiffened in surprise, but quickly hugged back. The two girls held each other as they slowly released the tension in their muscles.

"I was so worried that I was going to lose you," Coco whispered against Richeh's shoulder.

Her friend shook her head. "You're not losing me."

The girls untangled themselves from the embrace and leaned back against the couch. Despite the air of forgiveness, there were still lingering questions. “You know,” Coco pushed her hair out of her face. “Tetia theorized you might not like princesses. Is that true?”

Richeh made a face, but quickly tried to fix her expression. “Is that a problem?”

“No, not exactly. Not right now, at least, but…” Coco wrung her hands together. “I don’t think there's a world where this would ever happen. I mean, it’s completely crazy, and it’ll never come to pass. I just want to know. Say there was a world in which I married Agott and *I* became a princess, too.” Coco blushed at the mere thought of it, but quickly sobered up to the question she was asking. “Would you like me less? Would you hate me?”

It took a moment for Richeh to gather her answer. When she finally did speak, it was slow and hesitant. “I don’t think so. If it would make you happy, I’d find a way to be happy, too.”

Coco smiled sadly. “But you’d wish I wasn’t?”

The blue-haired girl paused, but shrugged. “I do truly mean it when I say I’d be happy for you. It would just be difficult for me to adjust. You’d still be Coco first, and a princess second.”

“I see,” Coco hummed as relief washed over her. “I really do hope that maybe one day you can feel the same about Agott and Tetia, too. Even if they’re royalty, they want to be our friends.”

Richeh huffed through her nose. “I make no promises, but I can try.”

A giggle passed Coco’s lips as she hugged Richeh again. “Still best friends?”

“Don’t be silly. Of course we are.” Richeh squeezed her softly before pulling back with a stern look on her face. “But you’ve still racked up quite a few angricheh points.”

“I guess I deserve that. Trust is slowly reearned, I suppose.” Coco tilted her head as she smiled. “Do you want to go back to the garden? You don’t have to if you don’t feel like it. Agott said you’re welcome to go home.”

Richeh shook her head as she stood. “That’s alright. I think I’m done sulking. I’m glad we talked. Besides, the only way for me to try and be their friend is to talk to them.”

Coco lit up as she followed after, slipping out of the drawing room and joining Qifrey in the hall.

Agott perked up the moment she saw Coco return to the garden, Richeh and Qifrey in tow. She stood eagerly to greet them. “Is everything alright?” She asked hesitantly despite her enthusiasm.

Coco smiled and nodded, taking her seat and motioning for Agott to do the same. “Yes, thank you. We appreciate your patience, and I’m sorry to have left so abruptly during your birthday celebration.”

“Please, think nothing of it. I’m relieved things have settled.” Agott smiled and gently touched Coco’s hand. She glanced up as Richeh took her own seat, looking anywhere but at the two princesses. She cleared her throat softly. “Richeh, I’m sorry for any tension between us. I won’t force you to like me, but for the sake of today, I hope we can at least get along.”

Richeh glanced at her from the corner of her eye and huffed. She slumped down in her seat and nodded. “Of course. I’m sorry for the trouble; it was rude of me.”

“No harm done.” Agott smiled. She noticed Qifrey was lingering nearby, and a realization dawned on her. “Oh, forgive me for stepping away so soon, but I should very much like to change into the suit Coco has prepared for me.” She turned to the tailor in question and leaned down. “Would you care to join me? Or shall I change and meet you here?”

“You go ahead! As much as I’d love to see your initial reaction, I’d hate to leave Richeh alone so soon.” Coco squeezed her lover’s hand. “I can’t wait to see you wearing it. I hope ot’s up to your standards.”

Agott scoffed and pecked her cheek. “You should know by now I’d wear even a jester's garb if it were sewn by your hands. Very well, then. Wait here, and I’ll return as soon as I am able.” The princess straightened her back and turned to her other two guests. “Do excuse me for a moment. In the meantime, please help yourselves to refreshments.”

As Agott hurried off to change, Tetia leaned back in her chair to watch until she was certain the princess was out of earshot. She grinned and clapped her hands together. “So, is everyone feeling better?”

Richeh hesitantly nodded, and Coco did the same. ‘Yes, thank you, Tetia. Sorry to leave you behind like that.”

“It’s no worries! Though I dont apologize for helping myself to the snacks in your absence.” Tetia reached under her chair and pulled out a small ornate box. Coco had briefly noticed her carrying it earlier, but was too preoccupied with Richeh to question it.

Richeh reached over and poked the box. “What’s this? It looks fancy.”

“Well, we got sidetracked before we could talk about the gift I got for Agott myself! As much as I’d love to give it to her on her actual birthday, balls are usually super crowded and busy. Not exactly ideal gifting time.” Tetia shook her head and rested her hands on the box. “So, I figured I’d show it to her now! I know the box itself looks fussy, but it’s actually-” She opened the lid with a flourish, revealing a set of quills and ink.

Coco leaned over to get a better look at the contents themselves. “I dont usually see so many small vials in these kinds of sets. What are they?”

Tetia proudly nudged the box forward so she could see them up close. “They’re different colors of ink! I noticed Agott usually writes in plain black, which is very sophisticated and all, but sometimes it's fun to have a little variety, too! Of course, there's a vial of black as well in case she needs something practical.”

Richeh ran her finger along the metal trim of the box, feeling its textured edge. Tetia seemed to take notice as she continued. “The box itself may be a bit much for her taste, but it was the best compromise I could think of to get her something that looked presentable as a gift from one royal to another while still being something she would like. I noticed she doesn't wear much jewelry, and she’d rather Coco make her gowns.”

“Even in your gifts, princesses still have to worry about appearances,” Richeh mumbled and withdrew her finger. “That seems tiring.”

Tetia blinked as she thought about it, then shook her head. “It can definitely be draining to worry about, but I quite like my life as a princess. I know what’s expected of me, and sometimes it can be fun, too! Then again, I’ve always enjoyed these sorts of things. The thrill of a ball, wearing pretty dresses, and dancing? All of those things make me happy.” She smiled and touched the top of her head. “One day when I’m crowned, it’ll be my most treasured possession! That being said, I can see how something like a crown might feel fitting for me, but stifling for someone else.”

“I think it might be fun to try it out.” Coco giggled and placed an imaginary crown on top of her head. “All of those things you mentioned do sound pretty wonderful.”

“Right?” Tetia clasped her hands with Coco’s and squeezed them excitedly. “It *is* wonderful!”

The two girls giggled between themselves before Richeh cleared her throat and pointed behind them.

Coco gasped as she turned her head to face a blushing Agott, standing stiffly wearing the suit she’d spent so many hours tailoring.

“Well, how do I look?” Agott kept her hands clasped behind her back. The light blues of the suit jacket and pants stood out against the clean off-white of her ascot. Her vest was a matching blue, though it was trimmed with a similar gold to the dresses she usually wore.

Coco was quick to practically launch herself at her, fussing over the details of how it fit as she curled around her. “Is it comfortable? Is it too hot? It’s been a long time since I’ve made a suit and I just-” She took a deep breath and smiled as she finally took in the whole picture, her cheeks going pink. “Oh, wow. You really are handsome.”

Both girls remained stuck in place, blushing and chatting idly about the garment as Tetia giggled and helped herself to some more snacks. Richeh sipped her tea quietly, keeping her comments to herself for the time being. Qifrey chuckled and busied himself refilling empty teacups as he pretended not to listen.

This moment was for the two of them.

After a few minutes of vigorous inspection, Coco finally took her seat at the table beside Agott. Tetia giggled at them over the rim of her teacup while Qifrey made some excuse to slip away and leave the four to their own devices for a while. As soon as they were alone, the gentle teasing remarks began.

“That’s quite a suit, Agott! It really complements you well. It must feel pretty nice to have someone who cares about you so deeply. Just think about it! Getting to spend your days side by side, wearing the garments she made for you with such thoughtfulness? It’s very romantic!” Tetia placed her hand on her forehead.

Agott’s cheeks burned, and Coco laughed bashfully. “Tetia, be nice. It’s her birthday party after all.”

“Her birthday does not protect her from the truth! It *is* romantic! And not only that, but it’s hardly fair at all.” The princess crossed her arms and playfully huffed. “There’s a serious lack of handsome princes waiting to take my hand, you know!”

“Having a prince waiting for you isn’t exactly all it’s cracked up to be, you know.” Agott chimed in as she stirred sugar into her tea.

Tetia mumbled and slouched as she poked at her teacup. “That’s easy for you to say; you already have Coco.”

“I don’t think we ever discussed that as a group, did we?” Coco rubbed her neck.

Richeh scoffed. “It was obvious enough just watching you two.” She stuck her fork into a strawberry and brought it to her plate.

“Richeh’s right! I’ve known for ages. Besides, Agott wouldn’t stop gushing about you in her letters.”

Agott nearly choked on her tea, and Coco dropped the scone she had picked up. Both girls looked at each other before quickly looking away.

“Gushing about me?” Coco giggled softly

Agott hissed through gritted teeth. “She’s dramatic. Don’t trust a single word she says.”

“Deny it all you want, but I have the proof.” Tetia grinned and folded her hands.

Richeh watched on quietly as the other three chatted. She didn't speak, but a tiny smile pulled at her lips.

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“Ta-da! Happy birthday, Agott!” Tetia revealed her gift with a flourish.

Agott carefully picked up the box and inspected it before peeking inside. Her eyes lit up at the contents. She held up one of the vials to the light to see it better, chuckling fondly at the sight. “Colorful ink like the ones you write with? I always wondered where you got them from. I couldn't seem to find any when I went into town.”

“There’s a shop not too far from the palace where I live that sells them! The inks are fun, but the little set was too cute to pass up.” Tetia crossed her arms proudly as she beamed. “Now you can make your writing all pretty too! We can even set up a secret message system with color-coded ink. It’s just like in a mystery novel!”

“Thank you, Tetia. It’s lovely. I promise I’ll put it to good use.” Agott closed the case and offered her friend a warm smile. She turned to Coco and gave her ankle a nudge with her foot. “I suspect you also have something waiting for me?”

Coco nudged her ankle back with her own foot. “I do, but you’ll just have to be patient. You’ll get to see it tomorrow morning on your actual birthday.”

“I look forward to it.” Agott took her hand and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. She was about to change the subject when Richeh suddenly cleared her throat.

The other three girls turned their heads to see what was wrong, but found the fourth girl staring at her lap with a look that could only be described as a mixture of frustration and embarrassment on her face.

“Richeh? Are you alright?” Coco placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

Without so much as a word, Richeh thrust out a closed hand towards agott, opening her fingers and dropping something into her hands.

Agott blinked in surprise as she looked down at the small object, running her fingers over it. It was a simple ribbon with a small pattern woven into it.

Coco leaned over and immediately perked up. “Oh, it’s one of your ribbons! Richeh, did you make this for Agott?”

The blue-haired girl sank lower in her chair as if to hide, a stubborn frown still firmly on her face. Nonetheless, she nodded.

Gentle hands began trying the ribbon around Agott’s neck on top of her ascot. “Despite being good at sewing, Richeh has always been much more skilled at the loom than I am. She used to make us matching ribbons all the time when we were small! Usually you braid them into your

hair, but I don't see any reason why you can't wear it like this…there!" Coco finished securing a small bow around her neck, causing Agott to blush and gingerly touch the small token.

Neither Richeh nor Agott spoke for a while, both struggling to process how they should react. I took a gentle nudge from Coco for the princess to finally respond. "Ah- I'm terribly sorry. Thank you, Richeh. It's very thoughtful. You didn't have to get me anything."

Richeh narrowed her eyes. "If you don't like it, you don't have to wear it."

"No, no, please don't misunderstand!" Agott hurriedly corrected as she touched the ribbon once more. "I just didn't expect anything, that's all. I really do love it. I wouldn't lie to you."

Skepticism still tugged at Richeh's brow, but she eased up a bit and nodded. "Happy birthday, then."

"It suits you well, Agott! And the color matches your suit." Tetia pointed out as she sipped her tea.

The princess smiled and joined hands with Coco. "It truly does complement it well. Thank you both for such thoughtful gifts."

Idle chatter soon took over the party, the four girls eating and drinking while enjoying the scenery. Eventually, Tetia piped up once more. "You know, we still have some time before it gets dark. How about a party game?"

“A party game?” Coco smiled and tilted her head as she helped herself to some more snacks, stacking a scone onto her plate. “Like the ones they play at festivals?”

Agott hummed and rubbed her chin. “While it’s a nice idea in theory, we don’t exactly have much room for any running around. Not to mention classic parlor games can be a bit dull at times…I’ll never understand why adults like them so much”

“Party games sound a bit tiring.” Richeh nibbled on a strawberry and leaned back.

“Well, that’s just because you’ve never played one of *my* party games before,” Tetia said smugly as she crossed her arms. “No running around needed and no boring chit chat! Actually, I think they’re better served as icebreakers than actual games, but that’s besides the point.”

Coco nodded along and nudged both Agott and Richeh, who eventually signaled their agreement.

Tetia pumped her fist and giggled. “Trust me, it’ll be fun! Coco and Agott may know each other well, but this gives RIcheh and me a chance to catch up and get to know everyone better.”

“So, what exactly will we be doing?” Agott relaxed against the back of her chair.

“Hmm… well, since some of us still don’t know each other very well, let’s start with a few questions! We’ll go around in a circle, and each give our answers.” Tetia folded her hands as she thought about it, before her eyes lit up. “Oh, I know a good one! If you had to trade lives with someone else at the table, who would you choose and why?”

The other three girls looked across the table at one another, seemingly deep in thought. After only a few seconds, Richeh piped up. “Coco, no question.”

“So you’d take the life of our resident tailor? Do go on.” Tetia smiled and motioned for her to continue.

Richeh shrugged and picked at the food on her plate. “No offense to either you or Agott, but I’d rather do just about anything else than be a princess. Besides, making things is rewarding, and Coco’s mother is very kind. I’m more than content living my own life, but if I were forced to swap, I’d rather choose the one that gave me the most independence.”

Agott grew quiet as she took in the other girl’s words, looking down at her lap. Coco smiled and nodded.

“You always have been independent. For what it’s worth, I think you’d make an excellent Coco!” Coco grinned and nudged her shoulder. Richeh nodded and gave her a thumbs-up.

“My turn!” Tetia chirped as she pointed to herself with a flourish. “Much like Richeh here, I’m not exactly keen to change anything about my life. But if I absolutely had to choose…” She paused for dramatic effect before pointing to Agott. “I’d take my only option to remain a princess!”

Agott, who had zoned out, jolted at the sudden attention. She smiled and chuckled. “Yes, I could have guessed you chose me. You do really love being royalty, hmm?”

The pink-haired princess grinned and nodded enthusiastically. “It’s true! If I weren’t a princess, I’m not entirely sure what I would do with myself. It’s the only life I’ve ever known and, honestly, all I could want. Not to dismiss any of the struggles you’ve gone through or anything, I know this life hasn’t exactly treated you gently.” She nudged Agott’s ankle sympathetically. The other princess smiled and shook her head.

“Think nothing of it.” Agott turned towards her lover and offered her a nod. “Well? What about you, Coco?”

The tailor hummed as she thought about it, considering her options. “Well, I think I could find a way to be happy in any one of your lives. However, if I had to choose just one, I think I’d go with Tetia’s.”

“Oh? You’d choose me? I’m flattered!” Tetia beamed and clapped her hands together. “Please, do go on!”

“Well, like I said, I think there’s something beautiful about all of our lives. I love the path I’ve chosen, and I wouldn't trade it away…But I can’t help but daydream about what it would have been like if I were born a princess.” Coco rested her chin in her palm, a wistful expression on her face. “I know logically it isn’t all ballgowns and fanfare, but I just can’t seem to let go of those childish thoughts. Honestly, you make being a princess sound so wonderful.”

Tetia hummed and nodded before picking up her teacup. “I’m flattered! While it’s true that there's a lot more to being a princess than meets the eye, I can’t say it’s entirely untrue either. Well, I think we already know that Agott would choose you, so if we want to move on to the next question-”

“I’d choose Richeh.”

The three girls went quiet and turned their heads to look at Agott, who was staring down at her lap. The princess flushed a bit under all the eyes on her, but took a deep breath and continued. “I guess I’m not like any of you in that way. Everyone else said they’d rather not trade their lives but had a preference if they were forced to. If you gave me the chance to change my fate, I’d do so without question.” She turned to look at Tetia. “You’re a warm and cheerful person, but the path you walk as a princess isn’t one I’d want for myself if I had another option. As for Coco, if it were just between the two of you, I *would* have chosen her. Being a tailor seems marginally

more appealing to me, but she still ended up tied to the palace anyway. The only person among us who managed to live their life most unburdened by royalty is Richeh."

Coco softened and squeezed Agott's hand under the table. "You really don't like being a princess very much, do you?"

"I suppose I don't," Agott responded quietly.

Richeh, who had been quietly drinking her tea, set down her cup and offered her a thoughtful look. "I suppose there is something we share common ground on, then."

"Hurray for common ground!" Tetia cheered and raised her teacup. "See? My party games truly do work wonders. Now that we've all answered, allow me to do the honors of reading your responses!"

The pink-haired princess pointed at Richeh first. "You value your autonomy above all else." She moved her arm slightly until she was pointing at Agott. "And you share a similar desire for independence, and finally." Her hand stopped in front of Coco. "You want something more than you've always known. Am I right?"

"I think that's a fair analysis." Coco smiled bashfully.

Richeh shrugged and nodded. "What about your answer?"

"If I may, I think Tetia's answer says a great deal about her." Agott chimed in. She smiled at the other princess softly. "You want to be in a position where you can make the greatest number of people happy, correct? I've gathered that you enjoy the perks that come with being royalty, but you also constantly seem to be putting yourself in a situation where you can be of service to someone else. Even back when we met, you spent so much time trying to understand me and make me smile. I'd recount that the opportunity to rule a nation would give you plenty of ways to bring others happiness."

Tetia was momentarily stunned, but quickly snapped out of it and giggled. "Honestly, I'm impressed! You read into my answer way deeper than I would have, but you're not wrong about me! After all, life's greatest joys come from the happiness of those around you!" She reached over and plucked a pastry from the center plate. "And the rest of life's joys come from the Arklaum kitchen!"

Snacks slowly began to dwindle, and the pot of tea ran empty, but the four girls continued chatting happily amongst themselves. Qifrey leaned against one of the gazebo's posts with a fond expression on his face. It was a rarity to see her highness so at ease, especially given all that had happened in recent years.

“Agott, have you been practicing your dancing?” Tetia asked between bites, wiping a crumb from the corner of her lip. “I don’t think I’ve seen you in a ballroom for a few years now.”

“Well, seeing as it’s part of my current curriculum, I’ve been practicing a few times a week. My professor insists I’ll need those skills now more than ever when I meet Eoleo in person again.” Agott frowned and let her hand find Coco’s absentmindedly. “Why do you ask?”

Tetia blinked and smiled. “No reason in particular! I was just curious if you were still just as clumsy.”

Agott’s face went red, and Richeh bit back a small snicker. “I’m not that bad,” The princess protested. “Coco will tell you.”

“Agott, I don’t think we’ve ever danced together.” Coco giggled sheepishly. Agott’s head whipped around to face her, mortified.

“We haven’t? How is that possible?”

“I guess it just never came up. You haven’t attended any balls that I’m aware of since that night you kissed my cheek, and that whole ordeal ended rather abruptly…” The green-haired girl shrugged and rested her head on her lover’s shoulder. “I’d love to, given the chance, but I’m not so sure it would be appropriate at any of the grand events.”

Tetia clicked her tongue chiddingly. “Oh, Agott, that’s no good! A lady should be swept off her feet! Years passed, and you're yet to so much as dance with the poor girl.”

“I’m a lady too, you know.” Agott huffed and hid her face in her hands. Her voice came out muffled. “Please spare me your critiques. I hear it enough from Professor Qifrey.”

The professor in question stiffened at the mention of his name, only to chuckle and relax once more.

“That’s different! You need to hear this girl to girl.” Tetia rested a hand over her heart. “Quiet domesticity is important, but you heard what Coco said earlier. Whether she admits it or not, a girl can dream of a fairytale life, and that includes a fairytale romance!”

Coco’s face was almost as pink as Agott’s. She shook her head and squeezed the other girl’s hand. “I’m very happy where I am, regardless of whether or not we’re super outwardly romantic.”

“But would you *want* to be romantic?” Richeh tilted her head to the side.

“Well…I suppose it would be nice?” Coco mumbled shyly as her ears went red. She waved her free hand around. “But it’s ok! I know that would be hard. We have completely different statuses after all, and I'd hate to cause any more trouble than I already have.”

Agott caught her waving hand with her free one, bringing it to her lips and kissing his knuckles softly. Despite her flaming cheeks, she spoke softly. “You’re not *trouble.* Don't say things like that. I would love to dance with you.”

Coco’s heart stuttered in her chest, and she pulled her hand back to cover her face.

“It’s decided then! During the ball, you and Coco should find the time to have a dance together. I’ll be there, of course, so there will be no avoiding it.” Tetia gave a thumbs-up and turned to Richeh. “You’re coming as well, right?”

Richeh hummed and nodded. “I received an invitation, but I wasn’t so sure if I’d go…But I think I will.”

“Do you have something to wear?” Coco asked as she finished the last of her tea.

“Of course I do. You made that dress for me.”

Coco coughed in surprise and set down her teacup. “That was years ago! Does it even still fit you?”

Richeh blinked slowly, thought about it, then shook her head.

The tailor sighed and let her head fall on the table. “When you get home, see if you can have it sent to the palace today.. I don’t have time to make a new one, but I think I can alter it.”

“Mm. Sorry.” Richeh nodded.

“Besides Richeh and me, who else got invited?” Tetia rested her chin in her palm. “I know it's your birthday, and ideally that would mean you choose your own guests, but it’s also a big deal for the nation. Opening the palace doors after so long is significant, no?”

“Most of the invitations were purely political and arranged by Regent Beldaruit. Wealthy allies, upcoming nobles, and their children, that sort of thing. But I did recognize a few of the names, including Euini. I haven’t met the boy myself, but I know of his father, and I hear he’s interacted with Coco and Richeh. Besides him, a friend of Professor Olruggio’s is bringing along a girl my age. I believe her name is Jujy.”

Coco nodded along. “Euini’s nice! He seems very shy, though. He only really talks to Richeh”

“Alright, so it’s not all bad. A few people our age will be nice. Talking to stuffy adults is always so awkward.” Tetia folded her hands in her lap. “I hate to ask since I know it might upset you, but…I take it King Deanreldy and Prince Eoleo will be in attendance as well?”

“Yes, they’ll be attending,” Agott grumbled and slouched. She fidgeted with the end of the ribbon Richeh had given her as she stared at the tablecloth. “It would be a sign of ill will not to extend the invitation, seeing as he is technically my future spouse.”

Tetia frowned and nodded. “Hopefully they won't take up too much of your time. Honestly, I’m still holding out hope that this whole marriage ordeal will be called off.”

“One can only hope…as for me, I’m trying not to let myself dwell on it. Even if it’s inevitable, I'd rather let myself be happy with what freedom remains. Perhaps that’s selfish of me.” Agott tightened her grip on Coco’s hand. She relaxed as she felt a gentle squeeze in return.

“I wouldn't call that selfish. I think it’s very human.” Tetia shrugged.

The sun passed its peak, and eventually their little tea party began to fizzle out. The four girls made their way back to the front of the palace, where Richeh’s carriage awaited. The three waved goodbye as the coach pulled off towards the town.

Tetia was escorted back to a guest room by Qifrey, leaving Coco and Agott by themselves.

“Are you nervous for tomorrow?” Coco whispered despite the lack of people around, as if saying it quietly would lessen the impact of what was to come.

“Of course I am.” The princess leaned into Coco’s shoulder. “But I feel much better knowing you’ll be there.”

“You know how to find me tomorrow if you need anything.” Coco pressed a kiss to her cheek. “I need to go set up so I can work on Richeh’s dress. I’ll see you bright and early to help you with your gown?”

Agott smiled softly and nodded. “I’ll be waiting for you.”

Agott had always been an early riser, even when she was quite young. It wasn't unusual for th princess to be out of bed and getting ready as soon as the sun began to peak over the edge of the horizon. The morning of her birthday was no different.

Royal birthdays within her kingdom werent as elaborate as ones she'd heard about from neighboring nations, but this particular year was different. Her birthday was not only an opportunity for celebration, but it was also a good enough reason to host the ball she'd be attending in the evening.

So many years had passed since her mother's illness took a turn for the worse, and it was understandable that their kingdom had experienced some unrest as questions about the state of the royal family began to arise. With any luck, a demonstration that Agott was growing to be a promising ruler should quiet some of the disturbances.

As Agott slowly pulled herself out of bed, she couldn't help but let her mind wander to what a birthday might have been like if she lived in the village like Richeh and Coco had. If she'd been so lucky as to live a more private life, how would she have wanted to spend a summer's day like this one?

There was little use dwelling on it. She was a princess, and that was that.

Despite it being early, it was rather unusual that no one had appeared to help her dress. The palace staff was aware of her morning tendencies, and even her professor would occasionally stop by to help brief her on the day's agenda. She sighed before checking her reflection briefly in the mirror before making her way to her bedroom door.

Agott poked her head into the hallway and looked around. It was quiet; much quieter than was usual even for this hour. No maids were hurrying around, no professors in sight. Perhaps they were busy attending to preparations for the ball? Even so, surely someone was expected to check on her.

She was about to close the door to get herself dressed when she spotted a shape out of the corner of her eye, curled up against the wall. She glanced down before her breath hitched slightly.

"Coco?"

Agott knelt down beside her sleeping lover, the other girl's head resting on her shoulder with her eyes softly closed. Her breath was soft and even, and her hair had fallen into her face. The princess gently reached out to tuck it back behind her ear.

Coco jolted awake at the contact before looking around, squeaking softly. Her expression melted into a warm smile the moment her eyes landed on Agott. "Happy Birthday!"

Agott blinked before laughing quietly. “Yes, thank you. Good morning. How long have you been out here? Please, come in.”

The two girls made their way into Agott’s bedroom (Coco, more so shuffling along and rubbing her eyes than walking) before sitting down on the edge of her bed. The tailor was quick to yawn and make herself comfortable lying down with her head in Agott’s lap. “Wasn’t out there too long, don’t worry. Maybe an hour? I think I fell asleep…”

“Oh, you *think?”* Agott smiled and rolled her eyes. “It was a welcome surprise, but you should know better than to take a nap in a draft hallway. What would I do if you got sick?”

“I didn’t mean to fall asleep; it just happened. S’ still early.” Coco stretched out with her arms over her head as she yawned once more. “I managed to finish Richeh’s dress, but I ended up staying up far later than usual. Still, I wanted to be the one to tell you ‘happy birthday’ first.”

Agott shook her head and smoothed the green hair away from her lover's eyes. “That was very kind of you. You were indeed the first. In the future, perhaps we can find a better solution than waiting outside my door?”

“Yeah, didn’t think that one all the way through, but I didn’t want to wake you.” Coco giggled and reached into the pocket of her apron. She pulled out a small box and handed it to Agott. “Speaking of birthdays, I got you something.”

“Oh? For me? After you already made me an entire suit?” Agott’s eyes softened as she accepted the box. She ran her thumb gently over the edge of it.

Coco hummed as she visibly struggled to keep her eyes open. “Wanted you to have something from me that you could keep with you. Hurry and open it up before I fall asleep on you again.”

Agott nodded and lifted the top off the box with care before peeking at what was inside.

At first glance, it was nothing more than a plain white handkerchief. She’d carried one like this before without thinking much of it. Still, like all things with Coco, the truth was in the details. She unfolded the cloth to find delicate gold embroidery on one of the edges, complete with two initials and a small rose. *C ♡ A*

Her smile was so wide her cheeks began to hurt as she glanced down at the sleepy tailor in her lap. “It’s beautiful. I’ll carry it with me always; you have my word.”

Coco smiled triumphantly as she rubbed her eyes. “I read in a story book once that noble ladies decorated handkerchiefs to give to knights. When I was little, I sometimes wondered if one day I’d find a knight I wanted to give a handkerchief to. I had no idea one day I’d end up giving one to a princess.” She giggled and gazed up at the girl she’d come to adore. “I know we can’t court each other openly, but I hope you’ll accept it anyway.”

Agott leaned down and kissed Coco's forehead softly. "Of course I accept it. I said I'd keep it with me always, did I not?"

"You did say that, yeah." Coco grinned as her eyes finally slipped closed. "Happy birthday, Agott. **I love you**."

Agott's eyes went wide, and her heart stuttered in her chest. Before she could even comprehend what she had said, Coco had already fallen asleep.

Agott was completely frozen. She couldn't so much as move a muscle, much less speak for a solid minute straight. She did nothing but stare down at the sleeping girl in her lap, an equal mix of horrified and flustered as the reality of her words had settled in.

When she finally broke free from her shock, she covered her face with her hands. That didn't count. She was tired and not thinking straight, so that didn't have to mean what she thought it meant.

Yes, they'd kissed before. Countless times they'd held hands or cuddled up together, sharing their evenings and confiding in one another. But they hadn't said '*I love you.'*

It wasn't for a lack of desire; honestly, Agott might have said those same words years ago if she had been given the chance. The lack of verbal confirmation of their love stemmed from the mutual understanding that it was *dangerous* to acknowledge. The more she thought about how she truly felt for Coco, the worse it would hurt when she had to stand at the altar with someone else. So, it went unsaid.

But **god,** did she want to hear those words again.

Agott reached down and gently touched Coco's cheek, the pressure feather-light so as not to wake her from her much-needed rest. She looked so peaceful that Agott was certain there was no chance she had understood the implications of her words before she drifted off. Maybe that suggested she had spoken through her haze without actually meaning it. Maybe that suggested she'd meant those words more than ever while free of inhibitions.

Before she could dwell on it any longer, a knock on the door roused her from her thoughts. "Agott? May I come in?"

The princess carefully maneuvered Coco off her lap and fully into her bed, tucking her in under the covers before hurrying to get the door. Qifrey stood in the hallway with a warm smile on his face.

Agott held up a finger to her lips before nodding towards her bed. Her professor's gaze flickered to the lump under the covers before he hummed his acknowledgment. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper. "Happy birthday, Agott. I know I'm usually the first to say so, but a certain someone was already camped outside your room when I came by." He chuckled and pulled out a book from behind his back.

Agott's eyes widened and lit up as she accepted it. It was rare she found freetime, but in the spare moment she had she'd always enjoyed reading novels such as this one. "You found the next installment? Where?"

"I found it in town last time I went out. Honestly, each edition is more difficult to source than the last. Well worth it though, I hope it's enjoyable." Qifrey smiled and bowed his head. "Now, would

you like to come have breakfast? Or would you prefer it be brought up to you? I see you have a guest, and I'd hate to drag you away."

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Agott had just finished eating and getting dressed when Coco began to stir. She yawned and stretched her arms out over her head before burying her face back into the pillow. "G'morning." She mumbled against the fabric of the pillowcase. "Sorry, I fell back asleep. What time is it?"

"It's a few hours past sunrise if I'm not mistaken." Agott smiled and sat on the edge of the bed, holding out a cup of tea towards her. "Don't apologize; you sounded as though you needed the rest."

Coco hummed and pushed herself upright before accepting the tea, blowing on it before taking a sip. "I guess I did. Everything about this morning is kind of blurry. I gave you your present, right? Or did I dream that?"

"Don't worry, I have it right here." Agott pulled the handkerchief out of her sleeve to show her. "And I love it, in case you've forgotten that as well."

"Don't tease me." Coco giggled and kissed her cheek. "But I'm so glad you like it."

Agott nodded and bit her lip, debating if she should ask about what Coco had said before she dozed off. It would surely eat away at her not knowing whether she'd intended it or it was an exhausted slip of the tongue. She exhaled through her nose and avoided looking at the other girl. It was for the best she didnt know if any possible answer would hurt in the end.

"Agott,"

Her lover's voice broke her away from her brooding, and she turned her head to make eye contact once more. Coco's expression was soft and creased with worry.

"Are you alright? I know this is going to be a stressful event for you. Is there anything I can do to make it a little easier?"

Agott's heart ached at her worry. She sighed and gently kissed Coco's temple. "Just having you here is helping more than you know. I'll get through it so long as you aren't far."

A small hum passed Coco's lips as she smiled at the kiss, though the slight furrow in her brow did not ease much. "Promise me you won't push yourself too hard, okay? I worry about you."

"I'll do my absolute best." Agott nodded and squeezed her hand. "But you must understand that duty calls."
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Agott spent the majority of her morning holed up in her room by Coco's side, trying her best to ignore the looming duties that the ball would bring. If she closed her eyes and stayed in this moment, maybe she wouldn't have to face Eoleo. It was far too easy to pretend she was anywhere else. Being a commoner in the village with Coco would be best, but anything would do. As long as she could pretend to be anyone other than a princess, perhaps she would be happy.

Coco didn't nudge her along or suggest they start getting ready even as the time drew closer to when she was expected to make an appearance. She held Agott close and closed her own eyes as she leaned her head against her shoulder.

About an hour before Agott was expected to make her way to the ballroom, Coco was helping her into her dress. She tugged gently on the strings of Agott's corset and winced when she saw her lover's pained expression in the mirror. "Too tight?"

"Wearing it at all is too tight. Honestly, these must have been designed as some form of torture." Agott grumbled and crossed her arms. She glanced over her shoulder reassuringly. "Don't worry, you aren't hurting me."

"As much of a relief as that is, I still feel terrible that you have to wear something so uncomfortable." Coco hummed as she tied the strings and tucked them into the garment. "If I had it my way, you'd be wearing that suit I designed instead."

Agott hummed fondly and turned around to kiss her on the forehead. "And you know I'd choose to wear it if I could. Unfortunately, there isn't yet a world in which a princess can wear such attire in public."

Coco nodded despite the frown on her lips. She perked up slightly when she noticed the book on Agott's dresser. "What's that? A present from Mister Qifrey?"

The princess's face flushed as she cleared her throat. "Yes, that's correct. Pay it no mind; it's merely a book, nothing more to see."

"Surely not. If it's from him, I'm certain it was heartfelt." Coco grinned and attempted to reach for it. Agott side-stepped to block her path. Her cheeks were flushed red with embarrassment.

"Honestly, it's nothing. Completely frivolous. You needn't look any further."

"Just a quick peek!"

"Please, I *insist"*

"Don't be shy!"

"*Coco!"*

Coco giggled as she managed to grab the book, glancing down at the cover. She paused momentarily as she tried to process what it was. Then, her eyes lit up. "Is this a *romance?"*

Agott coughed and snatched it back. "It doesn't matter what it is. Just something i read as a pastime. Honestly, it's childish."

"That's not childish; it's cute! C'mon, just a quick look?" Coco pleaded with her hands clasped together.

The princess scowled as her ears burned hot, the book still clutched tight against her chest. She begrudgingly grumbled and held the book out towards her. “Only if you promise not to laugh.”

“I could never,” Coco assured with a warm smile as she turned the cover over and skimmed the back. A third installment of a series with a knight and a beautiful noblewoman on the cover. From her glimpse at the synopsis, she could tell it was indeed a romance. “I didn’t know you liked this sort of thing. Not that I’m judging! I just don’t think I’d have guessed.”

Agott sighed and touched the edge of the pages. “I’m not particularly inclined to any one genre, but im afraid I’ve grown somewhat attached to this particular series. I first stumbled upon it when the first book got mixed into a shipment of study materials a few years before we met. I sort of…” She trailed off and blushed a deeper shade of red.

Coco nodded expectantly, her gaze patient as it was intrigued. Agott sighed and shook her head.

“I guess I sort of liked to imagine that I was the dashing knight,” She mumbled and pushed a curl behind her ear. “In the story, he ends up softening when he meets a beautiful woman while on duty. He sneaks away to see her, and the two fall in love. He doesn’t let his pride or duty stop him from trying to be with the person he loves, but he doesn’t change his morals along the way either. The books are ongoing, but I’ve always been curious as to what he and the leading lady will end up deciding for themselves. Part of me hopes there's a solution in which they can both be happy, even if it’s unrealistic.”

A hand on Agott’s shoulder, coupled with a gentle kiss on her cheek, broke her from her embarrassment. Coco smiled and leaned close. “I think that's wonderful. I haven’t even read it, and I can’t help but root for them myself. Perhaps you can lend it to me sometime?”

Agott smiled despite her surprise and nodded. “Of course, ask for them any time you’d like.”

“That aside, we should finish getting you ready. Wait here while I go grab some thread, okay? I’d like to touch up this part of your sleeve before the ball.” Coco gestured to the hem of her gown.

“Ah, yes, of course. I’ll finish getting myself ready in the meantime.” Agott slumped slightly (or as much as she could in a corset) as the weight of the coming ball pushed down on her.

Coco seemed to take notice and tapped her chin in contemplation. She leaned in towards Agott’s ear after a moment. “For the record? I think you’d make a dashing knight.” Without a moment’s further hesitation, she hurried off to retrieve her sewing kit.

Agott’s face burned even deeper than before, and the tailor giggled as she slipped out the door and into the hall.

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After a few last-minute touch-ups, Agott made her way to the head of the ballroom. She'd done this plenty of times before, and yet it never failed to make her nervous. Standing there without her mother by her side felt more than wrong.

Guards flanked her sides, and Qifrey was somewhere just down the hall getting ready himself. Coco would surely be just about ready by now. Richeh and Tetia would find their way to the ballroom not long after. She wasn't alone in this.

And yet, standing beside the empty throne where her mother was supposed to be, she felt impossibly lonely.

A fanfare outside announced the start of the ball, and nobles began to trickle in and fill up the space with chatter and movement. Agott took a deep breath and tried to steel herself for the time to come. It was one simple night. Surely she had endured far worse than this.

It was nothing she couldn't handle.

Despite attempting to keep herself separated from the main body of the event, it did nothing to deter guests from approaching her. Within the first ten minutes, more introductions had been made than she'd had in years all at once, and she'd completely lost track of all the names on her dance card. Dismay settled over her as she began looking around the room for any opportunity to escape.

A flash of pink curls somewhere towards the entrance of the ballroom caught her eye, and she immediately relaxed. If Tetia had already arrived, it wouldn't be unlikely that Richeh and Coco would be close behind.

Agott excused herself from the noble couple who were trying to make small talk to slip away into the crowd, but a hand on her shoulder caused her to freeze.

"Your Royal Highness." Deanreldy smiled as the princess turned around to face him.

Agott quickly hid her dismay with a practiced expression of neutrality. A smile felt far too difficult. "Your Majesty, it's a pleasure to see you this evening. I trust the journey treated you well?"

King Deanreldy nodded and tilted his head to the side ever so slightly. "Yes, naturally. I must say, there's something so refreshing about traveling to a smaller kingdom. It truly does cause one to reflect. Ah, but enough about that. Eoleo?" He stepped aside and allowed his son to come forward.

Eoleo looked exactly how one would imagine a fairytale Prince Charming. A kind, practiced smile, shiny hair, and bright eyes. His suit was expertly tailored and embellished with his family's crest.

It was almost enough to cause Agott to scoff.

It wasn't that she had something against Eoleo in particular; it was more that she had no such taste for men of any kind. If anything, she'd much preferred to have been Prince Charming in those stories herself.

"Your Highness." Eoleo bowed at the neck and took her hand, pressing a soft kiss to the top of it.

Ok, *now* she had something against Eoleo in particular.

Agott smiled through gritted teeth as Eoleo straightened back up without releasing her hand. The boy spoke with the same calculated tone as his father. "It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance once more."

"Likewise." Agott lied easily despite the slight pinch between her brows.

“How wonderful to see the two of you getting along. After all, it’s quite an important time for you both to get to know each other, what with your engagement.” Deanreldy clasped his hands behind his back as he looked down on Agott. The princess could feel her blood beginning to boil.

From a few paces away, Tetia peeked around the crowd of people to try to see what was happening. Her eyes landed on Eoleo first, causing her to pause, then flickered over to Agott. *Oh,* that was *not* a pleased expression on her face. She bit her thumb as she tried to think of a way to intervene before things escalated.

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“Is the fit ok? It’s not too tight, is it?” Coco circled her friend as Richeh finished adjusting her dress.

Richeh shook her head. “Not too tight. You have all my measurements, so why wouldn’t it?”

“You never know with these sorts of things until you try them on. I had to do a few finishing touches on Agott’s gown just this morning. Hold your arm out for me for a second?” Coco explained as she tucked her needle between her lips and cut off a small amount of thread. She fixed a loose stitch with careful fingers before trimming off the excess. “Alright, done! I think we should head over to the ball now if you’re ready. I don’t want to leave Agott stranded for too long.”

Richeh paused as Coco began to make her way towards the door, lagging slightly behind. It wasn’t long before Coco noticed she wasn't following and turned back around. “Sorry,” She mumbled quietly.

Coco shook her head and crossed back to where she was standing, resting a hand on her shoulder. “Don’t apologize. Is this about how things were at the party yesterday?”

A hesitant nod told her all she needed to know, and Coco immediately pulled her into a hug. “It’s ok. I promise I’m going to try to do better to be more present as your friend. I think us being there would mean the world to Agott, and if you’re willing, I think we should try to support her.”

Richeh exhaled through her nose and nodded. “Promise I can leave if I hate it?”

“Of course,” Coco giggled, “Whenever you’d like. Just give it a try. Who knows? Maybe Euini will be there. You get along with him, right?”

Richeh huffed and looked away with a shrug, but Coco nudged her shoulder playfully. The two girls made their way out of the room and down the hall towards the ballroom.

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The ballroom was decorated as lavishly as it was all those years ago at the first ball Coco had ever attended. The twinkling of the chandeliers combined with the candlelight and excited chatter of the attendees created a warm and buzzing atmosphere that felt almost contagious. Richeh seemed to notice the starstruck look in her friend's eyes and began to tease her. “You’ve lived in the palace all this time, and you’re still so stunned by the ballroom?”

“Shush!” Coco blushed and held her finger to her lips despite the smile on her face. ‘That’s different! I’m only allowed in certain areas of the palace, so I think I’m allowed to be a little taken aback, thank you very much.” She let her vision roam across the wave of gowns and suits as she held back an excited squeal. “Royal balls really are something else! I wonder if my mom made any of these?”

Richeh hummed and shrugged, clearly not nearly as impressed as her friend was with the amount of fanfare. She was just about to slink away to the side to check out the refreshments when she felt a tap on her shoulder, followed by a timid voice.

“Lady Richeh? Is that you?”

Richeh turned around and came face to face with Euini. He had grown quite a bit since she'd last seen him, though half his face was still hidden behind his bangs the same way they were all those years ago.

"Euini," Richeh addressed him casually without curtsying. She tilted his head to try and meet his eyes, but to little avail.

Hearing his name seemed to immediately fluster him, as he flinched and hurriedly fixed his bangs. Coco giggled and gave Richeh a small thumbs-up. "I'm going to go get something to drink, but it's good to see you again, Lord Euini! We'll talk later." She waved to them both before disappearing into the crowd.

Richeh bristled and huffed as her friend so quickly abandoned her side, but turned her full attention back to the blushing mess of a boy before her. The two stood in a relatively awkward silence before Richeh narrowed her eyes at him. "Did your father drag you here like he did last time?"

Euini flinched again, curling in on himself. He cleared his throat and shook his head. "Ah- no. Not exactly." He looked up at her like he intended to say more, but only swallowed thickly.

"… Hmp," Richeh narrowed her eyes further and turned away. "If you can't say what you want, then I'm not going to wait around."

"Wait-!" His hand contacted her shoulder. As she glanced back to look at him, she paused. He had brushed his hair slightly to the side, one eye making contact with her own. He took a deep breath and continued on his exhale. "Actually, I came in hopes of seeing *you* again."

Richeh tilted her head to the side at his sudden surge of confidence. "What made you think to look for me here? I'm not a Nobel."

"Yes, well, it's where we originally met, is it not?" I just thought if you'd been invited before, there was a good chance you'd be invited again, so…" He trailed off and wrung out his hands. His head dropped down as he stared at the floor. "I'm sorry, truly. I'd have asked for your address so I could write to you, but admittedly I was too nervous. At any rate, it seems whenever we cross paths, something dramatic seems to happen that keeps me from gathering my courage anyway."

The girl blinked before smiling softly despite herself. "Maybe you should ask sooner rather than later, then."

"Of course, you're right." Euini straightened up and shook himself off. "Lady Richeh, if it isn't too much trouble, might I be able to have your address? I should very much like to write, should you be so open to it."

Richeh thought about it before nodding. She looked around before shrugging. “I haven’t any paper. Do you think you could remember it?”

The boy nodded enthusiastically in agreement. Once addresses were exchanged, he visibly relaxed. “Thank you; you don’t know how long I’ve been waiting to ask you that.”

“A few years, if I’m not mistaken.” Richeh began to walk towards the refreshments with Euini in tow. “In all honesty, I’m surprised you still remember me after so long, much less that you have been meaning to ask to be penpals for such a span of time.”

“I believe you’ll find from my perspective that you are quite difficult to forget.” Euini hid his flushed complexion under his bangs as he watched her hesitate to select something from the table. “Is everything alright? Nothing to your liking?”

Richeh frowned and crossed her arms. ‘Quite the contrary. I can't start eating yet because I’m *waiting*.”

“Waiting..? What for?” Euini asked obliviously.

Richeh frowned, looked at the dancefloor, then back at him pointedly.

“Oh…*oh!* Of course, forgive me.” Euini stammered as he collected himself. “Would you do me the honor of having this dance?”

Satisfied, Richeh nodded and took his hand. His hand rested on her waist while hers found its way to his shoulder as they waited for the music. “You’ve gotten more confident,” she observed.

“Yes, well, I’ve had a few years to practice, my lady.” A small smile finally pulled at his lips.

A few additional couples made their way to the center of the ballroom as the musicians prepared to begin playing. The two glanced around the room, unsure if they should make eye contact or not. Finally, Richeh broke the silence.

“You forget I’m a commoner. You needn’t refer to me as a lady.” She glanced back at him.

Euini promptly shook his head. “It feels wrong to not address you as such, commoner or not. You are a lady, aren’t you? Your class shouldn't matter.”

The music finally started, and the dance began.

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Coco smiled as she glanced towards where Richeh and Euini were standing as she sipped her drink. In all honesty, her heart leaped with excitement at the idea of getting to dance with Agott
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in the same manner. Perhaps she was a bit *too* lost in thought, as she yelped when arms suddenly flung around her.

“Coco! You have to come right now; it's an *emergency!”* Tetia whispered into her ear.

Coco blinked and set down her glass so as not to drop it. Her mind raced with possibilities as she tried to decipher what was wrong. “An emergency? What happened?” She glanced around th ballroom for any signs of unrest, but found nothing out of the ordinary.

Tetia whined and began pulling on her arm as she dragged her towards the head of the ballroom. “It’s a disaster! Well, not yet, but it’s going to be if we don't do something!”

“What kind of disaster? What’s wrong?” Coco tried to coax out more information as she was pulled by her sleeve through the crowd.

The princess stopped abruptly before cupping a hand around her ear and whispering frantically. “I saw Agott talking to a prince, and she looks seconds away from snapping. I don’t know about you, but I am *not* ready for the Arklaum Kingdom to go to war with Ezrest because Agott *punched their heir in the face!”*

“Agott’s pretty level-headed; I can’t imagine that she’d…” Coco finally caught a glimpse of her lover, and sure enough, the expression on her face was unmistakable. “**Oh.** Yeah, what do we do?”

Tetia pulled Coco off to the side to avoid being seen, looking around to ensure they weren't being watched as she lowered her voice to a whisper. “Alright, operation ‘prevent Agott from ruining the Ezrest and Arklaum alliance’ is a go. It’s not the best code name I’ve ever come up with, but we’re on a serious time crunch here. Since I’m royalty, it’s unlikely that the king is able to completely ignore me, so I’ll try to take his attention away for as long as I can. You swoop in and try to get Agott’s attention before anything dramatic happens. Sound good?”

“That sounds good to me. Are you sure you’ll be alright handling the king?” Coco whispered back as they huddled behind a marble pillar.

“Trust me, I’ll be fine! I’m really, really good at talking.” Tetia grinned and gave a thumbs-up. “Your job is a bit harder. Not only do you need to get Agott’s attention, but you’ll also need to find a way to do so without getting the prince’s attention. Breaking her concentration is one thing, but it’ll be up to Agott to make herself an excuse to actually get out of there.”

The two girls nodded and peeked around either side of the pillar to see what they were working with. The ballroom was incredibly crowded, and they’d have to cross the room to make it over to where the king was standing.

“How exactly do we get over there? Should we sneak around the perimeter?” Coco tilted her head and narrowed her eyes.

“Oh, that’s easy!” Tetia pulled her back behind the pillar. “Just follow my lead, ok?”

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Qifrey sighed as he made his way back from the refreshments table, two flutes of wine in hand. He’d been dodging small talk all night with mixed rates of success. Honestly, if he’d known becoming a royal tutor would result in this much socializing, perhaps he’d have opted for a different career path.

Those who knew him as a child would have described him as ‘*unapproachable’* at best (though Olruggio may have begged to differ), and while he was somewhat known for his mildly pleasant and amicable personality as an adult, he also had a reputation for slipping away as soon as the conversation would permit it.

The only person he could be found openly conversing with was Olly. Tonight should have been no different.

Finding the other man always proved to be quite a task. He tended to get swept up in social pleasantries from nobles of all different walks, many trying to get on his good side in exchange for favors further down the line, but others simply wanting to enjoy his company and conversation. The downside of having such a wonderful man at his side was that it seemed half
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the kingdom was *dying* to sink their claws into him. Qifrey had never been terribly good at sharing.

His eyes lit up as he finally spotted that familiar deep blue cloak Olruggio preferred to don at these sorts of events. Qifrey wove his way through the crowd with the wine held up so as not to spill it when bumping into anyone. As soon as he reached Olruggio's side, he smiled warmly. "Forgive me, my friend. They were just running out of flutes when I made it to the table. I was lucky enough to snag your favorite, so I do hope to be forgiven."

Olruggio hummed and looked over his shoulder, accepting the wine graciously and swirling it slightly in his hand. "You know me too well. Ah, of course. Qifrey, you remember Hieheart."

Qifrey's pleasant expression fell immediately, though he attempted to mask it just as soon as he felt it drop. He glanced up, and sure enough, Hieheart was grinning ear to ear with his own glass of wine in hand.

Objectively, there was nothing *wrong* with Hieheart. He had attended the same school as their underclassman many years ago, and was pleasant enough. Given the chance, he had even attempted to make friendly conversation on a few occasions. No, the trouble with Hieheart wasn't his personality at all. The trouble with Hieheart was that he was so-

"I must say, the wine they're serving tonight is the best I've had in ages." Hieheart placed a casual hand on Olruggio's shoulder.

-touchy.

"Yes, well, I'll have to see for myself." Qifrey smiled through gritted teeth as he placed his own hand on Olruggio's opposite shoulder. "It's been a while since we've seen you, hasn't it? Do tell me what you've busied yourself with all this time."

Olruggio blinked as he glanced between both of their hands before staring straight ahead and taking a long sip of wine.

Hieheart laughed and had a drink himself. "I've forgotten how funny you were! Yes, I suppose it has been quite some time. My ward, Jujy, keeps me busy when I'm not dealing with estate affairs. I must say, though, it's been far longer since I've talked to you than since I've talked to Predis Olruggio."

"Oh?" Qifrey maintained a neutral expression despite raising an eyebrow. "How so? There hasn't been a ball in some years now, and I don't believe there has been another occasion for the two of you to connect since."

"There hasn't! That's why I'm so glad to be able to exchange letters."

“The two of you are pen pals, then?” Qifrey’s grip on Olruggio's shoulder tightened imperceptibly. “How quaint.”

Hieheart only grinned as he took another drink from his flute. Olruggio cast a sideways glance toward the silver-haired man, mumbling just loudly enough to be heard over the music and ambient noise of the ballroom. “Ease up a bit, yeah? He doesn’t mean anything by it.”

“It truly is a shame we aren’t able to meet up more often. It would be nice to get together sometime,” Hieheart offered.

Qifrey lowered his hand from Olruggios' shoulder and slipped it around his waist. “Truly a shame indeed. Oh well, what can be done?”

Olruggio sighed, his face flushing ever so slightly at the touch. He turned his head towards Hiehert. “Has your ward accompanied you tonight, or am I mistaken?” An urgent attempt to divert attention away from him.

Hieheart immediately perked up and looked around. “As a matter of fact, she has! Though I seem to have lost sight of her…”

“Right here!” A voice from behind Qifrey piped up. The three men all looked toward the sound. Jujy grinned and hurried over to her guardian's side. “Sorry about that! I turned around, and you were gone!”

Qifrey seemed to soften ever so slightly as Hieheart removed his hand from Olruggio's shoulder and turned his attention to the young girl. “Sorry about that! I saw Olruggio and had to take my chance. It’s honestly a nightmare trying to get anyone's attention at large events like this.”

Jujy sighed and crossed her arms. “Honestly, I can’t take my eyes off you for a second.”

Hieheart chuckled and rubbed his neck. He glanced back up to meet Qifrey’s gaze. “You're one of Agott’s tutors, the same as Olruggio, yes? I’d imagine you have your hands full. I can udnerstand the pressure of looking after a student.”

“Well, I must admit, I’ve been carrying my fair share of responsibilities as of late.” Qifrey exhaled with a smile.

It was at that exact moment that both Coco and Tetia hurried past them through the dead center of the crowd.

“…Speaking of which, there go two of said responsibilities now.”

Tetia charged full speed across the ballroom, paying little to no mind to the crowd she was racing through. Coco struggled to keep up as she weaved around impossibly large bustles and groups of nobles chatting over their wine flutes. There was no time to waste, not even for a more stealthy approach.

Coco gasped as a woman suddenly stepped backward, cutting her off from Tetia completely. She struggled to poke her head around or squeeze through, but to little avail.

Having not noticed the loss of her friend, Tetia reached the king first. She narrowly stopped short of slamming directly into his back as she huffed and struggled to catch her breath.

King Deanreldy raised an eyebrow and turned to face the source of the commotion. His eyes cast downward at the princess as he plastered on his charming (yet equal parts condescending) smile. “I’m terribly sorry, can I help you? Princess Tetia, if I’m not mistaken?”

In an instant, Tetia regrouped as if she had never been out of breath at all. She jolted upright, curtsied, and began to ramble as fast as she could. “Your Majesty, it’s such a pleasure to make your acquaintance this evening. Is it evening yet? I should assume so given how dark it is outside. It’s such a wonderful occasion to be able to attend a ball in the Arklaum kingdom again, is it not?”

Deanreldy’s eye twitched as he strained to keep a smile on his face. “I’m sorry, could you repeat that? Perhaps a bit slower this time?”

“Oh, pardon me! What was that? It’s just so difficult to hear you over the music! Speaking of which, it’s quite lovely, isn’t it? I haven’t heard a musician quite so gifted with a harp since my first ever ball many years ago. It truly is such a lovely, classic sound. Do you have any such taste for music? Wait, don’t answer that. Let’s step away somewhere quieter first!” Tetia babbled and grabbed onto his forearm before leading him goodness knows where.

Agott blinked in surprise as she noticed her friend attempting to drag the king by the sleeve of his coat away from her and Eoleo. The sight was almost comical, and brought the tiniest of smiles to her face as she stifled a laugh. Eoleo was, decidedly, less amused than she was.

The prince cleared his throat. “Agott.”

Agott snapped out of her temporarily good mood. Her eyes narrowed in anticipation as she watched him take on a similar expression to that of his father. How long had she been entertaining this conversation for? It felt like it must have been hours.

Eoleo’s smile never faltered, even as he spoke. “It’s alright if I call you by your name instead of your title, isn’t it? After all, we’ll be husband and wife one day.”

Oh, she could have vomited on his shoes.

“I suppose so, your highness.” The princess swallowed back her distaste as she stared him down with a simmering rage in the pit of her stomach.

“Oh, please. Eoleo is just fine.” He chuckled and raised a gloved hand to his chest. “Let's do away with the formalities altogether. Now, if I’m not mistaken, today is your sixteenth birthday.”

Agott barely suppressed a scoff. She knew he was trying to play coy, but it was quite literally a ball thrown in that exact honor. “You’d be correct in that.”

“Well, allow me to extend my sincerest well wishes. I hope you’ll find the year to come most fulfilling.” Eoleo bowed his head ever so slightly.

It was innocent enough, and yet somehow so deeply disturbing. Agott took the rare moment of having his eyes off of her to scrunch up her nose. She quickly returned to neutral the moment he straightened back up. “Thank you, you’re most kind.”

Eoleo chuckled and lowered his hand. “Well wishes aren’t the only thing I should like to offer you this evening. Please, one moment.”

Agott watched curiously as the prince produced something from the satchel hanging at his hip.

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Coco finally managed to push her way through the crowd, looking around to try and gather her bearings. She was very nearly out of breath and more disoriented than she’d like to admit; it was far too easy to get yourself turned around in a setting such as this one. Her gaze finally landed on a familiar silhouette of the one person she could find in any crowd, no matter the size or distance.

She smiled despite the circumstances as she hurried over towards Agott. No sight of King Deanreldy anywhere; Tetia was just as efficient and effective in her plan as she had hoped her to be. All that was left was reaching the girl she loved. Twenty feet, maybe less.

From where she was, the prince had his back to Coco while Agott was facing her. Tetia was right; she did look like she had just about reached the last thread of her patience.

The prince had turned away from Agott to rummage through his bag, but Coco paid it little mind. Whatever it was, it didn’t matter. The most important thing now was getting Agott far away from the scrutinizing eyes of the ballroom so she could calm down in peace.

Coco was barely ten feet away when the prince finally procured the item from his bag.

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Agott’s heart sank so fast, it may as well have fallen straight onto the floor.

A ring.

A shimmering blue stone, gaudy as anything she'd ever laid her eyes upon, and encapsulated by clusters of other sparkling gems and intricate details. She bit down on her lip hard to prevent tears from springing to her eyes.

"Do you like it?" Eoleo removed the ring from the box and gently took hold of her hand. "The jewelers of the Ezrest kingdom are some of the finest in the world. I realized that despite our engagement, I have yet to provide you with a symbol of our alliance. I do hope you'll accept it not only as a birthday gift, but also as my most devoted promise to someday rule by your side."

If Agott was nauseous before, now she was downright sick.

Every instinct in her body told her to run away. Tell him off, laugh in his face, find the woman she loved somewhere in the crowd and hold on as tightly as she could.

Even so, she thought of her mother. She thought of the kingdom she loved.

It was only a ring. Coco would understand, right? A gemstone on her finger meant nothing in the face of all the love in her heart and everything she had endured. Agott swallowed her heart and allowed her head to nod.

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Five feet away. Coco was only *five measly feet away* as she watched helplessly while Eoleo slid a ring onto Agott's finger.

Her logic was screaming in the back of her mind. *'She doesn't have a choice. It's not what she wants. Go to her anyway.'*

Those thoughts were drowned out by the sound of her pulse in her ears. Her face burned hot as her vision blurred with unshed tears. She didn't reach out. Instead, she shrank back into the crowd until it swallowed her whole.

Five feet away. Then ten. Then twenty.

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Agott's hand felt impossibly heavy, if not from the jewels themselves, then from their implication. She finally gathered herself enough to lift her head, only to be met with the sight of Eoleo. Only Eoleo, and no one else.

The requirements for being a royal guard were straightforward. Remain vigilant, be unwavering in your loyalty, and protect the crown at any given cost. There wasn't a man alive who took those guidelines more seriously than Easthies.

It wasn't that he was particularly devoted to any specific person or even to the crown in general. Despite his obvious protectiveness over Queen Adina and his duty to the late king before his passing, Easthies' priorities weren't tied to a person. Duty was the man's one and only muse.

Tonight was no different than any ball he had attended in the past: he was to stand at the head of the ballroom and keep watch for any suspicious persons while the rest of the knights were scattered amongst the crowd. Luluci had been shadowing Princess Agott since the doors opened, and one of the twins was stationed at the entrance. Galga was somewhere in the thick of the crowd, which left only one person to stand guard beside Easthies.

"Geez, how do all those people not get bored standing around all night? You'd think it would get old after a few hours, but it just drags on and on." Utowin yawned and leaned against his spear as if it were the only thing holding him upright. His eyes were drooping as he lazily scanned the crowd. He was seconds away from practically drifting off where he stood when a sharp pain struck the top of his foot, causing him to yelp.

"Eyes open," Easties snapped as he withdrew his spear. "Or have you forgotten your duty so easily?"

Utowin grumbled and shook off his foot. "No need to turn your weapons against *me.* What, has the multi-year dry spell from any action made you this antsy? Or are you just that eager to put me back in my place?"

Easthies shot him a withering glare as he stood at perfect attention. "It's too quiet."

"I'd say it's just about anything but. How do they even make a lute that loud?" Utowin rubbed his ear with his free hand before sparing a glance over at the deputy commander. Easthies' eyes had locked onto something, or rather someone, distant in the crowd. "What? Pretty noble caught your eye?"

No response. Utowin leaned over and waved his hand in front of the other man's face, only for it to be slapped away.

"Who's guarding Queen Adina's chambers?" Easthies demanded.

Utowin thought about it before shrugging. "One or two of the recruits? Most of us are here watching Her Highness or keeping the ball in order. Why?"

“The air doesn’t feel right.” Easthies shook his head. “There’s something we’re *missing.”* He scoured the crowd. Nobles in their circles of conversation, couples dancing along with the music, and servants busy keeping refreshments well stocked.

Then, out of the corner of his eye, a figure caught his attention. Slinking around the side of the room before disappearing behind a pillar. When they didn’t emerge from the other side, Easthies snapped his head towards Utowin. “Keep an eye on things, and remain calm. Don’t draw any unnecessary attention. *I need to check on the queen,* ***now****.”*

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“And that’s not even my *favorite* kind of custard tart! You can make them with elderberries, blueberries, and even whipped toppings! But my favorite just has to be the strawberry ones. They’re so sweet and sugary!” Tetia prattled on and on as Deanreldy struggled to keep a smile on his face. His lower eyelid twitched as he nodded along to her story.

“Yes, how very…enlightening.” The king cleared his throat and glanced over his shoulder back at his son, suddenly caring far less about keeping up appearances. From the looks of it, Eoleo had already presented the ring to Agott. A more genuine smile crept onto his face. Good, everything goes as planned.

Tetia, frustrated with the fact that her diversion was becoming less effective, huffed and crossed her arms. “It’s rude to look away from a lady when she’s talking to you, you know.”

“Yes, well, I beg your pardon, your highness. It’s just that our discussion seems to lack a clear ending point.” Deanreldy fought not to roll his eyes as he glanced back at her. Movement caught his attention as a figure slipped behind the pillar, just slightly behind and to the left of Tetia. Strangely enough, it almost seemed as though the wall behind the pillar had swallowed the person up.

Or, perhaps more reasonably, as though it had *opened.*

How very interesting.

“I’m terribly sorry, Princess Tetia, but I must excuse myself.” Deanreldy nodded and waved his hand before pushing past her in the direction of the pillar.

Tetia sputtered and tried to regain his attention, but to no avail. She pinched the bridge of her nose and slowly deflated. She began mumbling to herself in defeat. “That better have been enough time, Coco. I stalled for as long as I could. Men are just so *rude!”*

The princess busied herself with finding somewhere to sit down for a bit when she felt a light tap on her shoulder. She turned around expecting to see Coco or Agott, but instead came face to face with a girl she didn’t recognize.
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“Hello, your highness!” The girl smiled and curtsied before lifting her head. “My name is Jujy. I hope you don’t mind, but I noticed you were alone and thought I might take the opportunity to introduce myself.”

Tetia lit up and grabbed both of her hands excitedly. “Not at all! It’s a pleasure to meet you. Please, just Tetia is fine!”

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Qifrey had *very nearly* managed to come up with a good enough excuse for himself and Olruggio to slip away, but Heiheart was either as stubborn as he was or twice as oblivious. Every excuse was met with quiet dismissal.

“I’m becoming quite tired.”

“Very well, let us have a seat together.”

“Oh dear me, Jujy must be growing quite bored of our conversation.”

“She can go off on her own, then. No worries! She’s quite independent.”

“...It seems Olruggio has run out of wine.”

“He can have mine, then!”

Qifrey could have pulled his hair out. He had every chance to remove himself; the trouble was getting a window for Olruggio to follow. An excuse was on the very tip of his tongue about an urgent request he’d remembered some nonexistent noble making, insisting he bring Olruggio over to discuss important matters, but his train of thought was cut short when he saw a glimpse of green hair in the near crowd. He turned his head on instinct to see Coco’s face twisted up in dismay. His heart dropped.

No time for excuses now; there was a real matter to attend to. Qifrey shook his head and turned to his lover and Heihart. “I’m terribly sorry, but something has come up. Olruggio, I’ll come find you later. It was nice catching up.”
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Jujy and Tetia had found a spot away from the dance floor, giggling and gossiping among themselves as if they'd known each other for years. Jujy leaned over so she could whisper despite the room being far too loud for anyone to possibly overhear. "You distracted the king for how long? And it actually worked?"

"At least a good ten minutes!" Tetia beamed with pride and put her hands on her hips. "It was nothing really. Being a good diversion is a valuable asset to have."

"I'm just surprised you didn't run out of things to talk about. Did he even get a word in edgewise?" Jujy snickered as she covered her mouth.

Tetia shook her head and shrugged. "Hardly. Not that it mattered; I don't think I could *ever* run out of things to talk about."

Jujy nodded along before glancing across the room, leaning backward to try and see if she could make out Agott and Eoleo from where they were standing. Sure enough, she could see the princess suffering through making small talk with the prince. She wrinkled her nose and shook her head. "Honestly, from what you've told me, I don't blame her for not wanting anything to do with him. I can't imagine what it would be like to be married off so young, especially if there's already someone else you love."

The pink-haired princess nodded and rested her cheek in her hand. "Being a princess comes with a set of rules and expectations. No matter how much you glamorize it or make the most of your situation, you're someone else's to trade away when all is said and done." Tetia sighed and shook her head. "Not that being a prince is much better."

"Even so, being a prince has to have a few more perks, right? Getting to learn to fight, having more freedom over your future and all?" Jujy waved her hand with a flourish as if gesturing to Eoleo.

Tetia frowned and looked back towards Eoleo. "Not exactly."

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"Coco?"

A calm voice caused her to jolt in surprise, snapping her head around to face whoever it had come from. Coco wiped her eyes despite tears welling back up immediately to replace the ones she had just dabbed away. Her hands trembled slightly as she refused to meet his gaze head-on. "Mister Qifrey."

Qifrey looked around for somewhere quiet to guide her to so they could talk, but found no obvious solution. He bit his thumb and wracked his brain for any ideas. Ultimately, he began to gently guide her towards one of the small balconies. "It's alright, my dear. Come with me for a second? I promise I won't keep you long; perhaps some fresh air will do us both some good."
~~~

The further away from the music of the ballroom, the more the sound of hitching breath and soft cries filled Qifrey's ears. His chest ached with every quiet sniffle and whimper as he focused solely on gently guiding the young girl somewhere she could calm down.

The night air was cool, and the sky was more cloudy than it was moonlit, but it was blissfully quiet. Coco's trembling had turned to full-on shivers as her choked-back emotions clashed with the evening chill. Qifrey removed his cloak without hesitation and draped it around her shoulders. "There we are; a bit warmer, I should hope. Agott would surely have my head should I allow you to get sick."

His attempt at a lighthearted jest quickly backfired as the mere mention of Agott's name pushed forward a fresh wave of tears. The professor stiffened and crouched down to begin damage control. "No, no, it's alright! I'm terribly sorry to have upset you further. Please," He reached into his pocket and produced his handkerchief. The moment Coco laid eyes on it, she only cried harder. Qifrey furrowed his brow and covered his eyes. "Oh, goodness, I'm only making it worse. Perhaps I ought to give you some space to-"

Before he could straighten back up, Coco had flung her arms around him in a tight hug. She hiccuped around her words as he clung to him as if his life depended on it. "No, please. Don't -*hic*- go!"

Qifrey softened and cautiously began rubbing her back in slow, soothing circles. "I won't," he assured her. "I'll stay as long as you need."

For a long while, he held her gently as she buried her face in his shoulder, trying to stop tears that just kept coming. Qifrey remained quiet for fear of saying the wrong thing. If she needed to talk, he'd let her initiate.

After a few more minutes of allowing herself to be held, Coco lifted her face from his shirt and looked at him with the most heartbroken expression he'd ever seen. "Agott…Eoleo gave her a *ring."*

His heart sank as he took in her words. How terrible to be so young and so in love. "Is that right?" He sighed and glanced back towards the ballroom. Such things were, unfortunately, not beyond what he had anticipated would happen. Though he had hoped to delay such an outcome as long as possible, the two were engaged. He looked back at Coco and cupped her cheek. "How are you feeling?"

It would be useless to state the obvious: she was deeply upset. However, it was far beyond him to put words in someone else's mouth. Anger, betrayal, jealousy, sadness…whatever it was, he would listen.

Coco sniffled and wiped her eyes once more with the sleeve of her gown. The lump in her throat refused to go away no matter how many times she swallowed. Her attempts to talk around it left her words hoarse and quiet. “I don’t know. It’s all a mess in my head.”

Qifrey nodded and squeezed her shoulder to offer silent support, nodding along. “You don’t have to make sense of it right now, but if there's anything you want to get off your chest, I find having an open ear can lessen that weight.”

A quick glance back to the ballroom forced Coco to swallow once more before she continued, hands wrung together. “When I saw her with a ring on her finger, I was jealous. I thought it should have been me standing there with her, and that she would be happier if I was. But then…” Her voice wavered as her vision blurred once more. “I thought about everything I can’t give to her. I’m not a strong knight that can protect her, nor am I a prince or a princess.” Coco’s tears morphed into something deeper; something bitter and defeated all the same. Her voice had risen before she registered it. “I’m not even noble-born! All I can offer her are my words and my work, and thats not enough to save her. What can I do? How can I watch her slip away from me? How can I let myself sit idly by and be helpless while she suffers? She deserves the world, and I can offer so little of it!”

By the time she was done, tears had dried on her cheeks, leaving her face flushed and twisted in anguish. Her hands were balled into fists at her sides as she looked helplessly towards the ballroom she had fled from.

For a long moment, Qifrey said nothing. His own expression had shifted from worry and settled into understanding. “Are you angry with yourself?”

Coco’s breath caught as she looked up at him with wide, wet eyes. She choked back her guilt and nodded.

The professor rested both hands on her shoulders as he remained crouched down to be at eye level. “I can’t speak for Agott, but I did watch her grow up. I can tell you firsthand that the first thing she seeks out when given the chance is your presence. She doesn’t need a knight, and she doesn’t need a noble. She chose *you*. If you’re feeling defeated, jealous, or even angry, that only means you love her enough to want to hold onto her.” Qifrey wiped the remaining dampness from her cheek before pulling her close. “You don’t need to give her the world; you only need to lend her your strength. But if you cannot accept yourself as you are now, then *fight for it.”*

The winding hallways of a palace are all too easy to get lost in.

At least, that would be true for anyone other than a man like Easthies. The winding turns and dimly lit passages weren't far from being a labyrinth of their own. Far beyond the lavishly decorated halls leading to the ballroom was the intricate network of winding staircases and tucked-away passages that kept the palace running smoothly. Tonight, with all attending staff either catering to the ball or in their respective rooms, it was deadly quiet.

Eathies' steps were absolute and purposeful: there was no room for a single wasted stride when the feeling in his gut only grew in intensity. People didn't just disappear into thin air, and his eyes never failed him. If something was even the slightest bit amiss, he would investigate it thoroughly and snuff it out.

His eyes narrowed as he glared through the darkness, hanging close to one side of the hall as he took advantage of the candlelight. That thick, uneasy feeling in his chest only swelled the closer he got to the queen's chambers. What started as a suspicion only solidified further the closer he drew to the Queen's quarters. Not a soul in sight; only that kind of silence that wraps around you like a thick fog.

As he approached the final turn leading to Adina's chambers, his grip on his spear tightened instinctively.

No time for hesitation.

His guard was up before his body fully emerged from around the corner; his feet staggered ever so slightly and his weight split evenly between them. The slight raise of his spear quickly lowered as he finished scanning the empty hall. No one there.

Easthies remained on guard, though he allowed himself to relax the muscles in his arms as his cape swept across the floor with each step as he approached the Queen's bedroom door. His shadow loomed over the walls. Regardless of the lack of intruders, he simply would not be satisfied until he ensured Adina's safety with his own eyes. His mind would not quiet so easily until he saw that she was undisturbed.

His hand rested on the cold metal of the doorknob while his other maintained a firm grip on his spear. His wrist began to turn ever so slightly, the latch clicking as he eased the door open, breath held in anticipation…

…Queen Adina was asleep. Her expression was as peaceful as he could have hoped it to be, illuminated solely by what little moonlight remained. Then and only then did the tension in his shoulders ease as the burning in his chest began to fade.

Easthies sighed and turned to shut the door. The same soft *click* of the door closing without issue sounded through the silent corridor as he moved to return to the ballroom. He hadn't so

much as taken a step when he was abruptly slammed back against the door, something cold pressed against his throat.

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Once Coco's tears were dry, she took a deep breath and pulled away from Qifrey's embrace. Her watery eyes shone with a determined light as she looked back towards the ballroom. She took a step forward, then hesitated and glanced back out to Qifrey. "You said to lend her my strength, but what if that's not enough?"

Qifrey hummed, folded his hands in front of him, and offered a kind smile. "There's plenty of time for you to grow. For now, I think you ought to go find Agott. You don't need to save her tonight; you only need to remain by her side. After all, the strongest love is the one that endures"

Coco clenched her fists and nodded before turning on her heels and hurrying back off into the crowd, leaving the professor to lean against the banister and take a moment for himself.

~~~

Easthies grit his teeth as his eyes burned their way through the darkness to stare down his assailant, the cold kiss of steel against his neck digging into his skin as he swallowed. "Dastard*."* He hissed out through clenched teeth. "You show yourself only now? Such lowly tactics, as expected of one of the *brimmed."*

"You'd speak ill of my *tactics* with so little standing between having your words cut out of you?" The faintest shadow of a smile pulled at his assailant's lips as they closed the gap even further. "Your pride will be your undoing."

Easthies stuttered on air as he fought to keep his eyes open. Every shallow breath forced the sharp edge of the blade deeper against his skin, not quite enough to cut, but enough to force his head back ever so slightly. Even at a time like this, his gaze flickered towards the door behind him. His pride would not undo him, but his honor just might.

Both his arms were pinned in place, his spear still desperately clutched in his left hand, useless in this position. Even still, he refused to relent.

In an instant, his knee came up hard against the other man's chest. It was enough to knock him backward slightly, but not quite so forcefully as to free him completely. Regardless, it was all the space he needed.

Easthies jerked his head hard to the left, letting the blade slice shallowly through his skin as he ducked and shifted his footing enough to swing *hard.*

His spear collided with metal as the other man moved to parry. He was fast; that was a given. Even so, Easthies had the advantage at a distance. His spear came down hard once more, aiming through the dark in a calculated attempt to land a singular solid blow. If he could get him down, he could end this before any more blood was shed.

The cloaked figure narrowly dodged, their movements almost inhuman, lunging forward with an extended arm and knocking Easthies backward. He struggled to regain his footing as he very nearly fell backward himself. His next lunge was sloppy and easily disarmed. He struggled to cling to his spear as the sharp crack of the pommel of a dagger collided with his wrist.

Pain shot up his arm as his grip was forced to release, a sickening sort of crack filling his ears as he knelt in pain. The adrenaline pumping through his blood washed away the sting as he reached for his weapon once more. Get up. *Get up.*
His fingers struggled to close around the haft of his spear as his injury made itself known. Just as he had managed to get a grip on his weapon, he watched as the foot of his opponent stepped down on his wrist, the same horrid crunching from earlier making his stomach twist and a fresh jolt of pain shoot down his arm.

Easthie's finger released and curled uselessly as he swallowed back his agony. His vision blurred slightly from the sheer intensity of the pain, though he refused to allow himself to fade out now. Even from his knelt position, he reached for his weapon with his right hand.

A sharp kick to his sternum sent him doubling over and coughing. He barely had time to gather himself before his head was forced back by his hair to look up at the one who had brought him so low.

Deanreldy walked along the sides of the ballroom, his hand brushing gently against the walls as he cast his gaze to the side, ensuring his movements weren't being observed. The knights amongst the crowd had their attention elsewhere, and one of the two scanning from the head of the room had departed a few minutes prior. Such circumstances weren't exactly ideal, but they'd have to suffice.

His hand paused as he felt a slight dip beneath his fingers. Good; if there was one, there were surely more.

He continued on past the crowd until he found himself nearing the very edge of the ballroom, tucked behind one of the many decorative pillars and keeping him conveniently out of sight. Deanreldy paused, took one more glance towards the rest of the room, then pushed.

The wall gave way and opened into a dark passage, but that trivial detail wouldn't matter much to him in the end. He slipped inside and allowed the door to slide shut behind him. Honestly, he'd have thought they'd have had these *sealed off by now.*

It had been quite some time since the king had been able to explore the palace so freely. Just how long had it been, exactly? Well over ten years at least, perhaps even fifteen. The troublesome part of another ruler's untimely death was the heightened caution they took in having guests. Oh well, perhaps not cautious enough to leave such passages available.

Deanreldy meandered through the hall, a hand against the cold, damp stone to guide his path as he searched somewhat aimlessly for the individual that had preceded him. It wasn't so much of a hunt as it was to satisfy his own curiosities. Besides, unnecessary trouble could very well bring such an affair to an end before his son had time to properly acquaint himself with Princess Agott.

A voice in the distance caught his attention. The closer he drew, the more he could make out the telltale sounds of a struggle ensuing. Even then, he did not hurry his pace in the slightest. It was only as he came to the end of the line that he could discern the situation with more clarity.

"Such lowly tactics, as expected of one of the brimmed."

"You'd speak ill of my tactics with so little standing between having your words cut out of you? Your pride will be your undoing."

A smile curled the edges of his lips as he leaned against one of the passage walls, biding his time with great care. It was such a shame; if only he could have gotten a better look.

Within the next few minutes, the distinct sound of weapons clashing had halted. Ot was hard to make out much through the stone, but if someone had won, he ought to ensure it wouldn't prove too…*problematic for him.*

Pressing the passage door open was always a great risk, but it seemed Lady Luck was on his side; one party had their back to him while the other was preoccupied. He slipped behind the nearby corner to get a better look at the situation before he could decide if intervening was worth it.

A quick glance at the scene was all he needed. One of the royal guards was brought to his knees with his assailant looming over him. It would have been almost pitiful had it not been so ironic. He recognized Easthies from his recent visits to the palace as well as from past encounters many years ago. Always so cold and stiff…a pity to see a proud man made so small. And to think he'd almost considered him potentially valuable.

It wouldn't do much good to get in the way now. There had already been a fight, and if he didn't have a hand in it, this would surely bring a pleasant night to an abrupt end if word got out. He very nearly turned to leave and allow the scene to play out when he hesitated. His hand brushed against the small pocket woven into his cloak. Well, it couldn't hurt to cover his bases, could it?

It wasn't strictly necessary to involve himself, though the gears in his head began to turn as a plan settled into place. Very well then. He slipped a small pouch out of his cloak and tucked it into his hand before rounding the corner.

~~~

Easthies coughed and drew in breath, a shaky gasp as he struggled to get air back into his lungs. He jerked his chin away from the hand beneath it, only to have it forced back into place.

"Come now," that sickeningly calm voice practically crooned as they leaned down. Their hood obscured their eyes, but Easthies could vaguely make out their pleased expression. The sight of not so much as a scratch on them only fueled his rage.

The brimmed cloak kept hold of his chin as they brought their dagger back to his bleeding throat, lining up the blade with the shallow wound. "Consider this my act of mercy," they hummed and tilted his head back further. "Is this not what you'd want? I could very well leave you here helpless until it's done. Since you cannot make yourself useful alive, I'll do you a favor. Let's see how useful you are to her in the afterlife, shall we?"

Every instinct he had was screaming at him to struggle. A broken wrist, bruised ribs, a bloodied neck – it was nothing in the face of danger to his queen. So why?

He swallowed against the metal of the blade and closed his eyes tight as he braced himself.

The pain came, but in the way he had imagined. The cold metal of a dagger pulled away from his neck abruptly, and the pressure of a foot on his wrist disappeared as well. He was so sick with adrenaline that he barely registered what had happened until he finally looked up.
~~~

His assailant had been yanked backward and pushed to the ground, a dagger to his own neck in a twist of fate. At the other end of the blade was King Deanreldy himself.

The thick haze of pain was almost enough that Easthies didn't fully comprehend what he was seeing. The immediate danger was gone, and yet the rush of blood in his skull did not lessen for even a second. With his uninjured arm, he bushed himself back to a kneel, gripping his discarded spear with as much strength as he could muster before falling to his feet.

The anger in his expression had twisted his face into a snarl as he lifted the pointed edge to his assailant, eyes locked onto the subdued figure as he struggled to catch his breath through gasps.

"Take it easy," Deanreldy tightened his hold and nodded towards his dagger. "They're down."

Easthies practically hissed as he snapped his head towards the king. "*You.* What have you done straying so far from the ballroom?"

The king smirked as he kept a knee to the brimcloak's back, seemingly unaffected by the entire situation, almost eerily so. "Is that any way to speak to the man who just saved your life? Honestly, shouldn't you stay down for a bit?"

Before the knight could get another word in, someone came hurrying down the adjoining hallway. Easthies immediately resumed his guard and shifted his weight to ready his weapon.

With his back to Deanreldy, the king took a moment's pause before slipping his hand into the pocket of the brim's cloak, opening his palm and allowing something to slip inside.

Utowin rounded the corner, his own spear at the ready as he very nearly collided with the deputy captain. He jumped slightly and put a hand on his chest. "Watch where you *point that thing!* I could have been impaled, y'know!"

The bitterness of Easthies' expression morphed into something closer to annoyance. "Take a look around, you fool. Then tell me again how I'm wrong to be on guard." He winced as he tried to gesture to the king, the hand holding his spear faltering in an instinct to clutch at and stabilize his injury.

Utowin blinked slowly, confusion pulling his brows together before his gaze swept over the rest of the scene. The moment he spotted the familiar brimmed cloak, he clutched his own spear and pointed it towards the suspect.

"There you go." Easthies grumbled as he leaned against the wall in an attempt to remain conscious.

The uninjured knight wasted no time in helping the king restrain the mysterious individual, though their conversation was muffled to Easthies' ears as his vision swam slightly.

"*When did you find them? What happened?"*

“I’m not so sure myself. I was getting some air when I happened upon the incident.”

“Are there others?”

“None that have shown themselves.”

Utowin did his best to restrain the assailant using what he had on hand, and soon enough he had forced them to their feet. Both he and Deanreldy had begun escorting them in the opposite direction when Easthies stepped forward and held out his spear to block their path. “Wait.”

Deanreldy hummed and raised an eyebrow as Utowin slumped his shoulders. “Yeah? What is it? I need to get them detained so we can sweep the premises and alert Regent Bedlaruit that there has been an incident. A little urgency would be appreciated.”

Easthies scowled, his gaze cold enough to silence the other knight temporarily. He turned his attention to the king once more without lifting his spear from its position. “You expect me to believe you were merely taking a leisurely stroll? The timing is far too convenient. Explain yourself; I’ll take no chances with the well-being of this palace.”

“Easthies, did you *hit your head?”* Utowan whisper-shouted as he hurriedly looked between the two of them. “His Majesty appears to have very well saved your life.”

“Appears to have, with emphasis on appears.” The deputy captain tightened his grip. “Have you no suspicions? Leading the assailant towards the correct direction of the dungeons unprompted, carrying a dagger to a formal event?”

Deanreldy smiled calmly without releasing the brimmed cloak. “Come now, I understand you’ve just had a most distressing encounter, but I truly mean no harm. I’ve simply been a guest here enough times to understand the general direction I should be going. You forget there was a time when I frequently made political visits. As for my weapon, surely this whole ordeal has well past justified its possession, has it not?” The king shook his head and sighed. “Though your friend here has a point. You’re looking a bit…” His gaze flickered up and down Easthies’ form. “*Unsteady* on your feet. Perhaps you ought to sit down? I’m certian we can send for a healer.”

“Don’t patronize me,” Easthies hissed despite the slight sway of his gait. Utowin shook his head incredulously and rested his free hand on his shoulder.

“*Eas,”* Utowin whispered firmly, “*sit.”*

The sharp blow to his pride stung more than the injuries he’d sustained as he hesitantly lowered his spear and stepped to the side, his gaze cast firmly downward. Though his suspicions were not yet pacified, he held his tongue.

“Good man.” Deanreldy nodded and turned back to Utowin. “Now, I believe we ought to get a handle on things. Lead the way, would you?”

Utowin nodded and began guiding them forward. “Of course. I’m terribly sorry for his tone, Your Majesty. I assure you, he means no ill will.”

“Oh, please.” Deanreldy cast a glance over his shoulder, a small smile pulling at his lips when neither man could see. “No apologies needed. Think nothing of the matter.”

Easthies didn’t dare look back up as the three rounded the corner once more, leaving him bloodied and beaten against the wall as he slowly slid down to the floor. The sickening vertigo that kept him in its grip refused to lessen as he set down his spear and turned his attention to rolling back his sleeve. The pain of even touching his wrist was blinding, and the appendage itself was horribly swollen and discolored. At the joint, it had bent at an angle far unlike any he could consider to be natural.

There was nothing around to administer first aid with; not that there was much to be done about an injury like that aside from stabilizing it and taking something for the pain. With neither option available to him, he allowed his eyes to slip shut as unconsciousness finally claimed him.

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Coco kept her eyes locked straight ahead as she strode through the ballroom with purpose. Her heart hammered in her chest, but she refused to hesitate any longer. The path through the crowd was winding and may as well have been miles long. Even still, she carried herself forward.

Agott was at the center of the ballroom, one of the night's many dances having just come to an end. Eoleo had her in his arms before they parted and made their way off to the side of the ballroom. Such a sight should have crashed over her with dread, and yet it only fueled her determination.

The last few steps flew by. Twenty feet. Then ten, then five. Four…three…

“Your Highness!”

Two.

“Coco?” Agott immediately perked up and turned around to face the voice.

One.
~~~

Eoleo raised an eyebrow as he turned his head to look over his shoulder. An unfamiliar girl had approached the pair, hands clenched at her sides, and cheeks flushed a dusty pink as she made eye contact with Princess Agott. He cleared his throat pointedly before shifting to fully face the interruption. “Can we help you? Miss…?”

Coco ignored him entirely as she continued to stare at Agott. Silence hung awkwardly between the three of them before she seemed to finally get a grip and shoot out her hand to rest on Agott’s shoulder. “I’m so sorry to interupt, but I need your attention urgently.”

“And just who might you be?” Eoleo prompted once more as his gaze flickered to the contact.

Agott flushed a deeper red than Coco as she froze under the touch. She barely managed to find her voice to reply to the prince. “Your Highness, this is Coco. She’s been serving as my personal tailor for the past few years.”

“...Your tailor?” The prince asked incredulously. “Are you quite so…comfortable with all of your attendants?”

Both girls paid him no mind and focused solely on each other, the ball around them fading into the background. Coco’s eyes dropped down to the ring slipped around Agott’s finger, her expression darkening momentarily before snapping back to determination. She took a deep breath and pointed to Agott’s sleeve. “Your dress seems to have ripped! I’m terribly sorry; perhaps it snagged on something earlier? At any rate, it would simply be unacceptable to allow you to continue your evening before I see that it’s mended.”

Agott blinked in confusion, turning to look at the affected sleeve but finding not a stitch out of place. Before Eoleo could lean over to check for himself, Coco hurriedly covered the spot she had pointed to with both hands. “I’m so sorry to pull you away! I assure you it’ll only be a moment, but I really must borrow Her Highness from you.” She kept one hand firmly covering the sleeve while using the other to lift her own skirt and curtsy to the prince before practically dragging Agott by the arm towards the exit of the ballroom.

Eoleo stood in stunned silence, his brain struggling to catch up to what had happened. He couldn’t manage a single coherent sentence before his bride-to-be was swiftly stolen away right in front of his eyes. The rich hue of Agott’s gown disappeared into the sea of nobles, a strange girl leading the charge.

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Deanreldy leaned back and watched as Utowin finished securing the apprehended suspect to wall-mounted shackles, the latch clicking with an echo in the quiet of the dungeon. He ran his finger along the damp limestone that made up the walls, occasionally casting a glance at the knight that had accompanied him.
~~~

Utowin was locked in some sort of interrogation, but the exchange was one-sided. It seemed the attacker was either too exhausted to reply, or perhaps too smart to give out any sort of information. Deanreldy couldn't help but smile as he turned his head away to conceal his expression.

After a few fruitless attempts, Utowin groaned and rubbed his neck. "That's it, I'm not wasting my time or my breath. What's important now is finding the Regent and sweeping the palace."

"Oh, most certainly." Deanreldy nodded and steeled his expression with practiced ease. He looked the knight up and down and shrugged. "I'm certain your knights have this handled, though I am deeply concerned given the incident at hand. Please, allow me to accompany you to make your report. After all, I happened upon the scene before you had."

Utowin paused, nodding despite the faintest flicker of skepticism. He quickly dismissed his unease as jumpiness from the whole ordeal. This was the *king,* and he was clearly trying to help. He'd need someone who knew more of the story to help Regent Beldaruit make a more informed decision as to how to handle things. Still, there was something undeniably…what was the word to describe him….

Creepy about the king.

"Yeah, of course," Utowin spoke through the smile he plastered on as he subconsciously tightened his grip on his own spear. "Easthies will likely be down for the count, so I'd appreciate any information you could provide. I'll lead the way; these halls can get a bit maze-like if you're not sure where you're headed."

"Your assistance is greatly appreciated." Deanreldy glanced back once more at the dungeon cell as the knight began to escort them out. Despite their face being obstructed by a hood, he was nearly certian he caught a glimpse of dark eyes peering back at him. Neither spoke, though the tension was palpable. A silent message crackled through the air.

There's more to this than you're letting on.

~~~

"Coco!" Agott sputtered as she was all but yanked out of the ballroom and down the hall, stumbling over her steps as she tried to keep up. Coco showed no signs of slowing, much less stopping, anytime soon.

It wasn't until Agott dug her heels in that she made any real progress in getting her attention. They both halted abruptly, her breath hitching as she toppled forward.

The arms that caught her were warm and familiar, though just as unsteady as Coco very nearly tripped herself. It took a good moment of finding their footing and catching their breath before Agott looked up at Coco once more. The tailor was a blushing mess, her arms still wrapped
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around Agott as if trying to keep her upright despite them both having found their balance. It was entirely unnecessary, and yet…

Agott melted into her arms and hugged her close. “Thank you,” she breathed, “I thought I may never get away from that accursed ballroom again.”

The tailor’s breath caught in her throat as she softened against the embrace, hugging back without a second thought. “I’m so sorry I didn’t come for you sooner.”

“No,” Agott shook her head and stood, taking both of her hands in her own. “You were right on time.”

Both girls took a quiet moment and just looked at each other, hand in hand for the first time that evening. Coco reached out and brushed a stray curl behind Agott's ear as she leaned her forehead against hers. The princess relaxed under her touch as if it were the only thing keeping her grounded in that moment. "Please, can we go somewhere else? Just for a little while? I don't want to be found."

Coco thought about it for a moment as she pulled back, then nodded and released one of her hands as she began to guide her down the hall. Agott looked back towards the ballroom as the light from the party grew fainter with distance. Leaving her responsibilities felt heavy in her chest, and yet it was as though a weight had been lifted from her shoulders at the same time. She glanced back at Coco as she was led away.

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Utowin tried to ignore the feeling of eyes boring into the back of his skull as he escorted the king back to the ballroom. The halls of the palace were as dim as ever at this hour, and even he hesitated on a few choice turns. Jeez, did royals like the feeling of living in a maze or what? Sure, it was for security, but certainly this was a bit overkill.

Even as he faltered, King Deanreldy's stride was calculated and never once slowed. His shoes clacked quietly against the stone floors as he trailed Utowin on his heels. They were close enough that the guard could practically hear what the other man breathed.

For a moment, something instinctual stuttered in Utowin's chest. The hair on his arms stood on end, and he could feel the faintest hint of adrenaline rushing up through his blood. It wasn't a sensation he could rationally explain; after all, the king had done nothing to warrant such an extreme reaction. Even so, he couldn't seem to shake the feeling that he should put some distance between the two of them.

Utowin intentionally doubled his stride, charging ahead with forced confidence in hopes of creating some sort of buffer. His efforts proved to be in vain as Deanreldy matched his steps in turn. The guard laughed nervously and glanced over his shoulder. "Sorry for the hurry, but I really do need to make my report as urgently as I can."

"Oh, no need to worry. I'm keeping up just fine." Deanreldy smiled warmly as his eyes glinted against the torchlight of the hall.

The guard nodded and quickly whipped his head away to conceal discomfort. How could a smile be so bright and so unsettling all the same? It looked less like the welcoming expression of a royal and more like the piercing gaze of a lion observing its next meal. Utowin quickly brushed it off as the sight of the ballroom came back into view. *Finally, "*Well, if you'll excuse me, I must locate the Regent and alert the other knights. Please, I ask that you not raise alarm to other guests until a decision is reached on how to handle the matter. Rest assured we will handle things as efficiently and safely as possible."
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“Of course,” Deanreldy hummed and rested his hand on his hip. “Pay me no worry, I shan’t utter a word about it. I should be getting back to my son myself.”

Utowin nodded and bowed before disappearing back into the crowd in search of Beldaruit, leaving Deanreldy to make his way across the ballroom at a leisurely pace. He plucked a flute of wine from a passing servant's tray before sweeping the room for a good spot to wait for his cue.

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Agott wasn't certain where it was she was being led to, nor did she particularly care. All she knew was that the sounds of the ball had long since been replaced by silence and footsteps as Coco led the charge straight ahead. To be fair, anywhere could become a safe haven so long as they could go there together.

Their journey led them to the entrance of the garden as it had so many times before, including all those years ago when the two of them were younger and more naive. The green-haired girl looked back as they came to a stop in the doorway, taking both of Agott’s hands in her own once more. “Is this alright? I promise not to keep you long; I wouldn't want to cause you any more trouble than I already have.”

“You could keep me here forever, should you like to.” Agott squeezed her hands as she looked out towards the garden. The lights that had been strung up from her party the day prior were yet to be taken down, though the gazebo had returned to its original state devoid of table and chairs and replaced with stone benches. Even in the darkness, it felt welcoming.

Coco looked down at their hands, eyes lingering on her ring. “I couldn’t possibly, and you know it.”

Agott took a deep breath before exhaling slowly, lifting her hand in front of her face and watching the ring sparkle in the light as she moved. She slowly reached out and slid the ring off of her finger before placing it in Coco’s hand. She gently pushed her fingers closed until it was fully concealed within the other girl’s palm. “Then can we at least pretend?”

Tears sprang to Coco’s eyes as she felt the weight of the jewels against her skin. She kept her grip tight before slipping it safely into her pocket and looking back to the princess, nodding in agreement. “Yeah. We can pretend.”

Hand in hand, the princess guided the girl she loved into the garden. Her steps were light as she felt the smooth stone path underfoot. Though the delicate blooms of fresh flowers were breathtaking, they paled in comparison to the expression on Coco’s face. The quiet domesticity of sharing a moment together, even if it were fleeting, never failed to remind her of who it was that kept her grounded.
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Agott sat down on one of the benches and waited as Coco did the same, her head resting lightly against her shoulder as they looked out across the carefully landscaped sanctuary and into the night sky.

“It’s a bit nostalgic, isn’t it?” Coco giggled breathlessly as she rested her hand on top of Agott’s. “Do you remember the summer ball where you first kissed my cheek?”

Agott scoffed and blushed. “As if I could ever forget. Do *you* remember running off and leaving me to worry?”

Coco’s laughter was richer this time, and she lifted a hand to touch her cheek as they heated up. “Yeah, I’m still sorry for that. I was on my feet before I knew what was going on.”

“So long as you don’t flee every time I try to kiss you, that would make up for it.” The princess smiled and shook her head.

They sat in silence for a few moments as Coco fidgeted with the edge of her sleeve. She glanced at Agott’s lips shyly. “Well…should we try again?”

Agott paused as her words slowly processed, then smiled and leaned over, their lips meeting in a gentle, tender press.

When the kiss finally broke, both girls were blushing and smiling as if nothing else mattered. It took a moment to sober herself up, but Coco reached out and gave Agott's hand a firm squeeze. "I'm sorry I didn't come for you sooner."

Agott paused and adjusted her grip, lacing their fingers together and squeezing her hand back. "Why the sudden apology? You did come for me, did you not?"

"I did," Coco said softly, almost hesitant as she kept her eyes trained on her lap. "I'm apologizing for my lack of nerve. Had I only gathered my courage sooner, you wouldn't have had to be uncomfortable for quite so long."

"My comfort is hardly your responsibility. I'm grateful you came to my rescue, but I would not fault or blame you even if you hadn't." Agott nudged her shoulder as if in an attempt to make the other girl look up. "That being said, what's all this about gathering your nerve anyway? You know you can always approach me. It's unlike you to get such cold feet."

Coco flinched slightly as her free hand brushed against the lump in her pocket. Even through the thick fabric of her gown, she could feel the edge of the ring within. She reached in and pulled it out with a grip that trembled ever so slightly.

A dawning understanding settled over Agott's features as she reached out and plucked the ring from Coco's palm, turning it over between her fingers. "So that's it, then. You saw it all, didn't you?"

"I only wish I hadn't." Coco balled up the fabric of her gown in her hand, squeezing tightly to try and rein in her emotions. "I know being jealous won't solve anything. I don't even have a good reason to feel this way. It's you thats suffering, and yet seeing you with him hurts so much I don't know what to do with myself."

Agott scoffed and shook her head. "No good reason? Coco, if the roles were reversed I hardly think I should be able to keep my head on straight." After setting the ring aside on the bench, she reached over and took Coco's second hand as well. "To say the situation is complicated would be an understatement, and I'm so much more than lucky to have found someone brave enough, strong enough, and kind enough to be willing to support me. No one needs a *reason* for their feelings, though if anyone has one, it would be you."

"I'm not as brave as you're making me out to be." Coco finally looked up and smiled sadly. "At least, not yet. But I want to be, if you'll let me. I want to become someone you can depend on no matter what happens. I don't want to run away again."

The princess returned her smile and clasped Coco's hands within her own. "You're more than I could ever ask for, and quite possibly more than I've ever deserved."

“I don’t think thats true in the slightest.” Coco giggled and shook her head. She took a deep breath and looked into Agott’s eyes. “I can’t be your prince. I’m not royalty, or even nobility. I can’t satisfy your mother's expectations, win your hand in any duel, or slip an expensive ring on your finger. Even so, I promise I’ll be yours for as long as you’ll allow me to remain by your side.”

“That’s all I want,” Agott whispered and squeezed her hands. “Everything I could ever want to have is right here in this garden.”

The two kissed once more until Agott pulled back, their foreheads still pressed together. Despite the magic of the moment, truth loomed overhead. “I love you,” she whispered, “But that fact alone cannot undo the truth of the matter. I’m engaged to a man I’m quite certain I could never come to love, and yet he is my betrothed nonetheless. If we stay as we are, there's a good chance it will be painful for both of us.” The princess leaned back further and cupped her cheek. “I wouldn’t fault you should it ever prove to be too much. If you tell me you want to leave, I’d let you go.”

Coco shook her head hurriedly, leaning her cheek into Agott’s hand. “No.”

“No?” Agott smiled and brushed her thumb over Coco’s cheekbone. Her expression fell ever so slightly as she continued. “I’m not asking you to decide right now. I just want you to know that I’d understand if you ever changed your mind. No matter how hard we try, fairy tales remain fairy tales. In the end, I’ll either marry Prince Eoleo and take the throne soon, or I’ll end up married at some other point down the line. My hands are tied.”

“I can’t accept that.” Coco reached out across Agott and took the ring from where it was resting beside her. She held the bejeweled band in her grasp as tight as she could. “I swear, if you give me the chance, I’ll find another way straight ahead to a future where we can both be happy. Somehow, someway, we’ll figure it out. In fact…”

Agott watched with wide eyes as Coco stood from the bench before kneeling and taking her hand, slipping Eoleos's ring back onto her finger.

“Until the day I can replace this with a ring of my own to offer you, wait for me, ok?” Coco’s eyes shone with tears despite the smile on her face. “Don’t give up on me, and I won’t give up on you either.”

“Coco,” Agott exhaled her name as she stood, pulling the other girl up with her before embracing her tightly. “I knew it was true when I said it. I don’t deserve you.”

Coco buried her head in Agott’s shoulder as she clung on, silently praying for the day when she never had to let go again. The princess held her tight as the moment lingered on. “Dance with me?” Coco whispered hopefully.

Agott smiled and released her grip, her hands moving to rest on Coco’s shoulder and waist. “I thought you’d never ask.”

The first few steps of the waltz were as slow as they were hesitant. For all her talk of wanting to grow more brave, Coco found herself nearly silent as her one hand rested on Agott's shoulder and the other held up the fabric of her gown.

Agott's hand remained on her waist and shoulder as she swallowed thickly, taking quick glances at Coco's face as she led her around the gazebo through a dance with no music to guide them. Ever so slowly, her shoulders relaxed and allowed her steps to grow more confident. Dancing with another girl was unlike any instructor or partner she'd had before. She was graceful despite her uncertainty, and matched her pace as if trusting her movements entirely.

The songs of the garden consisted of rustling leaves and the steady hum of cicadas; nothing like the steady melody that filled the ballroom down the palace halls. From the outside, it must have looked terribly awkward. But to them?

Coco laughed softly as Agott slowly spun her before pulling her close. "I don't remember seeing that step from anyone in the ballroom."

"My apologies, I may have taken a bit of a creative liberty." Agott grinned as she rested her hand on the small of Coco's back. Closed position, if she recalled her lessons correctly. "For someone who claims not to have danced much, you certainly know how to waltz."

"If I told you I practiced on my own frequently, would that be embarrassing or endearing?" Coco giggled softly as their hands joined and the dance resumed.

Agott scoffed and shook her head. "Endearing, of course. It always is when it's you."

It couldn't last like this forever, at least not as it was. The dance would end, and they'd return to their respective roles within the palace: Agott walking a shortening path towards the throne and Coco off to the sidelines. Even so, neither girl could bring themselves to allow the moment to pass.

Hand in hand, chest to chest, they remained under the faint light of the evening sky.

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Princess Agott was nowhere to be found.

That fact alone was of no grave urgency, given that plenty of matters needing her attention could result in a temporary absence. Even so, it had been a fair bit of time since Beldaruot had lost sight of her amidst the crowd. "Qifrey," the regent whispered as he paused by the professor's side, hands folded in his lap as he kept his tone as even as he could. "Have you any idea of Agott's wearabouts? Last I saw her she was still with the Ezrest family."
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“Oh? Has she been missing?” Qifrey frowned as he removed his arm from around Olruggio’s waist. He’d spent that last while shadowing the other professor and keeping mostly to himself. To his knowledge, she must have still been with Coco. “My apologies, last I knew, Coco had gone off to find her. Perhaps something is holding them up?”

Beldaruit furrowed his brow and leaned back in his wheelchair. “Is that right? Well, I should hope whatever is keeping them resolves itself soon. A ball without that which it is honoring hardly seems in good taste. Besides.” His gaze flickered towards Prince Eoleo, who stood talking to some noble boy he didn’t recognize. “I can’t imagine His Majesty will take well to his son being left alone.”

“His Highness Eoleo is hardly Agott’s responsibility.” Qifrey rested a knuckle to his lips as he thought about it for a moment longer. “Has King Deanreldy made a comment on it?”

“No, he hasn’t. But that fact alone only concerns me *further.* If he’s waiting for the right opportunity, he’s playing his cards well. A direct complaint would resolve things far too easily for him to hope to gain anything from it.”

Qifrey sighed and shook his head. “Your skepticism, while not entirely unwarranted, never ceases to astound me.”

Beldaruit pinched the bridge of his nose. “Perhaps. Or perhaps it’s that you are simply inexperienced in politics.”

“Regend Beldaruit,” a voice from behind the pair caught their attention. Both men turned to face Utowin, whose expression had hardened in a way neither man had seen in recent years.

“Is something the matter?” Beldaruit gestured for the knight to rise from his bow, his expression deeply troubled as he braced for bad news.

Utowin looked around. It was risky to discuss such matters in public, though pulling the Regent from the event would only arouse suspicion. He leaned down to be close to Beldaruit’s ear. “I’m afraid there's been a most serious incident within the palace. We’ve apprehended the suspect, though they refuse to talk. The majority of th knights have already begun a sweep of the palace grounds. At your command, we are prepared to escort the guests safely to their carriages.”

“Incident? Suspect?” Qifrey stepped forward and pressed his lips into a thin line. “What has happened? Her Majesty and Her Royal Highness, are they alright?”

“Please, keep your voices low.” Utowin grimaced slightly and looked around once more. “Her Majesty is safe in her bed. As for the princess, she’s here, is she not? The suspect was apprehended outside of the Queen’s bedchambers. They were armed, and a guard has been seriously injured. If we don’t act swiftly, we give more time for any accomplices to escape or worse.”

Qifrey's blood ran cold. Agott *wasn't* here. He quickly dismissed himself to search for her without waiting to hear Beldaruit's reply– the princess's safety could not hinge on waiting for a verdict.

Beldaruit watched as the professor hurried off towards the hall, knowing full well he could not stop him. Utowin attempted to call out to him, but a hand on his arm caused him to hesitate. Right, his report. He exhaled and gripped his spear tightly. "Give the word, and the ball comes to an end."

"Of course, we cannot risk any further delays. Tell the knights we must-"

"If I may interject?"

Utowin froze, and Beldaruit stiffened, shivering as he snapped his head back to come face to face with King Deanreldy.

Beldaruit fought to keep his expression as neutral as possible despite the feeling of dread that washed over his body. Nothing good could come of giving *him* any more ammunition. The regent turned to fully face the king, his hands resting in his lap and his gaze still. “I beg your pardon, Your Majesty, but I fear this is a most pressing matter. If you would excuse uf-”

“Oh, believe me, I’m well aware.” Deanreldy lifted his hands in mock surrender before resting one on Utowin’s shoulder. “After all, I was there to see it all play out.”

Beldaruit narrowed his eyes and looked sharply at the knight. “Is this true? You seem to have omitted that detail.”

“My apologies; it was not my intention. I simply wanted to relay the information as quickly as possible.” Utowin bowed his head once more.

Deanreldy grinned as he looked down on the regent. “Go easy on the man, would you? I’m certain he’s doing his best. Now, as I mentioned, I happened to bear witness to the incident. Not only that, but voices do have a terrible tendency to carry through rooms such as this one. I’d suggest keeping our voices low.”

The regent struggled not to show the tension in his posture as it grew more rigid with every word from the king’s lips. Such condescension. “Yes, I’m well aware. Forgive me if a threat towards the life of Her Majesty was serious enough for me so much as raise my voice.”

“There’s no need for hostility. I’m only trying to aid you.” Deanreldy shrugged and withdrew his hand. He rubbed his chin and glanced back towards the crowd. “Such a wonderful crowd has gathered to celebrate Her Highness’s birthday, and in such numbers. Don’t you think…” He leaned down slightly to whisper, “That such a terrible scandal would reflect poorly on the crown?”

“If you think I care more about appearances than the safety of my charge, then you are most horribly mistaken about me.” Bedlaruit bristled and leaned back. No longer could he hide the sheer disdain in his expression. “If that’s all you have to offer, I strongly suggest you see yourself dismissed.”

King Deanredly only chuckled. “Please, I mean no offense. It’s only that it would be doing your charge a, shall we say, *disservice* by acting in haste. If my memory serves correctly, your last ball ended in a rather unfortunate manner. To think that the first time the Arkalaum palace reopens its doors would be met with a near tragedy only serves to suggest that the nation's core is *weak*. By no means do I suggest you overlook something so serious; I merely meant to imply that perhaps there is an alternative solution?”

Beldaruit couldn’t help but scoff. Honestly, the sheer audacity of it all was enough for him to be tempted to brush off the man entirely. That being said, somewhere deep down, his words held the slightest element of truth.

Drawing attention to such an event would only prove to cause an immediate scandal. While he held his suspicions of the king, it was blatantly undeniable that there had been an attempted assassination tonight. He held little doubt it would be the work of the brimmed. For such an important occasion to be sullied would surely cause deep unrest within the nation that had only just begun to heal with time. Even so… “Be that as it may, I refuse to compromise the safety of both the royal family and the guests among them. No amount of scandal will ever equate to a human life.”

“If it’s a life you’re concerned with, what of the possibility of a second assailant?” Deanreldy raised an eyebrow.

Utowin straightened his back. “The guards are sweeping the palace grounds as we speak. If there are indeed others, they will be found.”

Deanreldy feigned innocence as he shook his head. “Oh, I’m most certain of it. I wouldn’t dare imply otherwise. It’s only that evacuating the guests would potentially aid any secondary culprits in making a clean escape, would it not? Believe me, I have *safety* at the forefront of my mind, but allowing such an offender to get away…if they know the layout of the palace, what’s to stop an incident such as this one from occurring again?”

Beldaruit gritted his teeth to the point he feared they might crack. He was no fool; the advice dripping from the king’s lips was nothing short of insulting. Be that as it may, his chest tightened at the truth of the matter. As he looked up, he swore he could see a devilish glint in his majesty’s eyes, not unlike that of a cat standing on the tail of a mouse.

The regent exhaled sharply and whipped his head towards Utowin. “Search every inch of the palace. There shall be no rest until every passage has been deemed clear.”

“What of the ball? Shall we begin escorting the guests toward their carriages?” Utowin asked as he bowed one final time.

Bedlaruit looked between the two men, then out to the crowd of attendants. He swallowed thickly and shook his head. “Not yet.”

Deanreldy hid his smile behind a sip of wine as Utowin departed to do as he was ordered. Once the knight was out of earshot, the king glanced back towards the regent. “A wise choice. Should you so desire to end this affair early, I might suggest waiting until you’ve gotten the all clear before providing a simpler excuse. I’m certain such an event must be overwhelming for Her Highness Agott, what with the circumstances.”

“You needn’t advise me any further. I am perfectly capable of handling it myself.” Beldaruit shot back as he moved to turn his attention elsewhere

“Of course you are.” Deanreldy set his empty flute on the tray of a passing servant. “*But you’re no king.* Experience is golden, and I’ve had my share. Don’t take it to heart.”

The regent bit back a swell of rage as he watched King Deanreldy turn on his heels and disappear into the crowd.

Qifrey forced himself to keep his pace balanced so as not to draw attention to himself, though his path was unshakable once it had begun. He pushed through the crowd without so much as a second thought, as his shoulder bumped against those of the partygoers as he forced his way to the entrance of the ballroom.

The moment he was around the corner, his pace quickened, then morphed into a run. He didn't recall when exactly he had begun to breathe hard, though he could hear the sounds of his breath in his ears as his heart hammered against his chest. Down the corridor, around the first left…his legs carried him before his mind could even hope to catch up. If he knew Agott at all, he knew very well where she could have gotten off to.

The palace gardens weren't exactly a *secure location;* that much he knew. If the girls were out there alone and something had happened to them…he shook away the thought as he felt himself slide slightly across the floor as he took a hard turn. His hand hovered instinctively over the sheath under his cloak as he closed the distance between himself and his destination.

Sure enough, through the window ahead, he spotted her: arm in arm with Coco, without a care in the world.

"Agott!" He called out just as he was about to cross the threshold into the garden. He gasped and winced in pain as the pole of a spear suddenly struck his chest. He stumbled back and clutched his side as he gritted his teeth.

As he gathered his bearings, Qifrey looked up to see Captain Vinanna standing at attention. "Professor Qifrey," She acknowledged as she lowered her weapon. "Sorry for the interruption. It doesn't hurt to be cautious given the circumstances."

"*Interruption*?" Qifrey hissed as he held a hand over the place he was struck. He shook his head and brushed off his irritation as he brought his attention back to the task at hand. "Never mind that, the princess is-"

"We're here to escort her back to her chambers now; she's safe." A calmer voice chimed in. Qifrey glanced over to see a knight he recognized as Luluci. She bowed her head and put a hand to her chest. "Her Highness is in good hands with us. Please, see yourself back to th ballroom or your chambers and remain calm."

Qifrey very well could have scoffed. Agott was *safe?* When there had been an attack under their very nose? "I should like to see to her myself."

"You'd *like* to. Yet you won't." Vinanne said sternly as she kept her spear at her side. "Direct orders. We can't be too careful, and the guard has a handle on things."

It was nearly enough to make him laugh as Qifrey winced at the pain in his chest. How absurd to claim to have a *handle on things* when such incidents were their responsibility to prevent. “Is it not my place as her professor to ensure her well-being?”

“A professor is no guard,” Vianna said sternly as she turned her back. “Luluci, see that the professor returns to his quarters. I’ll escort Her Highness.”

Luluci nodded and turned her attention back to Qifrey, who looked as though he might bolt for the garden entrance at any moment. “Please, it’s in Her Highness Agott’s best interest for you to cooperate with us. Rest assured, we won’t stop until every inch of the premises is secured. Please remain out of the way, and report any sighting of brimmed figures to the knights. You’d do us all a great service by keeping this quiet.”

Qifrey couldn’t resist the urge to scoff any longer. Every inch, and yet he himself knew of passages long forgotten by the knights. Before he could think to mention it, his heartbeat stuttered.

Brimmed figures?

“Sightings of whom exactly?” He broached cautiously, eyes narrowing/

Luluci kept a tight grip on her spear, eyeing him somewhat warily as she spoke. “We’ve been instructed to apprehend and interrogate any suspicious guests, particularly those donned in brimmed cloaks.”

Qifrey gritted his teeth as blood rushed to his head. Was that right? So this was *their* doing? “One suspect has already been apprehended, correct? You claim they’re believed to be one of the brimmed?”

“We have no confirmation of such,” Luluci clarified as she shook her head. ‘We only know of them to have been wearing-”

“Who was the one to confront them? A guard was injured; weren’t they? Which guard?” Qifrey could barely hear over the sound of his pulse as he fought to remain level-headed.

Luluci narrowed her gaze as she hesitated to divulge the information he requested. “Deputy captain Easthies, though he has since been brought to the infirmary to be treated for his wounds.”

Qifrey snapped his attention down the hall towards the infirmary. *Easthies*. If anyone had the information he needed to unveil the Brimmed Cloaks' plan, it was him. He whipped his head back around to Luluci one last time. “I’m forced to take your word that Agott will be kept safe, though if I find out she is harmed by so much as a scratch, know I will not listen to something as invaluable as the *orders of the knights* again.”

Without another word, Qifrey hurried off down the hall, leaving Luluci to turn her attention back towards the garden.

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“Agott!”

The princess gasped and quickly released her hold on Coco as her head snapped towards the sound of her name. It was too distant to make out the voice clearly, and yet it didn’t matter.

Someone was coming, and here she was with Coco.

“Damn it!” Agott swore as she looked back to Coco with a heaviness in her gaze. Of course reality would come crashing back down as soon as she allowed herself to be swept away in the moment. The truth was so often unfair.

Coco, ever one to think of Agott before herself, quickly nodded and gathered her skirt. “Don’t worry about me, ok? There's a passageway near the palace entrance. You go ahead with whoever comes, and I’ll sneak back before anyone even notices I’m gone.”

“But-” Agott was cut off by the quickest brush of lips as Coco hurried past.

“It’ll be ok! Thank you for the dance; it truly was magical!”

Agott was left with a heavy, stuttering heart as Coco disappeared behind the gazebo to hide in the nick of time. Just as the green-haired girl had hidden herself from view, Captain Vinanna entered the garden.

“Your Royal Highness.” Vinanna bowed before rising and resting a hand over her heart. “I’m relieved to have found you. This is no time to be out by yourself.”

“I’m terribly sorry if I have caused worry or inconvenience.” Agott looked down as she gripped the edges of her gown. Her gaze flickered back up to the troubled expression on the captain's face. “Has something happened?”

Vinanna looked around the garden before sighing. “I assure you, all will be explained once you’re safely in your chambers. Please, allow me to escort you.”

Agott bit her lip as she hesitantly nodded, resisting the urge to look back to where she knew Coco was hiding as she began to follow the captain inside. Surely it was Deanreldy looking for her…so long as Coco was safe, she would manage whatever awaited her.
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Qifrey practically burst into the infirmary wing headfirst, wasting no time with manners as he hounded down the man he was looking for. Sure enough, Easthies was laid in a nearby bed–eyes closed, his arm bandaged. The professor gritted his teeth in frustration. Unconscious meant no immediate answers. He was about to turn on his heel to seek out Beldaruit when he noticed a figure in the corner of the room watching him.

“Quite the rush, professor.” King Deanreldy smiled from his perch at Easthies’ bedside, tilting his head as he looked him up and down. “I mean, I understand the reason behind your pace, but perhaps it would be best to keep your head on straight? Wouldn’t want to draw any unnecessary attention.”

“Do not insult me with such condescension.” Qifrey snapped back, not caring for his decorum as blood rushed to his head. He paused as he caught his breath, eyes narrowing. “What are you doing in the medical wing of the palace? Better yet, what exactly is your *aim?* Should you not be attending the ball?”

The king chuckled and held up his hands in mock surrender. “So hostile.” He rose from his seat and closed the gap between them. ‘And so *hasty.* Had you lingered a moment longer to get the whole picture, perhaps you wouldn’t be asking such an obvious question.” Deanreldy gestured towards the unconscious knight. “I happened upon the scene myself before the guards were alerted. As it stands, I saved this man's life. I felt obligated to see that his wounds were properly addressed, given they seemed particularly severe.”

Qifrey held his tongue as he considered the situation. A king seeing to the wounds of a knight from a different nation, during an important ball no less? He was far from buying into it. Even so, his desire for information won over his wariness. Happening upon the incident was suspicious, yes, but it also meant he *saw the perpetrator.* “You were there when it happened?”

“Guilty as charged.” Deanreldy raised a hand to his temple as if actively recalling the details. “It’s true, I heard a commotion and found myself witness to a horrific sight. To think a night of celebration could take such a bitter turn…it truly sets me on edge.” He lowered his hand and motioned towards the direction of the ballroom. It would be best to keep things quiet until things are under control, no? We wouldn’t want to cause a panic and risk the assailant getting away.”

“Yes, yes, the knights are sweeping the grounds as we speak. Did you *see them*?” Qifrey pressed as he took a step closer. The two men were practically chest to chest as he pressed further.

Deanreldy schooled his expression and nodded sharply. “Naturally. Their features were initially concealed by their cloak, though I got a fairly good glimpse of them after they were brought to the dungeons. An androgynous sort with long silver hair and a mole on their cheek. No one immediately recognizable to me,” he paused and tilted his head, “though that must be a given; the brimmed cloaks are the worries of the Arklaum nation. Back in Ezrest, we have a way of snuffing these sorts of groups out.”

Qifrey pointedly ignored the jab towards the crown as he searched deep in his memory for anyone who matched that description. His hand hovered instinctively at the sheath attached to his belt at the mere thought. Unfortunately for him, the unconscious action did not go unnoticed.

“If I didn’t know any better,” Deanreldy nodded towards where Qifrey’s dagger was concealed. “I’d say you seem a bit *too* interested in this mystery assailant's identity, professor.”

“Is it such a crime to want a name for such a heinous crime?” Qifrey bristled and jerked his hand back.

Deanreldy waved him off with a flick of his wrist. “No, of course not. It’s natural to want such answers. Though, I must admit, there's something to be said for the questions you *didn’t* ask. Nothing about the crime itself, nor the well-being of the patient beside us. No, you aren't here for information about the crime at all.” He stepped forward once more, forcing Qifrey to take a step back. “You came here in search of a *name.* Or, at the very least, a lead towards an identity. Surely thats no job for a humble professor…not unless there's something, shall we say, *concealed beneath the surface?”*

Qifrey sucked in a breath as he watched Deanreldy's gaze fall back towards his dagger. “It’s nothing of the sort. I seek justice for my queen and safety for my charge, nothing more.”

“Is that right?” Deanreldy took his seat at Easthies’ bedside once more. “Then perhaps you’ll find yourself a bit more useful by seeing to your charge. The poor girl must be frightened; she could use someone by her side right now. You’d do well to remember that in the face of…whatever it is you’re looking for.”

“You know *nothing* of me, and nothing of my intentions.” Qifrey turned on his heel to leave. Despite the anger in his tone, his heart ached at the king's words. There was truth beneath the bitterness– Agott needed him. This would have to wait until Easthies awakened.

“No, perhaps not.” Deanreldy hummed as he watched the professor leave. Once he was alone, he reached into the pocket of his cloak once more, procuring a vial. He reached to the small table at the bedside and opened the tincture of medicine the physician had administered to Easthies upon his arrival.

The king sighed through his nose, a small smile on his lips. “Poor man…you fought quite valiantly.” He twisted off the lid of the vial. “Perhaps a long rest will do you some good?”

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Coco kept her hand on the cold walls of the passageways, the darkness suddenly more frightening than it had been in times past. It wasn’t far from the garden to the servants' quarters; in a few more turns, she’d be safely in her bedroom.
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It was as she turned the second-to-last corner that she suddenly felt something grab her by the shoulder. She gasped and whipped around, but was met only by darkness and a low, familiar voice.

“There you are, my dear child of hope.”

Coco froze, eyes wide as she peered through the darkness, unable to move so much as an inch. It was as if she had been frozen in place, her body lost in the darkness of the passageway as she felt her limbs tremble with fear.

Why now? Why here, after so many years had passed?

“Why, you’re shaking like a newborn fawn,” The cloaked figure mused as they tightened their grip on her shoulder, squeezing with increasing pressure with every word. “Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten? Has your palace life truly made you so comfortable that you’ve allowed yourself the luxury of amnesia? Or is it perhaps…that this reaction of yours is one of memory?”

Coco’s breath hitched, though she made no effort to struggle. What could she do? It was dark, and she was all alone. No one but Agott and Qifrey should have known these tunnels even existed– a long, sealed-off secret from rulers past.

No one was coming to save her, and she had no possible way to fight back.

Her eyes filled with tears as she struggled to peer through the darkness to make out the details of who she was facing, though she doubted much would be clear even in the light. The only possible culprits had long kept their identities concealed. A nameless, faceless entity somehow proved all the more terrifying compared to any danger she’d known before.

“Now, now, you look as though you may collapse,” The figure crooned and held her steady with both hands. “We can’t have that, now can we? Not to worry, I shan’t hurt you—not without reason. No, you’re much too valuable to us for such fears to have any basis. That said…your cooperation is paramount. You’d do well to come quietly and let any word of our little encounter remain unsaid.”

Coco wanted so badly to speak, to ask what he could want from her. She wanted to cry out for help in hopes that Qifrey was just beyond the wall, searching for her at this very moment. And yet? There was no one, and she could form not a single syllable. Instead, she swallowed back her fear and attempted to remain very still.

“There we are, much better.” The brimmed cloak smiled through the darkness and began steering her down the passage. “Now, be a good and help me towards the dungeons, would you? After so much time sneaking through these passages, surely you have an idea of which turns to take?”

A shiver ran down her spine at the thought of it. All the times she’d spent in the passages alone- just who had been watching from the shadows?

“A young tailor, and a close friend to the princess, no less? How lucky am I to have happened upon you tonight.” The voice from behind her practically cooed. “Now, your time has come to play your part. I so hope you’ll prove to b e the perfect actress.” He leaned down to her ear and

lowered his voice to a whisper. “Our little show does need a heroine. Who better than to help bring about the downfall of the monarchy than someone so close to its heart?”

As they continued through the darkness, Coco kept a hand over her heart as she struggled to remain level-headed. Surely there was a way out– someone would find her. It would be alright.

“Agott,” she finally managed to choke out, so quiet the sound was lost among the damp bricks in the depth of the tunnels. “Please, be safe.”

—

Agott paced restlessly in her room, twisting the ring on her finger as she glanced out her window to try to catch a glimpse of anything unusual outside. There was no swarm of guests springing for their carriages, nor a commotion down the hall toward the ballroom. In fact, it seemed as if there were no distress whatsoever. If it hadn’t been for the sudden uptick in patrolling knights, she wouldn't have had the slightest inclination that anything was wrong at all.

She bit her lip and struggled to pry her eyes away from the courtyard. Coco had made it back to her room, right? Surely by now she’d be safely tucked away, waiting for someone to give her the all-clear. She’d be fine, and soon enough they’d reunite and put the stress of the evening behind them.

Her gown felt all the more suffocating as her gaze landed upon her reflection, the tension in her shoulders and dismay in her facial features glaringly obvious. For a moment, she attempted to relax her posture and assume some illusion of calm, but even that failed to calm her racing heart.

Agott sat down on the edge of her bed and hugged a pillow to her chest. After all this time, the weight of the looming crown had failed to ease whatsoever. If anything, the pressure increased with each passing day. Another birthday came, and what did she have to show for it? An inevitable engagement to a man she did not love, and no control over her own future. If only…

She glanced across the room to the book Qifrey had gifted her that morning. If only she had been born a knight, would things have been so different that she’d be able to forge her own path? Just one chance, one unlucky twist of fate, and she was bound to be nothing short of helpless in her own story.

No. She tensed her jaw and tossed her pillow aside, standing once more to retrieve the book from where it was resting. She gathered it in her arms before standing in front of the mirror once more, looking down at the cover before attempting to mock the stern expression of the knight with her own eyes.

She hadn’t been born a knight, nor could she go back and change that fact. She was a princess, and likely would be for as long as fate remained as it was. She couldn’t become a knight, but…

Her mind wandered back to her professor, particularly to the dagger she *knew* he kept sheathed at his side.

She couldn’t become a knight– but perhaps if she asked the right person, she could become just as strong.

Qifrey ran a hand through his hair, his heart still hammering against his chest as he attempted to collect himself. Anger simmered just below the surface as his mind replayed his interaction with the king over and over in an unending loop. He clenched his fist and inhaled sharply, silently willing himself to be still as he hurried down the corridor towards Agott's chambers.

He nearly knocked into one of the knights as he walked, simultaneously lost in his head despite being on edge. He grumbled and shot them a dirty look before finding himself rounding the final corner of the hallway.

Two deep breaths, then a hastily plastered-on smile. Qifrey cleared his throat and knocked on her door. "Agott? Are you quite alright in there?"

He waited a moment as his heart finally began to return to a reasonable rhythm. However, his peace was dreadfully short-lived as time stretched on with no reply. "...Agott?"

Nothing. His heart rate spiked once more as he wasted no time turning th eknob and throwing the door open. "Your Highness?"

Agott yelped slightly and whirled around, the hairbrush she had been holding clattering to the floor loudly as her cheeks flushed a deep shade of red. She ripped the blanket that had been draped around her shoulders off and tossed it aside. "Professor! I was…"

Qifrey's brow furrowed as he knelt down and retrieved the hairbrush. He turned it over in his hands before casting his gaze back up at the princes, narrowing his eyes.

"I can explain," Agott mumbled and crossed her arms.

"You sound far too guilty given the circumstances. This–" he gestured to his hand. "Isn't exactly incriminating. Though the same cannot be said for your behavior. Nor your…" he cleared his throat and bit back a slight giggle. "Attire."

Agott kicked the blanket further away from her feet and snapped her head away. "I was simply feeling a bit chilled."

"Oh, I'm most certain!" Qifrey feigned concern as he set the hairbrush aside and collected the blanket, folding it neatly. "The July weather is just notorious for its frightfully cool temperatures. We'd best bundle you up before you catch a cold."

"I see no need for your incessant teasing!" Agott bristled and crossed her arms. "You forget yourself."

"Pulling rank on your own professor? My, how bold you've grown. That said, I do apologize if I've overstepped." Qifrey smiled softly and returned her blanket to the edge of her bed. "It's been quite the evening–perhaps I was just a bit too eager for something lighthearted to discuss."

Agott softened and rubbed her neck. “About that. Has something happened? The knights won't utter so much as a word about it, and I’m growing concerned. Coco went off on her own, and I should hope she’s alright.”

Qifrey’s lips tightened into a thin line as he took a moment to steel himself before turning back around, his expression as neutral as he could muster. “I shall inform you when I receive word from the knights. It’s all terribly confusing, and I should hate for you to concern yourself with such affairs. I assure you, it will be taken care of.” His eyes darkened ever so slightly as he glanced out the window. “I’ll personally ensure it if I must.”

“How dreadfully vague,” Agott protested as she nudged the brush on her dresser. “You’ll check on Coco for me? I hated to leave her alone.”

“You have my word.” Qifrey put a hand to his heart and bowed his head. His muscles remained tense as the half-truth slipped past his lips. “Now, that aside, could you perhaps enlighten me as to what the ((object)) is for?”

Agott’s blush returned as she leaned against her dresser, eyes glancing towards the book he had gotten her for her birthday. The knight on the cover almost seemed to stare back at her while she hesitated. Instead of answering him head-on, she crossed her arms tighter and looked him in the eye. “Professor, where did you get your dagger?”

The remaining cheerfulness in Qifrey's posture dropped completely. It was only for a moment, barely perceptible, and yet Agott saw something akin to horror flash across his face. Before Agott could attempt to remedy what she had said, his smile returned as if it had never disappeared to begin with. “Oh? I was unaware you had noticed it. Pardon my surprise; I simply didn’t expect just an abrupt shift in subject.” Another lie, this one slightly more strained than before.

Agott hesitated, searching his expression for any hint of tension, but found only the slightest twitch in his brow. She shook her head and picked up the book. “It was merely a curiosity. I apologize for catching you off guard.” She flipped open the cover and leafed through the pages until she landed on a particular illustration. “It doesn’t look like the one here, so I was curious as to the difference.”

“Since when have you taken such an interest in weaponry?” A genuine lilt of amusement worked its way into Qifrey's tone as he leaned over to peer at the illustration. “Ah, I see. Well, it is an artistic rendition. That said, it seems the style the artist was attempting to recreate is more common among the knighthood. Seeing as I was never among those ranks, it’s only natural my weapon of choice would be slightly varied in size and shape.”

“I see…” Agott closed the book and straightened up. “Then, can I see yours? If it isn’t too much to ask, I’d like to hold it for a moment.”

Qifrey frowned slightly, rubbing his chin. “My dagger?” He hesitated, then patted down his sides and smiled. “Silly me, it seems I’d removed it before coming to your room. Perhaps some other time.” Lies continued to flow as easily as breath as he shifted his weight so the cloth of his cloak would more completely conceal the slight rise where his dagger rested. “Why the sudden interest? Curious from your reading, perhaps?”

Agott’s eyes dropped in disappointment, though she quickly recovered at his question. She balled her fists tightly as she faced him. “Professor Qifrey, please teach me how to fight!”