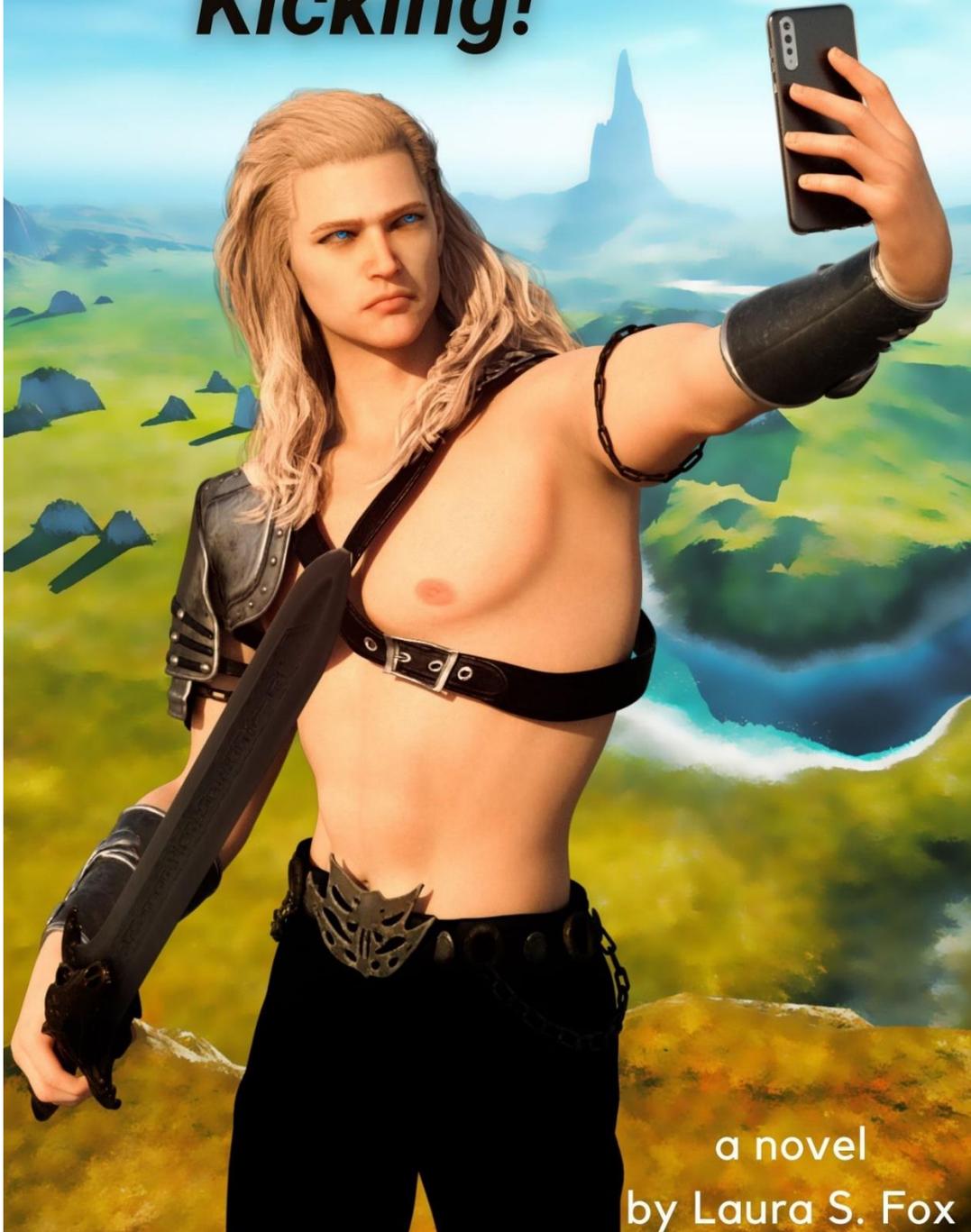


This Strange World Needs A Kicking!



a novel
by Laura S. Fox

This Strange World Needs A Kicking!

by

Laura S. Fox

Acknowledgements

For all my amazing patrons who made this story a reality

Dave K, J Q, Nina, Adam, Green TreeMan, Candace, Raymond, Joe M, Deirdre, Lucas, Daniel, Margaret, Joseph Sh, Tisha, Laura, Todd, Erin, Ilze, Joshua, Sarah, Anthony, David S, James, Kate, Nash, Peethree, Timothy, AC(XXL), P Ber, DJ, Curtis, Gunthorp, deedee, kevin, Maximilian, MKFanatic, Joanne, wiscguy87, Annis, Silanka, MH, William, EJ, Neysh, Angela, Sonija, UnivrsLVR, AYoung, Keith, Laura P, rowenayesha, Ryan T, Jase, Jonatank, Nts, Richard H, Wilhop, Amber, Jay, Matt, Posamunde, Sarah J, bertiebubble, Pablo, Angie, Richard G, Rosemary, Anthony S, Christopher, Russell, Steve D, Alexandre, Rutzky, Elisabetta, Alexandra, neesan, John, Tim, Kyle, Lucy, Suzanne, Net, Colleen, Jean-François, Mneupsis, Parker, Steve, Ted, C, Bruce, Lauren, David L, Ian, SGG, LadyJ, Gabrielw, Frank, Catherine, Michelle, NJ, Wayne, Peter, Clement, Suren, Odd, Joseph S, Bill, KelleyThatsMe, GregW500, Timothy W, Colleen M, John A, Jasmine B, John G, oja bella, AndyBen, Slappybones13, Steve J, crawfish, K, Yannis, Stephen B, Lord Matton, Lewis, Mats, Kasper, Jorne, Pamzy, Eric, Chris, Aline, Bradley, Emma, Charlotte S, George, Marie, Shawn, Bo, David S, Debbie, GM, HBSuth, Jeffrey, John S, mlhee4, Niniusjolibus, P Braun, Sagar, Sam, Satias, Alex R, Geoffrey S, Jerry, Anthony, Anthony N, buubuubaby, Ike, Karel, Leo, Adrian, Ang, Hagen, Jason, Jermaine, Kan, Kseniia, Lord Nynex, mahs hkgi, MaryAnn, ni13, Aaron, Amar, chexmix, Dawn D, Justme21, Ken P, Stan, Jessica, Vincent, Michael B, Stuart, Michael R, Daniel, Jannel, A.S12, Aaron O, Anthony P, Bee, chris t, Duncan, Jacob K, John D, Michael P, Raul, Carston, A, Ivan, Jose, Kevin D, Khoa Le, Luka, Ramflo, Ryan, Thomas W, Yvette, mary m, Tyron, Leda, S, Felix, greg r, Brandon W, Eric, James J, Juan, Michael W, Mike, Rob W, Youl Correa, Emma, Lizzypai, Matty, Sajid, Shelly, TJ, Marty, Hayden, Giovanni, Aaron W, Andrew Ross B, Brandon B, Les Theriot, Nico, Tim, tovnucut, Metro, Stephan, Gabriel R, Jeremy, Fredrik, Bogdan, Harry, Joshua, ken, nifty.stories, Paul, Ryan W, SteviiGee, tiziano, Anand, Wyndham, Priesta, Chad, Cody, DESunny, Gary, Laila, Quttzik, Tim, Elle, Guido SeventyEight, Dantalien, Oudoud87, Ana L, James A, Richard John A, Sebastiano, Alhamdi, hamadbakhsh, Gernot, Mats S, kabut11, Yaiza, Matthias, Bruce A, Kenny, Roberto

Copyright © 2022 Laura S. Fox

All Rights Reserved

Without limiting the rights under copyright reserved above, no part of this published work may be reproduced, stored, in or introduced into a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form, or by any means without the prior permission of the copyright owner and the publisher.

This Strange World Needs A Kicking! is a work of fiction. Any names, places, events, characters and everything else mentioned in the book are the result of the author's imagination, and are purely used for fictitious purposes. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, places, events and everything else is a pure coincidence.

M/M Fiction

Intended for Mature Audiences Only

This book contains graphic depictions of sexual intercourse between men, and it is not meant for readers who are less than 18 years of age.

Chapter One – Be Careful What You Wish For

“Man, I’m sweating like crazy,” Milo complained and pulled at his collar with a dejected look on his face.

“Only one month left, and we’ll be out of school and out of these uniforms,” Kai hurried to assure him. “Not sure if I want to become a grownup just yet.”

They were behind the school, and only the summer cicadas filled the air with noise. Milo had told him he had something to say to him, and now Kai was curious.

“Come on, man, what did you want to tell me? Did your folks buy you the latest T-box?”

Milo grimaced. “Seriously, dude, are you that ready for your life as a NEET? You’re only thinking about video games all day long.”

“Correction, my dude. I’m not thinking about them. I’m playing them all day long. And night. I’m also watching anime.”

“Yeah. That’s why you’re so pale and skinny.”

Kai laughed and punched his best friend in the shoulder. “So? I have you as my guardian. Nobody dares to touch me while I’m walking side by side with The Beast,” he joked.

Unlike him, Milo was into sports, particularly basketball. On the court, he was focused and determined, which was why he had earned himself that nickname. Also, unlike him, Milo had prospects to go to college in the fall. For now, Kai didn’t have the slightest idea what he wanted to do with his life. Most probably, he would end up scanning barcodes at the supermarket, which pretty much was what he was doing already – part-time – to feed his addiction to games.

The difference between him and Milo was visible from a mile away. Milo was athletic, blond, and handsome, while he was gangly, with dark hair, white skin, and often taken for a goth or emo kid. Some people had never heard of the music revolution.

“So, what did you want to tell me? Here, in the middle of nowhere?”

“We’re behind the school, dude.” Milo looked away for a moment and leaned against the wall.

Kai followed his every move with increased curiosity. “What is it? Now you’re starting to give me the willies.”

Milo laughed for a moment, like he was embarrassed by something, and then ran one hand through his wavy hair. Kai had always secretly envied Milo for his fantastic hair, but he didn’t let petty things get in the way of their friendship.

“What the hell... are you blushing? Ah, I know. You got yourself a girlfriend! You sly dog.”

Milo suddenly looked straight at him. “No, I didn’t. There’s something else I want to tell you, Kai.”

“So? Go ahead already. Or I’m starting to think it’s something bad. Wait, is it something bad?”

“No, no, nothing like that.” Milo inhaled and exhaled. “It’s just something... look, I’ve never seen you with a girl.”

“I’ve never seen you with a girl, either. Seriously, dude, you’re only hanging out with me, and you could have anyone else as a girlfriend or a friend or whatever.”

“I don’t want anyone else.”

Kai couldn’t recall seeing the same intense look in Milo’s eyes, except for when he was playing, and he wanted to score. Did Milo want to score now? “Cool. I mean, it’s cool that I’m your friend. You would be a dumb jock without me.”

“Kai, I’m going to tell you something. Promise me that you’ll be honest when you reply to what I’m about to say.”

“Sure thing. Just spit it out already. I’m boiling in this uniform just as much as you, although I might not look like it.”

Milo looked away again but then set his eyes on Kai. “I’ve always liked you.”

“And? I like you, too, bro.”

“No, like... like.”

Like, like? “Um ...”

“Will you go out with me? On a date? A real date?”

Kai felt his jaw falling, his eyes going out like popcorn, and his knees turning to jelly. He stiffened, pulled back his jaw, and closed his eyes. What the hell was he supposed to answer to that? No, no, no, this wasn’t happening...

If only I got transported to another world like in those cool anime series --

He gasped as the ground beneath his feet suddenly disappeared, and he struggled to open his eyes, but his eyelids were heavy, and he couldn’t move a muscle in his body. The sound of a dreadful wind passed by his ears and a deep fear engulfed him.

Then, just like that, he opened his eyes, and the wind was gone. The first thing he noticed was a high light blue ceiling adorned with delicate filigree the color of gold.

The second was that he was lying on a bed and that the room he was in looked nothing like the back of the high school where he had been only seconds ago.

“What the hell...” he murmured.

“Up already?” A gruff voice asked from his right.

Kai snapped his head toward the source of those words.

The third thing he noticed was the young man in bed with him. A very handsome, very naked man. He had eyes like molten lava and dark hair that caressed his shoulders.

Kai whimpered when the man pushed aside the coverlet, letting him see a... thing of impressive dimensions. He moved his eyes to the filigree on the ceiling in an instant.

“Ready for another round, then?” the man asked.

Another round of... what?

Oh, he needed to say the words out loud if he wanted to be heard. “Another round of... what?”

“Are you done playing with me?” The man scoffed, and much to Kai’s relief, got out of the bed.

Not that it served too much to watch him parade his naked body around. Kai had nothing but bro feelings toward guys, but he couldn’t stop staring. The man had tanned skin, and if anyone needed a model for studying anatomy or art, they could use his body for learning all the group muscles.

He cocked his head and squinted. Yeah, totally, all the muscles were there.

“What are you doing?” the man inquired in a tone that left no room for imagination about what feelings he nurtured toward the other person in the room.

Kai closed his eyes for a moment and then exhaled. “Where am I?”

Now, the man looked at him like he had just escaped from a mental institution.

“Oh, right,” Kai said and pushed himself up on his butt. He put one finger up. “I’ve been transported to another world, and I’m... the hero?”

At that, the man scoffed. “I suppose your people must see you as the hero,” he said through his teeth. “Although I doubt it.”

Kai blinked a few times. The way he got there was wrong on so many levels. First of all, it didn’t look like he had been summoned. There was nothing like some curvy goddess needing him for daring quests, and instead, he had been teleported to some dude’s bed. Not to mention, everything pointed at this world belonging to a particular sub-genre called...

“Boys’ love?” he asked out loud.

The handsome man gave him the evil eye now. He sneered. “Where do you see any boys? Or love?”

Hmm, so it wasn’t? Kai rubbed his chin in thought. He had plenty of questions to ask, but the handsome naked dude didn’t look like a good source for finding information. He was no expert, but he could tell the guy hated his guts.

Which wasn’t fair since they had just met.

His train of thought was interrupted by the huge doors opening. Another attractive young man in butler livery came in, pushing what looked like a mobile food tray. Well, maybe this servant was his guide in this different world.

This one had short blond hair, brushed over his head, and delicate features. However, he wore a sour expression on his face. “Your breakfast, Sire,” he said in a frosty voice that dropped the temperature in the room by at least four-point-five degrees.

Kai eyed the tray on which several plates covered by shiny lids lay. By how the butler slash servant looked at him, he wasn’t sure that food was safe to eat. The guy must have spat in his breakfast or something before coming here.

“I think I’m good,” Kai said and got to his feet.

The naked man stared at him with a mix of disdain and reluctant lust on his face. The servant’s eyes grew wide, and then, he quirked an eyebrow. His lips twitched and stretched into a smirk as he looked down.

Kai did the same and then he realized he was completely naked. But that wasn’t all.

His body didn’t look like his body at all. He quickly searched the room and rushed to the tall mirror in a corner.

His reflection stared back at him in the same disbelief he was feeling. If the mirror wasn’t magic or some serious shit like that, he was a six-foot hunk with platinum blond hair that poured down his back to his waist, eyes the color of blue ice, and lean muscles in all the right places.

“Oh. My. God!” he yelled. He turned toward the other two men, who stared at him in unhidden confusion and disbelief. “I’m hot!”

The servant pursed his lips. “Are you running a fever, Sire? That’s hardly believable. Your Majesty is healthy as a bull.”

Right, right, this was a world where words like ‘hot’ didn’t mean the same thing as they did in this world. Well, he should have been disappointed that his body hadn’t traveled with him, but could that mean...

“I’m overpowered?” he asked out loud.

The servant and the naked guy exchanged alarmed looks. Well, none of them was his guide, for sure, which meant that, at best, they were secondary characters, and his first quest was to find the entity that had summoned him to this world.

“I need to get out of here,” he said matter-of-factly.

“Like that?” the servant asked, pursing his lips in disapproval and letting his eyes travel over Kai’s body once more.

“Right. I need clothes,” Kai said brightly. “What’s your name?” he asked the servant or butler or whatever he was.

The guy stared at him in shock, then looked hurt, and then schooled his face into a neutral expression. “It’s Pepin, Sire. I’ve been serving you for fifteen years.”

“Really?” Kai didn’t hide his surprise. “Like since you were a baby?”

“I was five when I was brought here,” Pepin said slowly, and a frown wrinkled his forehead.

“Ah, so you’re twenty. I’m eighteen,” Kai offered, wanting, for some reason, to make friends with the guy. After all, it looked like he was in charge of the food.

The naked man scoffed.

Oh, right, maybe his character was a little older... He could be twenty-five or so.

“You’re twenty-two, Your Majesty,” Pepin supplied the information.

“Right, right,” Kai hurried to confirm. He needed to watch his mouth. He had no idea what rules governed this world, but maybe he could break the magic that had allowed him to be transported here by saying the wrong things. “And you are...” He turned toward the naked guy, keeping his head stiff so that he wouldn’t look down at the thing between those muscular thighs. The strongest reason was that he didn’t want to trigger himself into a bout of envy. There was no other reason.

The immediate response was a sneer. “Are you sure you don’t know my name? I bet you’ll remember it when you need to communicate it to the executioner.”

Kai grimaced. “The executioner? I won’t do that.”

A skeptical look countered him. “You won’t remember it even then? You’ll just say ‘off with his head’?”

Kai guffawed. “Off with... Seriously, who says that?” Seeing the stricken expression on the other’s face, he reconsidered. “Oh, right. No, I won’t... condemn you to death or stuff like that.”

The man walked closer, with a menacing look on his face. “What kind of new torture do you have in store for me?”

Kai took a few steps back until he met the bed with the back of his legs. For good measure, he climbed backward on the bed and put as much distance as he could between him and that dangerous man. He was no fighter, and he was no lover. Actually, he didn’t have too many skills, to begin with.

“Sir Conrad.” Pepin hurried to stop the menace from advancing by placing himself between them. “I believe His Majesty is not quite himself today. I advise you to withdraw to your quarters and wait for further orders.”

“Which are? To put my neck in a noose on my own accord?”

“Let’s not get so dramatic here,” Kai found himself talking. “It must be a show for kids.”

The moment the words left his mouth, he knew he was getting ahead of himself. What show for kids showed full-frontal male nudity? Shit, it could be that Conrad’s worries were not exaggerations.

“Look,” he put both hands up, “as long as I’m here, no one is going to execute you or anything.” Technically, not a lie. “Ah, here’s a better idea. Why don’t you go somewhere that’s not here? Like your home or something?” he suggested, pleased with his idea. This way, he could send Conrad out of harm’s way even if he didn’t stick around for too long.

Conrad’s face twisted with hatred. Pepin put both hands on his chest to keep him. “Why are you taunting me like this? Tired of me already? Don’t I have any more use for you?”

“Nope,” Kai said. He could guess the ‘use’ Conrad was talking about. And he definitely didn’t want to be part of that, even if it was a BL show. No, he would play this his way. “I have no more use for you. You’re free to leave.” He gestured with his hands to shoo away Conrad.

“I have no place to go, no home,” Conrad started, and his voice heated, “because of you!”

Oh, shit. That was bad. “Hmm, but don’t you have like relatives? An aunt in the countryside, stuff like that?”

Pepin proved too weak to keep Conrad. Kai yelped as it took Conrad only two seconds to push the servant away and reach him. They fell on the bed, Conrad’s hands wrapped around his throat.

Out of instinct and not because he thought himself capable of fighting off that killing machine, he grabbed the guy's wrists and squeezed.

Much to his surprise, the intense look of hatred on Conrad's face turned into pain and the tight grip on his throat loosened. "I am overpowered!" he exclaimed as he moved Conrad's hands away and pushed him off him with ease.

Kai looked at his hands in disbelief. Conrad was in the middle of the room, and the look in his eyes was now that of a hurt and humiliated man. For a second, Kai felt triumphant, but then he winced. It wasn't like him to belittle others since he was generally helpless, and he wasn't capable of hurting anyone, anyway.

But wait, now he could. Yet, that shouldn't change who he was. He scratched his head. Where was the damned guide or whoever summoned him and all that?

Pepin grabbed Conrad by one arm. "You need to go to your room, now, Sir Conrad," he said in a stern tone.

Conrad threw him one last look, and he walked out of the room with his shoulders hunched. Kai felt really bad about that.

Now, he was supposed to get dressed and go scout the perimeter. Later, if he got stuck around long enough, he would find a way to send Conrad someplace where he wasn't threatened to lose his head or hang or whatever.

Kai stopped for a moment. But what if Conrad was the villain? What if he deserved it? Hmm, that complicated things. Okay, so the guy hated his guts, but he didn't have the narrow, evil eyes of a villain.

That he needed to find out. But, first, he needed clothes. He walked over to a closet and opened it. "Wow," he whispered as he took in the beautiful silk shirts and coats with delicate embroidery. "I'm not only smoking hot, I'm loaded!" What he looked at was, most probably, the equivalent of having a closet full of designer clothes in the real world.

Real world... Kai pondered for a moment. Could it be that he was dreaming?

The doors behind him opened and closed with a bang that startled him. He turned to find Pepin staring at him with burning eyes. "What is wrong with you, Sebastian?"

Ah, so that was his name in this strange world.

Sebastian steeled himself as invisible vines wrapped around his body, pulling him down. He was in a dream, a strange, vivid dream, and all he needed to do was wake up. He willed his eyelids to open, but to no avail. His body was growing heavier and heavier, and he was falling.

Could it be a curse? His entire body became taut as his mind searched for answers.

And suddenly, the heaviness disappeared, and he opened his eyes.

Before him, a new world lay. Behind a stone fence, strange-looking contraptions in shiny colors moved like guided by magic. He closed his eyes again. He was probably still dreaming.

“Hey, I know it’s not exactly what you wanted to hear from your best friend, but could you say something?” an anxious voice asked from his left.

Sebastian squeezed his eyelids. Last night... ah, he had enjoyed Conrad’s skillful ministrations as a lover, and he had been delighted to discover that the captive prince did live up to his reputation. Of course, the fact that Conrad had hated it every step of the way made it all the more delicious, although he had been a bit too enthusiastic to have truly hated it...

“Kai, could you please not ignore me?” the pleading from before started again.

Sebastian opened his eyes, and the same view from before welcomed him. He turned his head, and his eyes met a chin. A strong, chiseled chin. Hmm, this person appeared to be quite tall. Sebastian looked up and stared at a pair of green eyes and a handsome young face. If it was a curse, the witches that must have cooked it loved an irony. They probably knew his weakness regarding good-looking men.

Therefore, he needed to be cautious about this messenger, no matter how handsome. “Who are you, commoner?”

The young man was dressed in a simple dark coat and a white shirt. He had wavy hair the color of gold, and a particularly delicious mouth.

No, he needed to keep his lust in check. He had already debated with himself so much whether keeping Conrad was a good idea after all. His weakness would be the death of him.

“Commoner? Really, man? Are you going to try to get rid of me by pretending to be some character?”

The way the commoner spoke was strange. First of all, that was no way to address a prince and Prince Sebastian of all people.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes and stretched one arm. He wore the same dark clothes as the other young man, and from the cuff of his shirt, jutted out a bony hand. Surprised, he moved his hands to his face.

What a mighty curse! He couldn't say exactly what was different, but he had been shrunk! He grabbed the commoner by the front of his shirt and pulled him close so that they could be level with one another. The beautiful green eyes stared at him in unhidden surprise.

"Tell me," he said through his teeth, "what do you see?"

"Um, that you lost your mind a little over my asking you out on a date?"

"A date?" Sebastian was sure by now his eyes had turned to slits. No one resisted his icy look, no one. "What is that, a date?"

The young man laughed and blushed. "You know, go out to the movies or the arcade, and then grab a bite or something like that."

Sebastian couldn't understand half of it. "To what end?" The curse wanted something from him, without a doubt. He now needed to learn what.

"Um, I don't know... maybe... a kiss?" The commoner bit his lower lip.

Sebastian swallowed hard. Damn his weakness! "A kiss?" That thing he understood. So, he only needed to kiss this stranger in plain clothes, and he would return to his realm?

There had never been stranger or sweeter curses then. He pulled the commoner close and pressed his lips against that enrapturing mouth.

It was as sweet as he imagined, so Sebastian bit on the lower lip the commoner had so enticingly teased just earlier. A small surprised gasp was the answer, and the beautiful mouth opened to him. Sebastian grabbed the other by the back of the head and moved his tongue for a full, hopefully satisfying taste.

The other was hesitant in front of his attack, so Sebastian leaned forward, trying to get more. Firm hands came on his shoulders, and he was pushed back gently. The commoner looked flustered. "Oh, Kai, I had no idea. I mean... did you... I mean..."

Hmm, the curse hadn't been lifted. Sebastian looked around. The commoner appeared to be a simpleton, and he was probably just a trick used by the witches to stray him from the real purpose of this trial.

The commoner let go of him and straightened his clothes. "I should head home," he said and looked down. "But, man," he laughed like he couldn't believe something, "I'll see you later, right?"

Hopefully not, although the young man was beautiful. He chose not to reply. The commoner walked over to him and gave him a clumsy kiss on the cheek. "Bye, Kai."

So, his assigned name in this strange world was Kai. As the stranger walked away, Sebastian acted on impulse and called after him, "What's your name?"

The young man laughed. "You're pulling my leg, right? I'm Milo Bennett and I'm the happiest guy in the world!" he yelled and threw his arms up while tilting his head back with a delighted smile.

Milo Bennett. What a strange name. As for being the happiest man in the world, he had to be mistaken.

Simpleton.

Milo disappeared from view, and Sebastian stared after him for a while as he considered his next step. The shiny colored contraptions passed by the stone fence at astonishing speeds. Maybe he would catch one.

He touched his waist and grimaced at the lack of his trusty sword. But he had his ice magic, and that was enough.

He jumped over the fence and winced at the pain in his feet when he landed on the other side. One look at the thin fabric covering his feet convinced him that this world lacked proper footwear.

He stepped on the road marked by white lines and waited for one of those contraptions. Calmly, he put one hand up when he saw one approaching, and then he noticed that a human manned it.

The thing screeched to a halt, and the human inside began shouting something while a deafening sound came ringing from the contraption. That was a strange sort of magic the human used, or maybe he was trapped inside and needed saving.

With measured steps, Sebastian walked over, searching for ways to gain entrance. The human, a bald man, opened a door on his side. "Are you crazy, kid?" he yelled.

Sebastian looked around. Who was this crazy kid he was talking about?

"Damn wackos," the bald man said and closed the door.

Before Sebastian could say a word, he took off and disappeared around a corner.

"Kai, what are you doing?" someone called for him.

He turned his head to see a girl who could be no older than twelve, with her hair tied in pigtails. She was wearing a dark dress and white shirt and had a bag on her back. And she was staring at him like he had horns.

She pursed her lips and hurried to him. Then she grabbed him by the hand. “Mom is going to be so pissed once she hears you were trying to do Goku on the street.”

Mom? Goku? What was this strange girl talking about?

“So?” he asked.

She must be his next clue in getting rid of the curse.

“So?” she asked in an angry voice. Then, she suddenly changed tack and stared at him with shining eyes while her lips stretched in a grin. “Pay for my silence.”

Hmm, what could that mean?

Chapter Two – A Weakness For... What?!

Kai forced a smile at Pepin, hoping that he didn't look like a psychopath while doing that. From what he had noticed when looking at his reflection in the mirror, his character didn't look inclined to smile much.

"Nothing's wrong, Pepin," he said in a haughty voice that actually sounded like it belonged to a character like that. Good, good, he had this one in the bag.

His servant pursed his lips and continued to inspect him with shrewd and judging eyes. Kai was sure that if it continued like that, he would end up wilting under that stare.

"You don't fool me." Pepin looked away for a moment. "Getting... that kind of attention from Sir Conrad, and all night long... What kind of nonsense were you talking about earlier?" He seemed to stumble over his own words, but eventually, he straightened up, hands behind the back.

"I was just trying to keep you, guys, on your toes. You know, to see if you were paying attention," Kai said promptly.

Pepin blinked a couple of times. "Paying attention to what?"

Kai placed his hands on his hips. Now was the moment when he would prove that he deserved to be called His Majesty. Did that mean he was a king? Maybe more like a prince...

"To me, of course," he replied, puffing out his chest.

That only appeared to puzzle Pepin further. "Why wouldn't I pay attention to you? I live to serve."

Kai had an inkling Pepin had been about to drop a secret, and by the blush coloring the height of his cheeks, he could only guess. Of course, that was the natural guess since he, apparently, had landed in a BL show, which meant that his servant could have feelings for him. Not him him, but this royal dude whose body he had grabbed while transferring into this world.

"Ah, you see, Pepin," Kai said in a cheerful tone, "I have to check. For instance, name my most important superpower. Points if you can name a second one."

"Superpower?" Pepin said slowly.

Ugh, no superpowers? Now that was lame.

"Do you mean your ice magic?" Pepin added.

Ice magic? Cool. So cool.

“Hmm, you’re doing good so far, lad.”

“Lad?”

Right, they were close in age, and probably speaking like a seventy-year-old grandpa wasn’t exactly how Sebastian talked.

“Never mind. Now, you’re not off the hook. How is it that I use my magic? How do I do it?”

Pepin seemed to ponder for a moment. “I don’t know exactly. I’m not a magic wielder. What I do know is that it is enough for you to look at things and --”

“I shoot lasers from my eyes?”

Pepin didn’t have time to comment on that or ask what ‘lasers’ were that Kai decided to try his skill by looking at a vase on a large table. He narrowed his eyes and focused, and in an instant, the vase splintered into pieces. There was white smoke coming from them, like that coming from a bath of nitrogen.

“And I will have to clean that,” Pepin said matter-of-factly, after his initial shock and a slight sound of surprise.

Kai liked Pepin and his attitude. He seemed a cool guy, and he was only two years older. Plus, he had said something about living to serve, which meant that they could work out something.

“Wow, it’s so cool to have ice magic.”

“I suppose it is cool,” Pepin replied, as he produced, like out of nowhere, a small broom, and a dustpan.

Again, cool probably only meant cold in this world. Now, he had other priorities. He needed to dress up, walk around the castle, look for more answers, and, particularly, for his summoner.

“What should I wear?” he said to himself as he continued to inspect the content of his closet.

“I’ve drawn you a bath while you were still sleeping,” Pepin said.

“It’s all right, I don’t need one.”

“Are you sure, Your Majesty? You kept Conrad in your bed all night long.”

There was an insinuation there, Kai could tell. Wait, so it was a BL show... so he must have... but he seemed to be the guy in charge...

He moved a little and squeezed his butt. Then, he relaxed. There was definitely something feeling weirdly... moist? Oh, the horror, he realized. So he was pushing Conrad around, and he wasn’t even... how was that term... on top? He was how his sister, Tani, said, the... uke?!

He had wished to be transported to a different world, and someone was pulling a prank on him. Right, he had wished for that because Milo had suddenly confessed to him... Hmm, that might have played a role in messing up the transfer.

“I’ll take that bath,” he said brightly.

It wasn’t his body, and he hadn’t done anything naughty with a dude, but damn, that felt weird.

“Very well.” Pepin began moving toward a door that had to connect the main room to the bathroom.

Kai followed the servant into a bathroom the size of a dining room. A bathtub cut in marble occupied the center, and there was a pleasant scent of roses in the air. He walked to the tub and grimaced at the rose petals floating on the surface. The people in this world were so extra.

With a shrug, he stepped into the water. It was still warm. He noticed Pepin standing there.

“Shall we begin, Sire?”

“Begin what? Oh, I can wash myself. Just pass me the soap and leave some towels.”

Pepin stared at him with narrow eyes. Hmm, he must have said something weird again. “Are you thinking of replacing me, Sire? Are you not happy with my service?”

Everybody seemed keen on jumping to conclusions, even if he had his best intentions in mind. Conrad thought him capable of executing him, although all he wanted was to have his royal ass left alone, and now Pepin thought he would get fired when he just wished to see to his bath by himself, like any normal person.

“I am perfectly happy. I just don’t want to be, you know, babied all the time.”

“Prince Sebastian,” Pepin said in a stern voice, “please, don’t be cruel. Is it because I just called you by your name earlier?”

Kai sighed and let himself sink into the water for a moment. Pepin probably had some crazy idea about washing him like he was some helpless baby. After realizing that the body he resided in had received plenty of... ahem, attention from a guy, he wasn’t ready for another dude touching him everywhere.

He re-emerged from the water only to find Pepin really close. He yelped in a definitely non-royal manner. “Ugh, man, you scared me.”

Pepin’s eyes were a dark shade of blue, he noticed. And he was pretty, even prettier than some of the girls Kai had crushed on during all his high school years.

And he looked like he was about to cry.

“No, no, no,” he started. “Don’t cry.”

“I’m not crying, Your Majesty.”

“But you’re about to.”

“I’m not.”

“Stop lying.”

Pepin’s face scrunched up. Yeap, he was about to release the waterworks. He had seen Tani doing that plenty of times to know what he was dealing with.

Kai closed his eyes and groaned. “Do you want to wash my back?” he asked, completely resigned with his fate for the moment.

“Certainly, Your Majesty,” Pepin chirped.

Kai looked at him. The guy seemed completely chill now. Ah, he should have known. Tani had fooled him plenty of times with that. Why did he never learn?

Pepin moved behind him and first pushed his hair away. He did something, and soon Kai could tell that his long hair had been twisted into an elaborate braid on top of his head. He groaned when Pepin grabbed his shoulders and began massaging them. “Oh, oh, this is, wow, you’re good, Pepin.”

“I know what Your Majesty likes,” Pepin said quickly.

That was quite the change in attitude, Kai pondered. First, Pepin had entered the room with a sour face, then he had challenged him, but now he acted like a servant scared of losing his job.

Or more?

His mind gears began turning. “Am I the villain?” he asked out loud.

Pepin’s hands stopped for a moment. “No one would dare to say that to your face, Sire,” he said airily.

Oh, damn. Hmm, that complicated things. Villains didn’t have it good in most shows, although they did have good hair, and that was where this Sebastian character seemed to excel.

“What about behind my back?”

“Is that another trick question for me to see if I’m paying attention?” Pepin asked.

Kai said nothing when Pepin pushed him forward and then sank his hands somewhere lower. “Hey, that’s --” he stopped as he felt Pepin’s fingers along his crack. “That’s not in your job description!”

Pepin didn’t seem willing to stop. But when he reached his balls from behind, Kai stood abruptly. “All right, that’s enough for today. I feel completely refreshed. Where is that towel?”

He grabbed it from Pepin’s hand and wrapped it quickly around his waist as he stepped out of the bathtub. Despite his protests, Pepin rushed after him with another towel to dry his hair.

“Now quit following me everywhere, Pepin. It’s annoying. Just get me some clothes I can wear.”

Pepin seemed happy with the order and disappeared into the closet, only to re-emerge with what looked like a riding outfit.

Kai stared at him. “Remind me the order of the day, Pepin.”

Pepin no longer questioned why his master seemed incapable of remembering the simplest things. It looked like Prince Sebastian – who he was right now – was a pretty mercurial character, which meant that not many people would care to contradict him even if he said weird things.

“You will inspect the troops first and train the knights. After that, a light lunch will be served. Then, you will have to meet the court and listen to their grievances --”

Kai groaned and grabbed the outfit from Pepin’s arms. “This sounds so boring. When do I get to fight monsters?”

Pepin remained undisturbed. “Tomorrow. The dragon cave to the west is stirring trouble again.”

“Dragons? For real?”

A small frown from his servant let him know that it wasn’t a good idea to push it.

“Right, dragons. Easy-peasy. They have fire, I have ice magic. Sounds like a piece of cake.”

Why did they have to be so many buttons? Pepin slapped his hands away and began to do the buttons on the vest for him.

That was so weird. Not the fact that someone else was helping him dress up, but the fact that Pepin was so close and smelled nice. Oh, no, what if he was starting to get BL thoughts now?

Pepin looked up, and their eyes met. Sebastian was pretty tall, or Pepin was really short. Definitely, very delicate, and now Kai was starting to get Tani always fawning over her 2D sweethearts from various anime and manga. Prince Sebastian’s faithful servant was the definition of a bishonen – beautiful boy – and Kai had to admit that his heart was beating a little faster.

He shook his head. “All right, then. Lead me to where I need to train the troops,” he ordered in a strained voice.

“Are you sure, Your Majesty? I have a lot of chores --”

“No more chores for you today,” Kai said brightly. He needed Pepin as an ally until he found the person that had called him and figured out what to do. “Find someone else to do it. It is a big castle, right?” By the size of his quarters, he hoped that was a safe assumption. “And you can just call me Sebastian when we’re alone. I won’t fire you. Pinky promise.” He put out his pinky to seal the deal.

Pepin was staring at him, wide-eyed. “I suppose I can do that. But I’m not letting anyone else in charge of your food.”

That sobered Kai instantly. “Would someone try to poison me?”

“You are too precious for the kingdom to leave such things at chance.”

Ah, great, so he was, at least, an unlikeable character.

“Was it enough? Last night?” Pepin asked in a quiet and tense voice.

“Um?” Kai was lost in thought, so he missed Pepin coming closer.

It was too late to fend off the attack. The servant wrapped his arms around his neck and kissed him on the lips. For a moment, strange dizziness grabbed him, but as Pepin’s kiss grew more daring – oh, gawd, there was definitely tongue! – his mind cleared.

He pushed Pepin away carefully, afraid that his superior strength might just send the delicate boy across the room as he had done with Conrad.

Pepin’s eyes were misty, and his eyelashes fluttered prettily. Tani would kill him if she knew the situation he was in right now with this bishonen. Yeah, she would totally have his head.

“Ugh, okay, thanks, I guess,” Kai said and scratched his head. “But what was that for?”

Pepin blushed and rubbed the back of his neck with one hand. “I know you require it daily.”

He was definitely part of a BL story. “It’s all right. I won’t require it from now on. Look at the bright side, Pepin. One less chore for you,” he said cheerfully.

Pepin’s beautiful eyes shot daggers at him. “Because you have Conrad?”

Right, the naked and handsome killing machine that Sebastian appeared to like doing the nasty with.

“No, I won’t require him, either,” Kai said in a measured tone.

“Are you cured, then?”

Cured? Oh, damn. He was pretty sure he wouldn't like what he was just about to hear, but he asked anyway, “Cured of what?”

“Your weakness,” Pepin said. “For handsome men.”

Kai groaned internally. That was just great. There had to be some silly BL plot to get him in trouble. “What does it mean? Do I have to do naughty things with guys for mana or stuff like that?”

Pepin seemed a bit lost. “Mana? You don't use mana. And no, you don't have to. It's just... your weakness.”

Kai sighed in relief. It would have been a bummer to have to avoid using his ice magic. “Ah, my weakness, of course. I have everything in check, trust me. Last night cured me.”

Pepin's eyes narrowed with a look of suspicion. “Cured you?”

“Yes, Pepin. You don't have to repeat everything after me, like a parakeet. Now, where is that food?”

He suddenly felt famished. Or it was just the body he currently inhabited.

Pepin hurried with the tray and began removing the lids. “It's cold now,” he said accusingly.

Kai looked at all the exquisite little plates with stars in his eyes. Being royalty surely had its perks. He reached for a tiny croissant and then reconsidered. He threw Pepin a pointed look. “Be honest with me. Did you spit in my food?”

Pepin gasped in righteous outrage. “I would never!”

Kai shrugged. “Good. I was just wondering.” He grabbed the croissant and moaned in delight.

Pepin sat by his side and began creating perfect bite-sized morsels, which he began to push into his face.

“Seriously? I'm not even eating by myself?” Kai asked with his mouth full.

Pepin smiled sweetly at him. He could only guess that there was something else behind that smile.

The girl dragged him after her, and, for the moment, Sebastian chose to follow without question. This curse was strange, and unlike others he had had to deal with before. Therefore, for the time being, he had to become a keen observer of his surroundings.

They walked for a while, the girl chatting all the time about things Sebastian could make little sense of. To understand this strange world and get rid of the curse, maybe he would have to learn this gibberish.

In the meantime, he looked around. They were on a street unlike others he had in his world, and there were no horses or carriages. Instead, those shiny contraptions kept flying by, moved by who knew what dark forces.

The girl dragged him to a flight of stairs leading underground. Could that be his first trial? His guide appeared to care not for dangers as she began descending. Other people – perhaps other adventurers trapped in this strange world – poured down.

He stopped. The girl looked at him with an annoyed expression. “What is it now?”

“Do you expect me to walk into danger without a sword?”

The girl rolled her eyes. “It’s the subway. The only danger we have to fend off are people getting on the train faster than us.”

Subway? Train?

“Are you trying to cosplay someone?” The girl squinted at him. “Because you suck. Now let’s go. Mom should be home by now and waiting for us with dinner.”

Dinner, he could understand. Mom was another term he was familiar with. Apparently, he had been cursed with a family in this strange world and a handsome commoner who wanted kisses in exchange for dates, whatever those dangerous things were. This little girl pretended to be his sister, but Sebastian was ready for her to change into a three-headed monster at any moment.

“What is your name, little girl?”

“You’re extra weird today,” she commented. “I’m Princess Tani-Bani-Lulu-Chan,” she added in a high-pitched voice and curtsied.

A princess, then. Well, that meant that he was still royalty in this world. Not that anyone appeared to offer him the required respect, but strange worlds came with strange rules.

He took a bow. “Delighted to make your acquaintance, Your Highness.”

The girl started laughing hysterically. “Wow, you’re really in character.”

She kept taunting him. Of course! She believed him to be her brother, and he had just acted as if he had met her for the first time. He would have to pay more attention to his actions from now on.

They stepped on a shiny platform and appeared to be waiting for something, just like the rest of the adventurers. Sebastian examined them. None seemed equipped properly for slaying monsters.

“Tani-Bani-Lulu-Chan,” he said, “are you sure there will be enough loot for everyone? If only I had my sword, I would make sure to kill the monster in one strike and secure the victory for our house.”

“Just call me Tani, you idiot,” she said as she slapped her forehead and dragged her palm over her face with a groan. “People are starting to stare at us.”

Sebastian shrugged. Attention never bothered him. The more, the merrier. He was about to ask a man dressed in a stylish coat and pants what kind of weapon he carried in that bag he held in his hand when a loud noise announced to him that the monster was approaching.

He would have to use his magic. The monster rushed in, but it wasn't met with the usual clamor of warriors getting ready for battle. It was a strange-looking thing, made from metal and glass, and... it had people in it!

Tani squeezed his hand and dragged him along. After the people inside poured outside, the ones on the platform walked inside the belly of the beast.

“Oh, it is like a carriage,” he said out loud.

Several pairs of eyes examined him with curiosity.

“Good day,” he said to one of the strangers. “A good day to you, too.”

It wasn't his habit to address commoners first, but the people in this world seemed to have no idea of manners.

“What the hell, Kai?” Tani hissed at him. “Just grab the bar already.”

Sebastian looked up and then noticed that everyone standing was holding on to that bar. Of course, it was probably how the carriage moved. So people in this world were magic wielders. Except, of course, for the ones sitting. They did appear to be old or weak in some way or another.

Tani wrapped her arm around his. Sebastian drew one breath as he felt the floor under his feet moving. And then, they delved into a dark abyss.

He felt a bit sick to his stomach as he walked back to light. Tani then dragged him to a tall building.

“Is this our palace?” It was taller than his residence back in his world, which could mean that he enjoyed a higher station in this one. “Am I the king?” he whispered to himself.

Tani scoffed. “Would you stop with the weirdness? People kept staring at us on the subway because you kept on yelling weird stuff at each stop.”

He had been amazed at the capacity of the metal beast to have people come and go like that, without falter or signs of tiredness. The magic in this world had to be truly powerful.

They entered the building, and Sebastian expected Tani to take him to one of the doors on the ground floor. Instead, she pulled him toward a metal door and pushed him inside a small room with a mirror and a metal panel.

Without telling him anything, she closed the door and pressed her finger on one of the buttons on the metal panel. Sebastian staggered as the room moved. “What is this?” he asked and grabbed one of the metal bars on the side to avoid losing his balance.

Tani threw him another annoyed look. “It’s just the elevator. I hope you didn’t want us to take the stairs to the sixth floor.”

He turned toward the mirror and froze. He wasn’t himself anymore. He was a scrawny young man with dark hair and pale skin. Some of his traits could point out at him being a vampire, but he had walked in the sun just fine, so that wasn’t his class. He scrutinized himself. This body looked weak. And he had to find a place where he could see if he still had his magic.

Maybe it was a good idea to keep his mouth shut for a while. This world had to have scholars and a library from which he could learn more about it without depending on this hysterical little girl.

A small plink came from one of his pockets. Then another followed. He chose to ignore it.

“Aren’t you going to check your phone?” Tani asked. “And what’s the deal with you and Milo?”

Milo was the commoner’s name.

“There is no deal,” Sebastian said haughtily. “And I check my phone as I see fit. It requires no tending now.”

“Whatever,” Tani said with a shrug.

The room stopped, and Tani opened the door. They walked onto a platform and headed over to a door.

“It was about time that you two made an appearance,” a woman in her forties welcomed them. She had short curly hair and a tired expression on her face. “Go wash your hands and come to the table.”

Sebastian looked around. If they were royalty, they surely preferred to live in small quarters. The walls and the ceiling were bland. However, a pleasant smell of food tickled his nostrils. He was quite hungry, he realized.

Tani opened another door and began washing her hands at a fountain spouting water from a wall. Sebastian followed and examined everything with intrigued eyes. He observed Tani as she touched a knob and made the fountain stop.

He ignored her as she wiped her hands and waited until she was gone. Then, he touched the knob. Nothing happened. Ah, he had to turn it, he realized.

“What an astonishing thing,” he murmured. He placed his hands under the fresh stream of water and washed his hands and face thoroughly.

He turned the knob again, and the water stopped. Then, he noticed a similar knob on the other side of the spout. He turned it and placed his hand under the stream.

“Oh,” he exclaimed when hot water burned his skin.

He quickly turned the knob to stop it. What a handy and strange invention! They were probably sitting on top of a hot spring.

That meant that, despite appearances, they were a wealthy family.

“Are you coming already, Kai?” Tani called from behind the door. “Mom says that she didn’t spend hours cooking so that you couldn’t give a damn about her food.”

Strange, Sebastian thought as he wiped his hands. They had cold and hot water on command, but their mother didn’t have anyone to do the cooking.

They had to be a very eccentric wealthy family.

Chapter Three – This Body Rules/Is An Utter Disappointment

Kai held back his excitement with much difficulty as he hopped on the back of a black horse with elegant ease. Having this body surely kicked butt. He wondered just how good he was. Prince Sebastian was strong enough to kick a man the size of Conrad across the room and had ice lasers in his eyes, which, again, was pretty damned cool.

It served a lot that his body knew by itself what to do because he had never been on the back of a horse in his life. The troops were gathered on a large field, and Kai let the horse trot as he pretended that he knew what he was doing while looking over the armed men.

The horse also appeared to know when to stop and turn toward the troops. Hmm, was he supposed to hold a speech?

“Fellow men,” he started. Hmm, was that how it was done? Impassive eyes met him. “Tomorrow, we will slain some dragons.”

There was no reaction from the gathered men.

“This is all. Dismissed!” he shouted.

Nobody moved. The impassive eyes now seemed full of dismay.

Pepin hurried to him on the back of a smaller horse. “Your Majesty,” he whispered angrily, “you’re supposed to yell at them and tell them how bad they did on the last expedition.”

“How bad they did on the last expedition?” Kai whispered back.

Pepin seemed taken aback by his question. “They saved all the villages along the border and brought with them supplies for an entire year.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound so bad, right?”

Another discomfited reaction from Pepin confirmed that he had, actually, a tough time staying in character.

“All right.” He turned toward the troops again. “Last time, you sucked. Big time. I mean, come on, supplies for just one year?”

“It was all the villagers could spare.”

Kai turned toward Conrad, who was also on horseback and coming toward him. He wore a red coat that looked like it had been made to order and the same disgruntled expression on his face.

“What are you doing here?” Kai leaned slightly to one side and threw Conrad a questioning look.

“I am your royal concubine, whether I like it or not. You enlisted my services,” Conrad said through his teeth.

“Ah, okay.” It made perfect sense. Not really. “So the people couldn’t spare any more food. Is that it?”

“Yes.”

“Then it’s all ‘kay,” he said with a shrug. “Good job, people.” To emphasize that, he turned his thumbs up and grinned.

Panicked whispers were coming from the troops now.

“Seriously,” Kai said louder. “From now on, when we save a village or whatever, take only what the people can spare. All right? Are we good?”

There was no more movement, and all the eyes were on him, now filled with fear. Damn, he really was some sort of villain.

“Can I dismiss them now?” He turned toward Pepin.

“You’ll have to train the knights,” his servant reminded him.

“Of course. Everyone but the knights dismissed!” he shouted.

“The knights are waiting for you at the jousting grounds,” Pepin whispered.

Right. The troops in front of him were all on foot.

“Then why aren’t we already there?” he asked Pepin like it was the servant’s fault that his master was a scatterbrain. “Come on, let’s go.”

Conrad followed them at a short distance.

“Does he really have to be everywhere I go?” he asked Pepin and threw one look over his shoulder at the – his – royal concubine.

“Your Majesty, do you really want to get rid of him? It would break his heart.”

“Really? He hates my guts. And he thinks that by getting rid of him I’m trying to break his neck, not his heart.”

“Break his neck? Ah, you mean,” Pepin said and made a discreet move with his hand across his neck.

Kai snickered. He was starting to infect Pepin with his stupidity. “Yeah. Between you and me, because he doesn’t believe me, I have no intention to do that. I just don’t need him anymore.”

“Why are you talking to your servant about me?”

Kai let out a small yelp. He hadn't noticed Conrad getting so close.

“Because you're annoying, and I don't know how to deal with you,” Kai said promptly. “BL or whatever, I'm not interested, okay.”

“Ah, so it's true,” Conrad said. “You just wanted to make your servant jealous by bringing me to your bed.”

“Say what?” Kai asked quickly.

It wasn't enough that it was a BL story. He was caught in a frigging love triangle! Ugh, that meant double the danger.

“I am not jealous,” Pepin said from the tip of his lips and turned his head away from both of them.

“You're not?” Conrad hissed. “Then why do I have to wear such tight clothes? I can barely breathe in them. It's surely your hand in this. I don't see how my garments could have shrunken overnight.”

Kai threw Conrad a cursory look. “Are they too tight? You look pretty awesome in them.”

Pepin looked at him, and he seemed surprised at his reaction. Ah, so the servant wasn't completely unaware of what must have happened to Conrad's clothes.

Conrad unbuttoned his coat, revealing a sculpted chest. “And I have no shirt!”

Kai stared for a moment. All right, he needed to focus. *Be gone, BL thoughts!* “Pepin, why doesn't Conrad have a shirt?”

Pepin appeared quite ready to throw a hissy fit. He put his heels in the sides of his horse and rode away with a pissed-off look on his face. “Because Your Majesty prefers him naked, anyway!” he threw over his shoulder.

“Hmm,” Kai barely managed. Great, now he was alone with Conrad, which wasn't exactly ideal. Who knew what lewd thoughts crossed the guy's mind right this moment?

“You're letting him get away with anything,” Conrad accused as soon as Pepin was out of earshot. “And you're taking him with you everywhere now? Does it mean that you're going to put him in my stead?”

“In your what?”

Conrad looked ahead. How come a proud man like that could settle for becoming a royal concubine? It had to be only because of the BL plot, or otherwise, it made no sense. "I would rather you not torture me like this, but very well, do as you wish."

Kai grabbed Conrad's arm. "Conrad, look," he said, "no one will get your place, all right?"

The molten lava eyes inspected him for signs of lying, without a doubt.

"Cross my heart," he added. "Now I have some knights --"

He gasped when Conrad grabbed him and pressed their mouths together. They had to be riding pretty close for the guy to pull a stunt like that. Kai felt his eyelids growing a bit heavy and his chest getting warm as Conrad brushed his lips forcefully against his.

No way was he getting any more tongue from a dude today! He pushed Conrad away, but just as measuredly as he had done with Pepin.

Conrad licked his lips and followed his every move with heated eyes.

"Um, about this, though," Kai started, "can we not do it?" That was a good idea.

"So that you can do it with your servant?"

Kai groaned. "What the hell is wrong with you, people? Why does everyone want to sleep with me?" Well, it was an exaggeration, maybe, as they only seemed bent on kissing him, but still.

"Why? Are you really asking that question? You're Prince Sebastian. Gods forbid someone didn't do your bidding or it would be hell to pay," Conrad said tersely.

"And I have no idea what you mean by that," Kai said under his breath. "Now let's go to the jousting grounds, to kick some knight's ass."

Conrad looked at him with a stricken expression in his eyes. "Even with the knights? Just how perverted are you?"

"That's so frigging rich," Kai moaned, "coming from a dude who just tried to stuff his tongue down my throat."

"I certainly did not," Conrad said, obviously taking offense.

"You did. Good thing I kept my mouth close," Kai said back. "You went all forceful on me."

"You ordered me all night long to do that to you."

Kai rolled his eyes and looked at the azure skies, hoping for an answer. "I mean it, Conrad. You look like a cool dude. You can just forget about doing... that kind of things with me. I'm not

firing you from being the royal concubine since you care so much, but I'm not going to require, um, that kind of services from you."

"I am not about to fall into the same trap again. Now what do you want to do with the knights?"

"Definitely not the kind of thing I did with you last night," Kai said. "I'm not a manwhore!" Hopefully not, or cool ice magic and other stuff were wasted on Prince Sebastian.

"Keep that thought, Your Majesty," Conrad said with a smirk. "That is not what I've heard about you."

Kai sighed. All right, so having superpowers came with drawbacks, but why did he have to be a manwhore in a BL story? Whatever, as a true hero, he would have to navigate this world with skill and determination, even if it meant fending off the advances of his sex slave along the way.

Sebastian took place at the small table and looked at the sad vegetable stew on his plate. "Is this the first course?" he asked.

The mother, whose name he hadn't learned yet, looked at him with stern eyes. "As if you would finish even one. I don't understand how you have no appetite at your age, but still managed to grow like weed."

No appetite? He had a legendary appetite. But this gangly body in which he was trapped for now apparently cared little for food. Without commenting, he began to eat. From the corner of one eye, he spied on Princess Tani. She was fiddling with a magical item that looked like a thin rectangular box. She kept tapping on it and giggling from time to time.

"I said 'no phone at the table'," the mother said sternly.

Ah, so that was the phone Tani was talking about. And he seemed to have one of his own. That was the sort of thing he would have to examine at length later.

The food was not much to look at, but it had just the right amount of flavor. However, the portion on his plate proved to be unsatisfying. He would just have to wait for the second course once everyone finished theirs.

"Do you want seconds?" the mother asked him.

Confused, he looked at her.

"I'll fill up your plate again just to witness the wonder," she said and grabbed his empty plate.

Oh, that was what she meant by ‘seconds’. It wasn’t like him to eat so much of the same food, but it appeared that this family was down on their luck. Maybe the only wealth they still had was the hot spring underneath the building.

His quest couldn’t be to solve this family’s problems. Therefore, as soon as he could be alone with the magical item called ‘phone’, he would start figuring out what to do to lift the curse and return to his world.

“Tani, help me wash the dishes,” the mother warned the princess just as they were about to finish.

They were so pitifully poor, Sebastian thought. They had no one to wash the dishes, either.

“How come Kai doesn’t ever have to help you?”

“He breaks everywhere he puts his hands on. I don’t want to budget new plates this month,” the mother said.

Oh, so the original owner of this pathetic body was a klutz. However, Sebastian took offense at that. “I beg your pardon. I am perfectly capable of doing that.”

He had never washed dishes, but he had seen the kitchen wenches using large buckets with soapy water to clean them. How difficult could it be? He had slain dragons!

“All right. Let me see you place the plates in the dishwasher without breaking one while not forgetting to hit the correct button,” the mother said. She linked her fingers and placed her chin on them.

She was no longer young, and she seemed tired, but Sebastian liked her for some unfathomable reason. He was no good with mothers because he had never been close to one. Maybe that was the reason why he liked her.

“What is a dishwasher?” he asked.

The mother threw her hands in the air and began grabbing the plates from the table. She was shaking her head and muttering something under her breath. Sebastian followed her with his eyes as she opened a strange drawer and placed the plates inside.

“Are you watching, my helpless children?”

Sebastian looked attentively. Apparently, this family was in charge of multiple magical items, and he had been wrong, after all. Of course, the scarcity of food still had to be taken into consideration.

The mother pushed a button, and the dishwasher began making a strange noise. Sebastian looked with intense interest. Was that thing going to spit back clean plates?

“When it finishes its cycle, one of you,” the mother pointed sternly at him and the princess, “remember to take them out and put them back into the cupboard.”

“I will stay here until it does,” Sebastian said.

The mother gave him a crossed look. “For one hour and a half?”

Sebastian felt rightfully taken aback. That was some slow-moving magic. A kitchen wench would be much more efficient, but this family couldn’t afford one. Probably, they had no food to spare. That had to be the reason.

“Very well.” He stood stiffly. “I will return.”

How would he be able to tell the time? He hadn’t noticed the presence of a clock anywhere in that modest abode. He would just look out the window and check the position of the sun.

“What’s gotten into your brother?” He heard the mother asking the princess.

“I don’t know. He’s just himself, I guess.”

Very well. He had no interest in being questioned by the mother, and he couldn’t allow her to doubt him. Therefore, it was a good thing that the owner of his body was a strange individual. His minor mishaps would go unnoticed.

Now, he had a few things he was terribly curious about. He entered the room with the hot spring tap and began examining it. From what he could tell so far, the magical items in this world didn’t require incantations or particular skills. They could be used by tapping them or fiddling with knobs.

His eyes fell on the porcelain bowl. There was water at the bottom and a scented piece of soap hanged from a side. Then he noticed the reservoir that appeared attached to it. And then, a small lever. Could that be the entrance to a hidden dungeon? Without hesitation, he pushed the lever. Water rushed inside the bowl, and the scented soap spread its smell. Then it stopped.

“How peculiar,” he murmured.

He pushed the lever again, triggering the same thing. “Marvelous,” he exclaimed. That portal could be used to make things disappear.

“Mom!”

He turned to see Tani in the door.

“Kai keeps flushing the toilet and yelling ‘Marvelous!’”

A toilet? The gears in his head began to turn. He pulled his hand off the lever. “Oh, a toilet,” he said in a measured voice.

“Leave your brother alone. You’re too old to trail after him everywhere,” the mother yelled back at Tani.

“If only I could ask someone about these strange things,” he said to himself, without noticing that Tani was still there.

“What strange things?” Tani asked. Then she gasped and covered her mouth in fake surprise. “Are you discovering your body?”

Sebastian frowned. Could it be that she knew? “As a matter of fact, I am.”

Tani rolled her eyes. “You can’t take a joke these days, seriously. Any question you have, though, just ask your phone. I’m not getting pulled into your weirdness.”

The phone, of course. It was, apparently, a powerful item. But, to ask the questions he was interested in finding answers for, he needed to be alone.

He left the bathroom and walked into the hallway. Hopefully, he didn’t have to share his quarters with the young princess.

He noticed a door at the end of the hallway. In big letters, an inscription said ‘Kai’s Room, Keep Out And Be Aware Of Trolls’. Hmm, so Prince Kai appeared to prefer sleeping under a bridge. Sebastian opened the door cautiously, only to be welcomed by a small room with a bed and a desk. He walked in slowly, ready for a troll attack, but nothing happened.

The walls were covered with paintings of various creatures and tales of heroes. Well, at least, the prince of this strange world was not unacquainted with what it meant to be a ruler and defender of the realm. There was some comfort in knowing that this world was still inhabited by monsters, which meant he could go on quests and ensure that this family had enough food on the table.

He heard the plinking sound from before again and searched his pockets.

“Aha,” he said with satisfaction as he discovered an item similar to what Tani had used at the table. While hers was a bright pink color, his was black. “Phone,” he said, bringing the item to his lips, “what is a toilet?”

The phone remained silent. Hmm, maybe he didn’t know how to use it. He turned it over and examined it carefully, and then he noticed the knobs on one side. He pressed on one, and the item came to life.

“Marvelous,” he said. The face of his phone was a curvy female in skimpy clothes. Probably, she was the servant of the phone.

“Swipe up to open,” he murmured. He placed his palm on the phone and moved it upward.

Oh, things were happening. The curvy servant disappeared to let another appear in her stead. All kinds of strange runes were stamped over her image.

Then, suddenly, the item began to make noises, and the image changed again. He could see the face of the handsome commoner he had met early. So, he was in his phone, too?

“Oh, stop it,” he murmured and began tapping and swiping at random, annoyed with that sound.

The commoner’s face appeared again but from a different angle. And he started talking to him!

“Hey, Kai,” he said.

“What are you doing in my phone...” What was the young man’s name... “Milo?” Sebastian asked slowly.

“Hmm, yeah, good question.” Milo laughed. “You didn’t read my texts.”

Texts? Could it be that the young man was a scholar? “No, I didn’t,” he admitted. “Where are they? I might peruse them later.”

Milo dropped his eyelids, threw him a confused look, and then smiled. “What were you doing?”

“I just had a one-course meal with mother and Princess Tani, and then I inspected the room with the toilet. We have a hot spring,” he added with importance.

“A hot spring? Where?”

“Under the building, of course. We can command it by fiddling with knobs.” Since Milo was just a commoner, Sebastian felt that he needed to explain such things to him.

Milo ran one hand over his face and laughed. “Great to hear that you have hot water. I don’t want to pressure you or anything, but how about going on a date right now?”

That strange and dangerous quest Milo had mentioned before... Of course, as a valiant prince, Sebastian wouldn’t back down from a challenge. “What is a date, again?”

Milo grinned. “You really love pulling this act on me, don’t you? All right, I was thinking about going to Mandy’s, have some hamburgers.”

“Hamburgers. What are they?”

“Hmm, you’re really trying me here. Delicious meat in a bun with fries on the side and pickles. I’ll throw in some soda, and I’m paying.”

Oh, it was something to eat. This Mandy wench must be keeping a tavern where she served travelers. The date had to be a perilous quest that required the consumption of ritualistic food.

“After that, what will happen?” he asked.

“I was thinking that we could, you know, talk a little.” Milo stopped and blushed. “Maybe kiss a little more.”

That sounded like an extremely easy quest. “All right. Where should we meet?”

“I’ll come get you. I’m one block away. Oh, damn, I hope that didn’t sound weird or desperate, right?”

“No, not at all,” Sebastian said brightly. He had to accustom himself to the manner of speaking of these people so that he could see about his quest without drawing unnecessary suspicions.

“Can you help me with something, commoner... I mean, Milo?”

“Shoot.”

“How do I talk to my phone and ask it questions?”

Milo laughed again, but then he began explaining, all the while his eyes continuing to smile. Sebastian’s eyes narrowed as he listened carefully. The young man said goodbye, and Sebastian got to work right away.

He had an entire world of scholars trapped in his phone!

“So, let’s see about that toilet,” he murmured under his breath. “Oh,” he said as he began to read. “That is quite... interesting.”

“Kai, Milo’s here,” the mother called from behind the door.

Right, he had a quest to complete this evening.

“See him in,” he said.

“Just go in. He’s been acting a bit strange,” he heard the mother saying.

Hmm. He had to figure out how to talk like these people. The mother didn’t appear upset over having a commoner visiting their place at that hour. Maybe Milo wasn’t a commoner. Maybe he was a knight.

The thought was refreshing. Sebastian didn’t care for commoners who thought of themselves as adventurers. They were too much of a bother to save all the time.

Milo walked in, and he was dressed differently than before. His clothes were thinner, and especially the shirt with short sleeves was quite revealing of certain qualities he possessed. Sebastian took in the broad shoulders and strong arms with well-defined muscles. And it was easy to spot his chest through that thin fabric.

Hmm, so Milo was an enticer.

“How come you’re not out of your uniform yet?”

Ah, so that garment was called a uniform. “I have nothing else to wear.”

Only then he noticed the presence of a closet. He should have searched through it, but he had been caught up in exploring the many wonders the phone contained. Since it seemed as if its knowledge was infinite, there was just one thing that worried him.

“Can one consume the phone?” he asked.

Milo threw him a strange look. “I’m only indulging you, dude, because you’re finally with going on a date with me, and this must be you coping with the shock. Do you want to eat the phone now?”

“No, that isn’t what I meant,” Sebastian said. “Its spirit... if I use it, will it go away?”

Milo rolled his eyes. The people in this world did that a lot. He pointed at something on the floor. “You always leave your charger in the socket.” He grabbed the phone from Sebastian’s hand and then jammed the end of a thin black rope in a nook on the bottom. “Charger, phone, charger, phone,” Milo repeated a few times.

“I’m not a simpleton,” Sebastian protested. He didn’t understand many things, but he couldn’t allow commoners to take him for a fool.

Milo made a move to give him back the phone but then changed his mind. “You know what? I will just delete the texts I sent you earlier. They’re way too cheesy.”

So Milo was a scholar who wrote about cheese. Not a very interesting topic. Still, he disliked Milo handling his magical item like that.

“Give it back now,” he said in a stern voice.

Milo smirked. “How about you make me?”

Was that a challenge? Yes, it was. Sebastian didn’t hesitate and rushed to grab the phone from Milo’s hand, only to be avoided with ease. That would not do. He rushed again, but Milo sidestepped. Enraged with being taken for a fool a second time, Sebastian opted for a frontal attack.

He ended up on the bed, on top of Milo.

Who, much to his annoyance, was laughing.

He couldn't even prevail in front of a commoner in this body? That was an utter disappointment!

"Hey," Milo called softly, "do you have something weird in your pocket or are you happy to see me?"

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. He couldn't understand what Milo meant by those words. He had nothing in his pocket, which meant that he was taken for a fool once more. This commoner needed to be taught some manners.

Chapter Four – You Put A Spell On Me

Milo wrapped his arms around him. The desire in his eyes was unmistakable. Sebastian was rightfully annoyed. His prisoners could take the initiative only if he allowed them to. It appeared as if Milo, a mere scholar, considered himself on the same level with a prince to take such liberties.

“Did I tell you that you could embrace me?” he asked.

Milo grinned. “No, but you kissed me already, so I don’t see how a hug could be worse.”

Yes, the kiss. Sebastian remembered it clearly. He looked at Milo’s lips. They were full and soft and enticing him to give in to his weakness. But weren’t they supposed to complete their quest of going on a date and eating hamburgers first?

Milo stopped smiling as Sebastian shifted against him. Their bodies were rubbing against each other, leaving enough room for pleasant sensations. Sebastian recognized the unmistakable signs of his arousal growing.

“Your mom is home. Your sister, too,” Milo whispered. “Maybe we shouldn’t --”

Sebastian kept his breath for a moment. No, the weakness was too much. He pressed Milo into the bed and kissed him hard. Milo responded by hugging him closer.

Well, the place appeared to have thin walls, and there was also the inconvenience of having delicate royal ears close by. Sebastian indulged in the other’s mouth only for a few moments more.

“Let us handle the quest first,” he said and stood up stiffly.

“Quest?”

“The date.”

“Oh, right.”

Sebastian walked over to the closet and looked inside. Thin short-sleeved shirts in dark colors and bottoms that matched were the only things in there. They hardly qualified as armor, but maybe the quest needed them to use their wits more than their strength. After all, Milo didn’t wear any armor, either.

He picked two garments without hesitating too much, as they all appeared to be the same, and began shedding off the uniform.

“Wow, I know I’ve seen you naked before, but you really are comfortable in showing me everything,” Milo said.

Sebastian turned toward the young man, who was now looking at him with hooded eyes. He looked down at his own body and grimaced. “This body hardly warrants such a reaction from you.” He could taste Milo’s arousal if he did as little as close his eyes.

“You look fine to me.”

Well, he didn’t miss any limbs, and while he appeared underfed, he was not overly thin. Aesthetics-wise, he would give this body a pass. “I suppose more food would serve.”

Milo laughed and looked away. “Then it’s good that I’m taking you to Mandy’s.”

He finished dressing and walked out of the room with Milo. Tani was waiting for him and barring the way. “Weren’t you going to look at the dishwasher for half an hour?”

“An hour and a half. Please, do it in my stead.”

Tani snorted and crossed her arms. “Yeah, right.” She looked around and then opened her palm. “Pay me.”

“I don’t have any coins.”

“Paper will do,” Tani said brightly.

Milo dug into his pocket and took out a folded paper. “Is it okay if I bribe your sister?”

Sebastian shrugged. “It is your paper to do as you wish with it.”

He couldn’t understand how Tani could accept a simple paper sheet instead of gold or silver coins. Maybe she wasn’t a very clever girl, and Milo knew that.

“Let’s go,” Milo said after giving Tani the folded paper. He grabbed Sebastian by the shoulders.

“Are you guys an item now or what?” Tani asked.

Milo stuck his tongue at her. “Not telling.”

“OMG! You totally are! You’re making kissy-kissy faces at each other!”

“Tani, leave the boys alone,” the mother intervened. “Take care and don’t stay up too late. You still have to study. Your graduation is not that far off,” she warned.

Graduation? Was that another quest? He would have to ask his phone many questions.

“I’ll make sure to return him in one piece and not too late, Mrs. Martin,” Milo said cheerfully.

So the mother was Mrs. Martin. That was one thing he didn’t have to ask his phone.

Kai grunted as he was made to meet the ground, butt first, by one of the skilled knights in his retinue. It was his fault for having his head in the clouds, and his body couldn't compensate entirely for his lack of awareness.

"Your Majesty," the knight said breathlessly as he jumped off his horse and hurried to him. "I apologize for throwing you off! Please forgive me!"

Kai pushed himself up. "No sweat, man. I wasn't paying attention. Let's do that again."

His current body had many wonderful perks, it seemed, among which the fact that he didn't feel as much pain as ordinary people.

"I will make sure not to throw all my strength behind it this time," the knight pleaded.

"Oh, you make sure you do, or I'll get mad," Kai said playfully. As the hero of the realm, he couldn't allow others to cut him any slack.

Once he began paying attention, he outsmarted all the knights on the jousting grounds, much to his delight. It was a good boost of confidence to overpower everyone like that.

"So, are you tired already?" he called.

"No, Your Majesty!" The knights shouted as one.

These guys needed to learn a bit about life-work balance.

"Well, I'm done here. You're free for the day. But don't forget about tomorrow. Dragons, caves, all that."

He turned on his heels, ignoring the flabbergasted knights he was leaving behind. All this time, Conrad had stayed there, judging him with his eyes. As soon as Kai began to move, he was on his heels again.

"I hope you're not getting any weird ideas," Kai said as he threw a look back at Conrad. "I'm hungry, and I don't know where Pepin is. I'm only supposed to eat his cooking."

He was surprised when Conrad grabbed the reins of his horse and guiding them both in the opposite direction of the castle.

"What are you doing? You know very well that I can kick your ass." Not that he wanted to do it, but Conrad was annoying.

Conrad said nothing until they were at a fair distance from the jousting ground and everyone's earshot. He dismounted and then offered Kai his hand.

For a moment, Kai closed his eyes. *I could ignore him and leave. But I suppose that will make me a coward, and Prince Sebastian appears to be the complete opposite of a coward. What can he do to me? I can just send him flying, like before.*

He accepted Conrad's hand and dismounted, too.

"Well?" he asked.

Conrad began to unbutton his coat, his eyes never leaving Kai.

Kai groaned. "What are you doing?"

Conrad threw his coat on the ground, offering Kai the unimpeded view of a strong perfect torso. "You were quite explicit in your requirements, Your Majesty," he said through his teeth.

"I changed my mind," Kai said with a forced grin.

Conrad seemed completely deaf as he continued to shed his clothes.

"Don't," Kai said and covered his eyes as Conrad pushed down his pants.

Maybe the guy was an exhibitionist. Kai didn't uncover his eyes and put his free hand in front to make sure that Conrad wasn't getting too close. "Stay away, I'm warning you. I can shoot ice from my eyes."

"Then you must be keeping them covered for a reason," Conrad said.

Kai walked back and grunted when his back hit a large tree. He uncovered his eyes only to find Conrad close. Really close.

"You said," Conrad said slowly, "that you require satisfaction at least three times every day."

Kai groaned. *Prince Sebastian, you damned manwhore!*

He was still debating how to deal with Conrad when the other glued himself to him and plastered his lips against his neck.

"Oh," Kai barely managed. His eyelids began getting heavier. That wasn't unpleasant at all. Conrad flicked his tongue around, making him shudder as pleasure shot through him head to toes. It was...

Kai pushed Conrad away. "All right. Okay. This isn't working. Down, boy," he ordered Conrad.

"I'm not a dog," Conrad protested and looked at him with the same hurt eyes from before.

There was no way to please this guy. He got pushed away, he got mad. He got told he could leave, he took offense.

“Then why are you licking things you shouldn’t lick?”

“Do you want me to bite?”

Kai pinched the bridge of his nose. “No,” he said quietly. “I want you to stop licking and biting. And kissing.”

“Which means,” Conrad said in a pensive tone, “that there is only one thing left. You should have said so.”

Kai put his hands up to keep Conrad away. “Stay there. I’d hate to turn you into a popsicle, but you’re pushing it, man.”

“Pop... what?”

“You know.” Kai began to gesticulate. “A block of ice or something.”

Finally, Conrad stopped. “What did I do to displease you?”

“You just keep wanting to hump me,” Kai shot back. “I’m not in the mood.”

“Ah, you’re not in the mood,” Conrad said slowly like he was trying to understand what Kai meant by that.

“Don’t you find it embarrassing? At least a little?” Kai asked. “I mean, everybody knows that we – whatever. Isn’t this... thing something you don’t want?”

Conrad frowned and blinked a few times. “If you’re talking about your men, all I heard was how they would all like to share your bed. If only so that they don’t have to fear you so much anymore. How little they know,” he added with bitterness.

“Crazy BL plot,” Kai murmured under his breath. “Yeah, okay, but you’re... a knight, right?”

“A prince,” Conrad said heatedly.

“A prince, of course. You don’t want to be a concubine, right?”

“I don’t.” Conrad crossed his arms. He was still distractingly naked, and Kai had a hard time keeping his head up so that he didn’t look down by accident. “No matter how coveted the position is.”

“Yeah, I bet,” Kai said to himself. “But, for you, it’s like a disgrace, right?”

Conrad stared at him with hurt eyes. “Yes,” he said quietly.

Right. Conrad must have been an enemy. Prince Sebastian was walking a thin line getting an enemy to serve as his bed partner. He probably thought that he was overpowered enough not to have to worry about anything.

“Is there really nowhere in the world you could go?” Kai asked.

“No,” Conrad said directly. “And if you send me away, it is as good as a death sentence. There is no place left in the world for a vanquished prince.”

Hmm, that was a difficult situation, indeed. “Then how about this? You play your role in front of everyone else, and I don’t send you away. But we don’t do any more...” Kai trailed off and just made a vague gesture with his hands.

Conrad watched him with incredulous eyes. “If that truly is your wish, release me from the bond.”

“Hmm, what bond?”

“This.” Conrad touched his chest, and thin lines the color of blue ice appeared and shone softly.

“What does that do?” Kai asked.

“Don’t you know it better than me? The less I please you, the tighter these vines of ice will curl around my heart.”

“Ah, so it’s ice magic. Then it should be easy,” Kai said.

He looked at the fine ice lines and focused. They began to shine brighter. Conrad gasped and grabbed his chest.

“Oh, shit, sorry,” Kai hurried to say and looked away. All right, so that wasn’t working. How was he supposed to undo that? He would have to ask Pepin later.

“Is it a slow or a quick death you have in store for me?” Conrad asked in a pained voice.

“Neither. Trust me,” Kai said. “I’ll figure out how to undo that bond. Then you’ll be free.”

“I don’t see how I can believe you.” The pain had forced Conrad on his knees, and Kai felt terribly guilty.

“Well, you should because, you see, I’m a nice guy, no matter how weird that might sound to you.” Kai offered Conrad his arm to help him to his feet.

“Each time I fail to please you, you only make it worse. You’re not nice, Prince Sebastian,” Conrad said heatedly.

“Damn. So you have to, um, please me, so that your heart doesn’t freeze or something?”

Being so overpowered had its downsides, for sure, Kai thought.

“All right. I’ll let you kiss me once. Will that make it better?”

He was crazy for even suggesting a thing like that, but what was he to do? He couldn’t watch Conrad getting a heart attack or something.

Now Conrad seemed reluctant to do what he was told. He was probably fearing that he was getting himself into another trap.

“Damn you, BL author,” Kai said, grabbed Conrad’s cheeks, and kissed him once.

Conrad lost his balance for a second and then stared at him with unhidden surprise.

“Any better?”

If he did it fast enough, it didn’t count, right? And he could just think of something else. Kai pulled Conrad to him again. This time, when they kissed, Conrad grabbed him and pushed him to the ground.

Think of something else, think of something else...

Conrad pushed one thigh between his legs, forcing them open. Great, not he could practically feel... Why on earth was he humping himself against Conrad’s leg? It was all great when his body had quick reactions while knights in heavy armor dashed toward him with all kinds of dangerous weapons, but not so much when it was reacting to this!

“All right, all right, just stop. Feeling any better?”

Conrad was breathing heavily, and his eyes were hazy. He was a handsome dude, but Kai wasn’t going to play into that crazy BL plot. All he had to do was keep Conrad alive until he figured out how to get rid of that bond. And for now, he was sure he had done enough.

“You want me, too,” Conrad said in a raspy voice. “I can feel you.”

Kai had a very distinct idea of what Conrad meant by that, but it was all that body’s fault and not his. “And, unfortunately, I can feel you, too.” The dude’s tool was lengthening against his leg. That was totally weird. “I’ll handle the thing with the bond. Now, get off me.”

Conrad stared at him for a moment with burning eyes. Little by little, the flame in them dimmed. He stood up abruptly and began dressing up with brusque moves.

“You know, you might have an anger problem,” Kai suggested as he got to his feet. “Maybe you should take the day off, ride around, I don’t know, do stuff you like.”

Conrad turned toward him with lightning speed and thunder in his eyes. Yeah, totally an anger problem. “How can you be so cold? Last night --” He stopped and turned toward his horse.

“Well, you know, ice magic, ice prince, cold. It’s all natural,” Kai justified himself. “And could you forget about last night? It was a...” – how did people say in movies? – “...mistake.”

“A mistake?” Conrad stared at him again like he was saying unfathomable things. “You kept asking me to --”

“Hush, zip it, shut up,” Kai said quickly and cut the air with one arm. “I don’t want to hear about it.”

Conrad cocked his head to one side and narrowed his eyes. “Are you ashamed of your weakness? People say you call it that.”

“Weakness?” Ah, right. Pepin had said something about it. Prince Sebastian’s – apparently notorious – weakness for handsome men. “No, I’m not ashamed. Because I have no weaknesses. Whatever you’re talking about, it’s gone. Poof. Like that.”

“You’re different from last night. How can you call it a mistake? Five times --”

“Five times?!” Kai covered his face. Prince Sebastian was a shameless bastard.

“Five times you told me that you would never let me go, that if I kept it like that, you would see no reason to get rid of me.”

Oh, phew. Not that kind of five times. “Ah, well, people change.”

“Overnight?”

“Yes. Hey, do you believe in ice magic? You know, the stuff that comes out of my eyes.”

Conrad touched his chest and grimaced in pain. Kai made himself little. “Yes, I do believe in it.”

“Then it should be easy to believe in people changing overnight.” Pleased with his logic, Kai mounted his horse. “And stop following me. Go have some fun, whatever you think that is. And eat and drink as much as you want.” What could people around there do to enjoy themselves? It wasn’t like they had internet and video games. “It’s on my tab, I suppose.”

“Fine,” Conrad said in a strained voice. “I’ll see you tonight, then.”

Well, that had been taken care of quite swiftly. Now, he needed to find Pepin.

“You don’t have to hide whenever you feel like using Conrad, you know?” He heard a voice from behind.

Kai closed his eyes. “Do you master teleportation, Pepin?”

“What magic is that, Your Majesty?”

His servant appeared from behind the tree like it was the most natural thing in the world for him to eavesdrop on his master’s trysts.

“Never mind. Now, I’m so hungry I could eat a horse.”

Pepin pursed his lips. “If you wanted horse, you should have let me know in advance. And because of you and your ideas, I had little time to cook properly.”

“Eww, I don’t want horse, what the hell?” Kai put his hands over the horse’s ears and looked into his humid eyes. “Don’t worry, in this house, we don’t eat our horses.”

“We do,” Pepin contradicted him.

Kai scoffed. “Could you please stop saying stuff like that in front of him?” He gestured with his chin toward the horse.

Pepin shrugged and disappeared behind the tree, only to reappear with a basket.

“Are we having a picnic?”

Pepin said nothing as he lay a blanket on the ground and then the basket. He started taking out all kinds of little pots and plates and arranging them on the blanket in an orderly fashion.

“We totally are,” Kai said and grinned. He could barely wait to see what Pepin had prepared.

He knelt on the blanket and watched Pepin displaying the tasty foods.

“I heard everything,” Pepin said accusingly.

Kai took one plate with finger foods from the servant and began stuffing his face. It wasn’t like him to be hungry, but ever since he had gotten here, he suddenly felt what hunger was. “It’s not nice to eavesdrop,” he said while munching loudly.

“You kissed him,” Pepin continued, ignoring him.

“Well, I did,” Kai admitted.

“Why?”

“Because he has an ice magic spell that squeezes his heart if I don’t kiss him,” Kai said matter-of-factly. He barely put down the empty plate that Pepin supplied him with another. Ah, right. He had to ask the servant about it. “How do I remove that bond?”

Pepin blinked and frowned. “You don’t recall?”

“I don’t. I’m only human. I forget things,” Kai said defensively.

“But I cannot help you,” Pepin said. “Your magic is your secret. You’ve never shared it with anyone.”

“Not even you? We grew up together, right?”

Pepin nodded, all the while staring at him. “The Ice Goddess always took you with her to teach you. No one was allowed to witness your training.”

“Ah, damn it,” Kai moaned. “Where can I find the Ice Goddess?”

Pepin looked at him with wide eyes. “That’s also a secret,” he said as if Kai should have known that.

Well, surely, Sebastian had to know, but, unfortunately, Kai didn’t get his memories along with his body, so that was a bummer.

“I’ll have to find her so that I can remove the bond on Conrad,” he said.

“Does that mean that you will have to sleep with him again?” Pepin asked anxiously.

“Hopefully, some kisses will do,” Kai let his intentions known.

Pepin crossed his arms and pouted.

“Come on, Pepin, I can’t just let the guy die or something,” Kai said.

“Then will you kiss me just the same as you kiss him?” Pepin asked.

“Do you have a bond on your heart that could kill you?”

“No.”

“Well, then, you just got your answer. Ah, stop pouting. I won’t fall for the same trick a second time. I know you’re not going to cry.”

Pepin was scrunching his nose, but then his features relaxed, and he grinned. “It was worth a try. You won’t last long without kissing me, I’m sure.”

Well, as long as it was only kissing... what was he thinking? Kai shook his head. He wanted to be in character, but only as long as he didn’t end up torturing people or doing naughty things with dudes.

Sebastian observed Milo and began to imitate his gestures. He took place across from him at a square table and looked around. The tavern was clean, and it smelled of food.

A woman in an apron came to them. “What will you boys have?”

“Hi, we’re going to have two hamburgers, fries on the side, and extra ketchup. And two large sodas,” Milo said and smiled.

As the woman walked away, Sebastian continued to take in his surroundings. No one was wearing armor, and most travelers wore the same thin fabric as they did.

“Are there other people on a date here?” he asked, curious of how quests were handled in this realm.

Milo looked around. “Could be. I don’t know. So, you didn’t read my texts, huh?”

“No, I didn’t get the chance. I should inform you that I don’t find cheese an interesting topic.”

Milo blinked and grinned. “You’re particularly funny today. I don’t think cheese is interesting, either.”

“Good, then maybe you should think of writing about other things.”

“Look,” Milo said and reached for his hand across the table. Sebastian allowed the touch. By what he could tell, other people held hands, too. It was probably a custom. “I know I was the one to spring the question on you, and you should be the more surprised of us two, but, damn, I’m so... ah, I don’t have words. My heart is full.”

“Full,” Sebastian repeated slowly.

Milo linked their fingers together. “Yeah.” He looked down sheepishly and laughed. “I mean, we’ve been here before, and we did so many things together, but tonight is different, right?”

That wasn’t far from the truth, but Sebastian could tell that Milo was thinking of something else. He seemed to be very emotional. That was always an annoyance. But he had a good-looking body and a handsome face, and, for now, Sebastian could see Milo’s uses.

The woman interrupted them by placing plates in front of them. Sebastian looked at Milo, waiting for him to eat first so that he could imitate him. The wench hadn’t brought them any utensils, although she had bothered to offer them some paper tissues that had to serve as napkins.

He proceeded as Milo and bit from the bun filled with meat. Sebastian stopped for a moment. It was meat, but even Pepin would be hard-pressed to make it so intensely flavorful. It was almost on the point of being too much, but Sebastian decided to give it a try and began chewing slowly.

“If you can’t finish it, it’s okay,” Milo said.

Prince Kai might not have had an appetite, but Sebastian needed to keep his strength up. “I will finish it,” he said sternly.

He took the high glass placed by the server on his side of the table. There was a bent stick in it. For what purpose, he was unsure. He observed the bubbles; was it champagne? Since they were going on a quest, they were probably having a feast, although, again, the presence of a single course was disappointing.

He stole a glance at Milo and noticed how he sipped from his glass through that stick. He did the same.

“Oh,” he said and put back the glass. It was definitely more bubbly than champagne. And much sweeter. “This champagne has an odd flavor,” he commented.

Milo laughed. “Is that a hint that I should have made things a bit more special?”

“No, no, that is completely fine,” Sebastian said politely. “When will we kiss?”

That was the purpose of their quest, according to Milo.

The young man blushed to the tip of his ears. “As soon as you finish that.” He pointed at Sebastian’s food.

“Of course.” If it was a rite he had to complete, he didn’t mind it. The food was tolerable, although extremely flavorful. Sebastian took a delicate bite from his bun.

“You know, it’s like I see you in a different light today,” Milo said softly.

Sebastian had been with enough men to know that Milo was showing signs of being infatuated. That meant that the kissing part would go flawlessly.

Chapter Five – Songs About Majestic Things

Milo hooked his arm over his shoulders as soon as they were out of the inn. There was an unnerving familiarity in how the commoner handled him. Sebastian was not used to being treated that way and wished for Milo to be less familiar with him. Nonetheless, he knew this much; different rules governed this strange world, and until he understood them completely, he had to allow such unpleasant things.

Not that feeling Milo's warm body so close was unpleasant. Quite the contrary. The young man was attractive, with his wavy blond hair and emerald eyes. It was annoying that he was so tall, and Sebastian had to tilt his head to look properly at him, but having the body he had now had to be part of the curse.

At least, his mind appeared to be intact. He had quickly gathered that his ice magic was gone, but, otherwise, he had all his wits about him, and that should be enough to vanquish this curse.

Another unnerving thing was the constant noise. The shiny contraptions traveling at dazzling speeds were called cars, as he had learned, and they served as transportation. However, they caused a constant clamor that took some time to get used to.

Milo kept chatting about something he made little sense of, so he had abandoned listening in favor of pondering over his peculiar situation.

"You're very quiet. That makes me a little nervous," Milo said. "If you have any doubts, I mean, about where we go from here... Argh, I'm talking like those boring people on reality shows. Just stop me already."

"Stop you?"

They had left the city's noise behind them and walked into a trimmed park with painted benches.

"Stop me from talking," Milo said.

Sebastian looked around. The park was deserted, and it was hard to tell in the dark, with only street lamps throwing their gentle light around where the mansion it had to belong to was located. Maybe that was part of their quest, and Milo was now just hinting at how they had to handle the next part.

Firmly, Sebastian took Milo's cheeks in his palms. Yes, he was a pleasure to look at. With slow moves, he brushed one thumb over Milo's bottom lip, particularly full and enticing, and watched the beautiful eyes at half-mast, now inspecting him with growing desire.

He enjoyed spending his leisure hours in the company of handsome men. They were his reward and a distraction for the times when the weight of his position in the world became too much to

bear. What hardships awaited him in this new world? Whatever they were, they might hinder him from enjoying a beautiful young man and his arousing body like he could right now.

Sebastian kissed Milo softly, and then he bit his lips, making him gasp and open his mouth. Most probably, the soonest they kissed, monsters would spring on them, or the dark quest would finally rear its ugly head through whatever means it wanted to manifest.

Milo embraced him tightly and clumsily tried to kiss back. He wasn't very skillful, but Sebastian found it endearing. While he usually preferred a man who knew the art of love, such as Conrad, he didn't mind tasting the lips of an innocent, either. Like Pepin, he thought but then dashed the thought away.

Sebastian ran his hands through Milo's hair and pulled his head back. "Look at me," he said.

Milo blinked lazily and smiled. "I'm looking at you. You're so beau --"

"You must learn how to use your mouth," Sebastian said directly.

Milo's eyes grew wide, and then he giggled. "Aren't we going a little too fast? Now that I don't want that, but --"

"Open your mouth and stick out your tongue," Sebastian ordered.

"O-okay," Milo stammered.

Sebastian moved his own tongue across Milo's, eliciting small moans and gasps from the other. Then he began sucking on it, gently but progressing slowly toward taking over that now slack mouth that heeded his every demand and move.

He enjoyed kissing men, but mostly he enjoyed being kissed by them. As he was most particular about being the one penetrated, he wanted his bed warmers to know how to take the initiative and offer him the pleasure he desired.

"You see?" he said. "Now do the same, but be more forceful."

Milo nodded and rubbed his lips against his mouth. He was a quick learner, Sebastian thought, enjoying the way Milo now kept devouring his mouth. Hesitant hands grew bolder, and soon one was right above his buttocks.

There was still no attack, although Sebastian hadn't dropped his guard, despite the pleasant eddies of arousal elicited by Milo's enthusiastic tongue and wandering hands.

Much to his disappointment, Milo stopped. "We're crazy, right?" He laughed. "Someone might come."

"When are they going to come?" Sebastian asked. He couldn't make much sense of this quest.

“Hopefully, not right now, as I want to kiss you one more time.” Milo dragged him to one of the little benches.

He reached for another kiss, but Sebastian pulled back. “What will happen next?”

Milo shrugged. “I don’t know. I didn’t plan that far. All I could think of after today was how to be alone with you and kiss you.”

Sebastian didn’t have to reconsider Milo’s condition as a simpleton. It was clear as day that he was one. That meant that he might have to face the dangers of the quest alone. It didn’t bother him, except that he didn’t care so much for saving simpletons. Sooner or later, fate would catch up with them, regardless of how many times their betters rescued them.

“Do you, at least, have any idea about how long do we have to kiss until the next stage begins?”

Milo scratched his head. “I didn’t think I’d be so lucky for you to say ‘yes’, actually. And I feel like you’re asking me trick questions. How long do you think it should take?”

“Is it something I decide?”

“Yeah, why not? You already kiss better than me. How come you do?”

Sebastian opened his mouth. Having kissed many men, he was entitled to all the praises, but he had a feeling the puny body he was currently trapped in couldn’t have experienced the same lavish attention from handsome men as he had. Also, he had an inkling Milo would not be happy to hear about his previous flings with men, for once, because Prince Kai couldn’t have had such encounters, and secondly because he appeared to be too much of an innocent himself.

“I asked the phone about how it’s done,” he supplied a prompt reply. He seldom lied, but in this case, his choice appeared to be warranted.

“So, you watched tutorials and stuff?” Milo laughed.

Sebastian offered no reply. The commoner appeared inclined to take others for fools, and that irked him to no end. Nonetheless, his beautiful appearance compensated for his shortcomings.

“Can I touch you a little, then?” Milo asked. “I promise I won’t do anything weird. I mean, not on the first date.” He laughed again.

“Feel free to do so,” Sebastian said, now intrigued with what the young man wanted to do.

Milo laughed nervously and moved one hand only to sneak it under Sebastian’s shirt. “My hand is too cold, right?”

Cold had never been a problem for him. “Go ahead and touch me.”

Timid fingers brushed against his lower abdomen. Sebastian frowned at the tickling sensation and then found himself bursting into laughter. Besides being puny, albeit attractive enough to please a commoner like Milo, this body was easy to stimulate in all sorts of strange manners.

“Oh, gawd, I’m so terrible, right?” Milo complained.

“What exactly do you expect to find?” Sebastian pulled the shirt up and stared at his own belly. There was some muscle definition in there, despite the lack of appetite Prince Kai appeared to be known for.

“I don’t know,” Milo admitted. “I suck at this.”

“At what?”

Ah, so Milo, being as innocent as he was, didn’t know on what he was supposed to suck to elicit pleasure from his lover. With the risk of exposing himself and his experience with men, Sebastian decided to take the reins again. He pulled his shirt farther up and brushed one hand over his chest.

He kept in a small whimper. Prince Kai’s lean body was, apparently, made for pleasure. The simple act of touching his chest made him react like that. Or maybe being watched by beautiful wide eyes had something to do with it.

“You should start here,” he said, unwavering.

Milo didn’t hesitate. He pushed Sebastian with his back against the bench and then delved headfirst. Warm lips landed on Sebastian’s upper belly, causing a slight shiver to course his body. Then, the moist mouth wandered upward, finally finding purchase in that little nub of pleasure which Sebastian admitted he enjoyed very much to be teased. It was his favorite appetizer if someone were to ask him.

Milo sucked gently, making tendrils of heat spread from that point throughout his body. For someone who enjoyed the cold the most, Sebastian had a soft secret spot for letting himself prey to the sweet abandon of hot lips and warm bodies.

“It’s getting harder,” Milo said in a raspy voice. “Your nipple.” He flicked one finger over, making Sebastian arch his back off the bench uncontrollably.

“Don’t be uncouth,” Sebastian whispered, although he found it difficult to express his anger right now at having his body pointed out for its sensuality and lack of control. “Stop talking.”

Milo grinned. “Less talking, more sucking, right?”

Before Sebastian could have a say, Milo grabbed the other nub of pleasure between his teeth, teasing it with his tongue as well.

“Oh,” Sebastian barely managed. No later than the previous night, Conrad had done the same to him, but much more forcefully, as he had been demanded. It appeared that he enjoyed this sweet teasing a lot more.

Milo’s soft lips brushed over, and his tongue licked over and over, making Sebastian pant and curse with unbridled desire.

“Wow, is it that good?” Milo asked breathlessly. “Sorry, I’ll shut up.”

“Oh, stop it, you lewd heathen,” Sebastian protested. He was teasing too much, and he was too gentle about it.

“Lewd heathen?” Milo stopped, finally allowing Sebastian to breathe. “What character are you trying to imitate?”

Sebastian’s mind cleared. He pushed himself up and pulled down his shirt, hissing at the sensation when the fabric brushed against his sensitive chest. His manner of speaking would get him into unpleasant situations, sooner or later. “A prince from a distant realm,” he said, opting for a pretense of truth.

Milo laughed. “That was why you kept on calling me a commoner?”

“Yes,” Sebastian replied. “Are you a scholar?”

Milo slapped his shoulder playfully. “We’re both in the same class in high school. If you want to call that a scholar, go ahead. But maybe you don’t want to rehearse your character too much in school tomorrow. I have practice after, and I can’t walk you home.”

“I doubt I need a chaperon,” Sebastian said. “I believe I can handle my own just fine. What practice are you talking about?”

“Like you don’t know.” Milo wrapped one arm around his neck and nuzzled his cheek. “What? Do you want to stick around and watch? I’d like that. And watching guys sweating and throwing a ball around should beat staying indoors and playing video games.”

“Watch you sweat and throw a ball around?” Sebastian asked, just to make sure he understood what Milo was talking about.

“Yes. I might take off my t-shirt. And then let you watch while I shower,” he added in a teasing voice. “Ah, sorry, I can’t help but tease you. I’m not that sure you like me.”

“Why would you say that?”

“Hmm, maybe because I’m all over you, but you’re not all over me. Except for kissing. You’re better than me, I’ll give you that.”

“Do you believe that I don’t enjoy looking at your body?” Sebastian asked.

“Something like that. I mean, I suppose that each guy is different.”

“I have yet to see you without clothes, but I can tell that you have beautiful chest and arms. I can see through your shirt.”

Milo rubbed one hand over his chest. “I had no idea you were watching so close.”

“You are a handsome young man. Very enticing. I would love to see you naked.”

“Is this still part of the prince-from-another-realm impersonation you’re trying to pull?”

“No. It is my intention.”

“To see me naked?”

“Yes.”

“Cool.” Milo grinned. “Then I should take you home so that we can go to sleep. I can’t wait for tomorrow. Of course, we’re not allowed to do naughty things while at school,” he added, now worried. “But I still want you to stay and watch me practice. Then we can go by my place and study together.”

“Study?”

“Hey, your grades are kind of shit, my friend,” Milo said. “Let’s just graduate together, and then we’ll figure out what to do. What do you say?”

Hmm, he was talking about that other quest that the mother had mentioned. “Yes. Let’s do that, my friend,” Sebastian said. Imitating Milo’s manner of speaking was one way of sounding less like himself.

“It’s a deal. Just let your mom know that you’re studying with me tomorrow.”

“All right. Do you have food at your house?”

Milo threw him a surprised look. “I’m glad to see you’ve worked out an appetite. Yeah, we have food.”

“More than one course?”

“Yeah. My mom’s a pretty good cook.”

“All right.”

He had called Milo a commoner, but it appeared that he had more food, although his mother was just a cook. There were still many mysteries in this world that he needed to unravel.

“Ready to go?” Milo stood up and offered him one hand.

Sebastian took it and didn’t protest when Milo wrapped his arm around his shoulders and pulled him close.

What a wonderful sensation was to have his stomach full. Kai lay on his back and sighed contently while patting his belly. He couldn’t recall why he hadn’t enjoyed eating before. His mom was always doing her best, and her food was great. The problem was that he just kept on forgetting about having to eat, and he had always had to be put at the table and scolded over not eating enough.

It felt like there was something he kept on forgetting. It had to do with the fact that he was in a world completely different from his, and there was so much new stuff he needed to figure out.

Pepin grabbed his right hand, wiped it with something cool and pleasant, and then did the same with his other hand.

“Hey, I could have just washed my hands later,” he protested lazily.

“I don’t care. You’re not sending me away like you did with Conrad,” Pepin said back. “Although I’m not used to seeing you gobble down food like that and eat with your hands.”

“Stop busting my balls,” Kai said, but without opening his eyes. “It’s not like you gave me a fork or anything. Ouch.” Something cold hit his forehead. He supposed that was the fork he hadn’t noticed.

“How long are you going to laze around?” Pepin asked.

“As long as I feel like it. I’m the prince, right? I can do whatever I want,” Kai said petulantly.

“But you must address the court. They’re waiting for your words of wisdom.”

“Well, today, I don’t feel like sharing,” Kai replied.

“It’s not like you to be a lazy royal ass,” Pepin chided him.

Kai opened one eye. “Did you just call me names?”

“Yes,” Pepin replied, completely unperturbed.

Kai groaned and closed his eye. “Then I should consider firing you, after all. You’re worse than a nagging wife.”

There was silence from the other. Had he gone too far with his joke? He opened both eyes and looked at the servant. Pepin was kneeling but his side, but his head was turned, and Kai could only see his profile.

“Why can’t I be?” Pepin asked wistfully.

“Why can’t you be what?”

“Your chosen.”

“Do you mean, like Conrad? Trust me, it’s not all that’s cracked up to be. You’d have to serve me all night long or something, and it looks like I’m pretty demanding. Plus, you already serve me all day long,” Kai made an attempt to joke.

“I would do everything for you.” Pepin looked at him with his large beautiful eyes.

Kai sighed. He pushed himself up on his forearms and looked at the servant. “Everybody fears me. Even you,” he pointed out.

Pepin nodded.

“So why would you want to be my... concubine?” Kai made an effort to push that word through his mouth.

“I want to be your wife.”

Kai closed his eyes, mumbled something against silly BL plots again, and then drew one deep breath. “Pepin, buddy, you’re a guy. At best, you could be my husband.”

That seemed to block Pepin’s train of thought for the time being. Kai stood up and straightened up his clothes, hoping that he looked royal enough. “Let’s go. What do I have to tell the court?”

That appeared to spring Pepin into action because he started talking rapidly, explaining things to Kai that he only understood half of. Whatever, he would wing it all like he did with homework all the time.

All right, so it wasn’t like he had stage fright or even had any idea what that was, but sitting there on a lavish throne with dozens of eyes on him felt rather... awkward. Kai shifted in his place. Prince Sebastian was more than loaded; he was like the equivalent of a frigging billionaire in that world. The ceiling appeared to be covered with intricate golden designs and paintings in beautiful colors, and the floor had to be marble.

Then came the court, which was made of men and women dressed in velvet, silk, and who knew what else expensive fabrics. The place by his right side was empty, and he gestured for Pepin to

take a seat. The servant shook his head and frowned. "You sent Conrad away for the day," he whispered.

Ah, so he held court with his concubine by his side. What a strange custom! But who was he to comment on that?

He never pretended to be a good judge of character or tell what people were thinking, but the pairs of eyes set on him appeared to stare at him with a mix of fear, envy, and pettiness. At least, the knights and the rest of the troops had worn their sentiments toward Prince Sebastian on their sleeves. He supposed that he also had their respect, but it didn't look like the same thing could be said about this colorful bunch.

An old man in a silly high hat and a dark velvet robe stepped forward. He executed a complicated curtsy and waited.

"Tell him he can stand up," Pepin whispered at him from his left, "and state his problem."

"Stand up, my good sir," Kai said cheerfully, "and pour your heart out." He made a gesture with both hands to show everyone that he was in a generous mood.

"Your Majesty," the man began in a simpering voice, "I would just like to remind you that my Wilhelmina is now of marrying age."

"Good for you. And her," Kai said. "And what would you like me to do about that?"

Hopefully, not marry her. Wilhelmina doesn't sound like a sexy name. Plus, I need to keep my options open. Maybe I can turn this BL into a harem plot. With girls.

"Have you thought of a good man for her?" The man kept rubbing his hands in a very distracting manner. Kai couldn't tell if the man was cold or very pleased with himself for some reason.

He turned his head slightly toward Pepin. "What knight would be good for Wilhelmina?" he asked, moving just one corner of his mouth.

"It's not my place to gossip," Pepin whispered back, in the same way.

"What? Is Wilhelmina the type to play the field?"

"I don't know what kind of play or field you're talking about. She's in love with Sir Harduin."

The name sounded familiar. "Ah, is he the one with the lazy eye?" He had asked the knights to introduce themselves, so he had a vague idea about who was who, at least as far as his royal guard was concerned. The guy in question was built like a brick house, but he had a somewhat serene look on his face that could be the sign of a not-so-stellar intelligence. However, if that Wilhelmina chick wanted him, who was he to say 'no'?

“And what about him? Does he like her?”

“I believe her feelings are returned,” Pepin confirmed.

Kai shrugged. “I have this one in the bag, then. Wilhelmina, step forward,” he said.

A chubby young girl with a pleasant smile hurried by her father’s side. Her smile faded fast, and she watched her parent with desperate eyes.

“Sir Harduin,” Kai called next.

The massive knight moved slowly as if he was walking on eggs. He stole furtive glances at the girl.

“You two can go get hitched. You have my blessing.”

Everyone kept their breath. Kai looked around, a bit annoyed with that suspicious atmosphere. Right, his manner of talking sounded strange to those people.

“Feel free to get married,” he explained. “You,” he pointed at Sir Harduin, “to her,” and then pointed at the girl.

Wilhelmina’s father made a sour face. “Your Majesty, I believe that you promised --” he instantly swallowed his words.

Kai was looking curiously at him. Maybe he had an asshole-resting face or something like that because no matter who he looked at, they turned into a statue.

“Do you really mean it, Your Majesty?” Wilhelmina’s timid voice asked.

“Yes, yes, just remember to invite me to the wedding,” Kai said and waved one hand as a sign of dismissal.

Pepin leaned slightly. “That is not the most strategic choice, Your Majesty,” he said carefully. “Wilhelmina would have been better off with one of the lords in the east.”

“Really, Pepin?” Kai whispered. “I bet she didn’t think so. Just look at them lovebirds.”

Happy with their lord’s decision, the knight and Wilhelmina were holding hands and barely kept in their excitement.

“Next,” Kai said loudly.

The old man retreated after taking a bow. Maybe he was messing up Prince Sebastian’s court, but it was pretty fun.

Three happily arranged marriages later, five settlements of borders between neighbors with vast properties, and several cases of brawlers who preferred to attack one another through means of sharp tongues, Kai felt rightfully tired. All he wanted was to rest.

“Can I call it a day? I think I’ve done plenty,” Kai said.

Pepin took a look at a heavy register he carried on his arms. “There is just one more thing, and then you can dismiss the court.”

“All right, let the man, woman, or goat step up.” One of the cases had involved a wandering herd of goats that appeared to belong to no one in particular. In the end, he had assigned them to the lords who had lands in those parts, and, he liked to believe, he had been quite impartial about it.

“It is the famous minstrel Wymer Wadeki,” Pepin announced in a pompous voice.

“Is he going to sing?” What a bore, but well, he was a prince who could shoot lasers from his eyes, so he could live with that.

“Yes, his latest song.”

“Oh, interesting. What is it about?”

“Your royal backside, Your Highness,” Pepin said.

Kai stared at his servant, searching for signs that he was joking. “For real?”

Pepin was surprised by what must have been a pretty anxious expression on his face. “You’ve been waiting for months to hear it.”

“I’m slaying dragons, and people feel the need to sing about my butt?”

“It is a majestic butt,” Pepin said. “Should I send the minstrel away?”

“I don’t know. Will he come back?”

“Yes, the next time you hold court.”

“Just let him sing, and I’ll do the walk of shame later.”

Kai covered his face. What kind of story was he trapped in, after all?

Chapter Six – ...Is No Flatscape

Kai was thankful for Prince Sebastian's cold blood, as it looked like he was incapable of blushing. The minstrel walked forward, brushed his fingers across an instrument that looked like a lyre, and began singing in a loud yet quite pleasant voice.

He's Prince Sebastian, and he fights evil

No one in the world's his equal

He's the most handsome; he's the bravest,

And all know, he's also the lewdest

Oh, gawd, it was starting. Kai covered his eyes. Was everyone just pulling his leg and laughing at him now? He was itching to jump to his feet and order something idiotic like 'off with his head' while pointing a royal finger at the unfortunate entertainer.

The son of a goddess,

Loved by many,

Eyes will undress,

And it's not uncanny,

That his royal shape

Especially from behind

Is no flatscape

And not unkind

Not unkind? How long must have taken the minstrel to come up with that stupid song? And how long was it supposed to take to sing it and be done with it? Kai let himself sink into the throne and began wrapping his long hair around his head and covering his face in an effort to obscure the entire world and hide his shame.

He's Prince Sebastian, we all adore him,

But we all know that our chances are slim,

To have him notice just one from the many,

But, wait, what do I hear...?

He took on a lover

Someone to keep his frozen heart warm

And him safe from falter

Alas, we are grateful to be spared the storm.

The minstrel attacked the chorus again, and now the court joined in. Slowly, Kai pulled his knees to his chest, hoping to make himself little enough that he could disappear. Defo, it would have been much better to have teleportation instead of ice magic at the moment.

Everybody was having fun, except him. And the frigging assholes showed no signs that they would get tired of singing about his butt anytime soon. Wait, they weren't singing about him, but Prince Sebastian. Well, there was some comfort in that thought.

Someone patted his shoulder discreetly, and he disentangled himself from his own hair to look at Pepin.

“Do you like it that much, Your Majesty?” the servant asked. “I’ve never seen you so... impressed.”

Yeah, impressed was just the right word. *Thank you for nothing, Pepin.*

“Yeah, I’m totally impressed. Just give the man a cookie.” Preferably a diarrhea-inducing cookie. “And let’s get out of here.”

“A cookie?” Pepin blinked.

“Or a coin, or more. You know better how much he should get, right?”

More like a foot in his un-royal behind. Yeah, Kai smiled, that would be a much better compensation for pulling off a stupid song like that.

“You really enjoyed it,” Pepin said cheerfully, painfully, and obviously unaware of what made his master smile.

“Yeah, sure,” Kai said brightly. “Now what do I have to do to make him stop?”

“Just raise your hand.”

“Like this?” Kai did as told, and the minstrel fell silent, along with the entire court.

That was more like it. Everyone’s eyes were on him, and they were all holding their breath, the minstrel included. Now, that was fun. And his arm wasn’t hurting yet, so he could hold a contest to see who would be the last man or woman standing.

“Your Majesty?” Pepin asked cautiously. “Sebastian?” he whispered.

“What?” Kai whispered back. “I’m just starting to have fun. For real, they won’t breathe until I put my hand down?”

“You know that very well.”

All right, so maybe some people were getting a bit pale. Kai dropped his arm, and a collective exhale rushed through the vast throne room.

“Now tell the minstrel what you thought of his song,” Pepin said in a tense voice.

“Do I have to leave a review? Really? All right. Minstrel Wadeki,” Kai said loudly, pleased that he had remembered the guy’s name, “your song was quite interesting. Next time, more about fighting dragons and less about my butt. Are we good?”

The minstrel nodded and curtsied frantically. “Yes, Your Majesty.”

Kai turned toward Pepin. “Give him what you usually give him.”

“But you’re the one who usually throws the coins.”

“Throw? That’s a little rude. Like how? On the ground?”

Pepin presented him with a large bag of gold. Kai sighed. “But if I begin throwing them around, aren’t they all going to try and get as many as they can?” He gestured around the room.

“That is how you always do.”

“Really? And how many fatalities are registered each year?”

Pepin didn’t appear capable of understanding the question.

“Never mind. Minstrel,” he gestured for Wadeki to come closer, “here’s your reward.” He grabbed a handful of coins nonchalantly and placed them in the man’s palm.

The look of perfect astonishment in the man’s eyes was funny. Kai began snickering.

“What? Too little?”

“No, no, Your Majesty. I’m grateful.” Wadeki threw himself at his feet.

“All right, this is getting awkward,” Kai said slowly and pulled his feet away from the minstrel’s grabbing hands. “Are we finally done here?” he asked Pepin again. “Just instruct whoever you need to instruct to give everyone food and drinks. Is that how it’s done, right?”

Pepin seemed at least half as astonished as the minstrel who hadn’t yet gotten to his feet. “I will see to it right away, Your Majesty.”

“When you’re done, just come to my room,” Kai ordered. He needed to ask Pepin about the dragon cave he was supposed to visit tomorrow. As overpowered as he was, it could be that he wasn’t completely invincible. And seeing how he was going on his first quest, he didn’t want to end up as dragon food.

And he was beat. He had never worked so much in a day in his entire life. But it didn’t feel that bad. Except for his royal backside that got a little numb for sitting in that throne for hours and that stupid song that was also about his backside, he was feeling pretty damned good about himself. He had helped lovers get married, neighbors avoid cutting their throats over wandering goats, and a minstrel earn his keep for another day. Well, the last bit had been awful, but apparently only for him.

Yet, the tune was pretty catchy.

His royal shape

Especially from behind

Is no flatscape...

He hummed as he walked toward his room. Or chamber? Did they call it a chamber? He needed to brush on his vocabulary. Having Pepin blink, frown, and grimace at him every time he said something weird was getting old. He needed to sound more royally.

Kai walked down a long corridor while checking the place for any available corners where he could turn. It was a bit funny that he had ended wandering the hallways and getting lost. He had no idea where his room – the royal chambers – was, and it wasn’t like he could just ask someone. Pepin put up with his weirdness, most probably because he was head over heels with Sebastian – for unexplainable reasons except that the guy was a total hunk and this was a BL show. But others might get suspicious over their leader having turned into a senile overnight and not knowing where his room was.

A hooded figure appeared at the opposite end of the hallway. At least, there was an end, Kai thought. There was something strange in how the hooded figure moved, though, like he was floating over the polished floor. Hmm, that was weird. Wait, he still had to figure out who had summoned him to this world. Suspicious hooded figures had to be handled with care.

Kai hurried toward the mysterious person. The hooded figure stopped, waiting for him.

“Hey, I know this may sound crazy, but did you summon me?” Kai asked.

The robe opened, and Kai barely had time to step back. The sight of a metallic glint bouncing off a blade was enough warning for his body to react. He jumped back, and the blade slashed through the air. What the hell? Was that an assassination attempt?

But he was an overpowered...

“Hey, cut it out,” he warned, as the mysterious figure rushed to him with the obvious intent to stab him.

He jumped out of the way just in time. Ah, he could just use his ice magic and turn that assassin into a popsicle. Yeah, that was a good idea. How did he do that, again? Ah, right, he needed to focus, only that it was a bit difficult to do that while jumping around to protect himself from that nasty-looking blade.

Didn't he have a sword? He touched his belt and unsheathed a long saber.

“Yeah, noob, come at me now,” he said and pointed his sword at the assailant.

If he was overpowered, then he had to be a master swordsman. The assassin had to know it, too, because he hesitated.

“Thought so,” Kai said cheerfully. “Now taste my steel or something.”

He grabbed his sword with both hands, but just as he dashed toward the hooded figure, someone came from behind and pushed the assassin to the side, smashing him against a wall. The red coat was a giveaway.

Now, why was Conrad coming to the rescue? Didn't he hate him? Kai watched as Conrad fought the assassin, trying to find an opening. His first sword fight – all right, sword versus dagger – and someone had to ruin it for him. Still, he didn't want to end up slashing Conrad through by accident.

Conrad grabbed the robe, and a dark-clad figure slid away from it, making the other fall face first. The assassin ran and disappeared at the end of the hallway in a split second. Kai considered rushing after him, but then he noticed Conrad slumped to one side and holding one hand over his stomach. His coat was red but not red enough to not let the blood show.

“Oh, shit,” Kai said in a noncommittal voice. “Why the hell did you have to get between me and that guy?”

Conrad grimaced, and his face was all sweaty. Oh, no, this wasn't good. Kai knelt by Conrad's side.

“You could just thank me for saving your life,” Conrad breathed out while his face contorted in pain.

“I was doing just fine before you rushed in and threw yourself into that asshole’s blade. Now what the hell am I supposed to do with you? I don’t know any healing spells, do I?”

Conrad removed his hand to let Kai see the long red line splitting his coat and skin. “Just freeze the blood here,” he said faintly.

“Is that safe?” Kai asked worriedly.

“I don’t know how deep it is,” Conrad said. “Just do it. If I bleed too much... I’ll die.”

“Well, if you put it like this,” Kai said. “I hope I’m not going to freeze your liver, too, while at it.”

“Just... do it,” Conrad hissed.

Kai pushed Conrad’s coat out of the way and focused on the gash. The blood turned into icicles, and white tendrils began spreading. “All right, I think that’s enough. Now wrap your arms around my neck so that I can get you to your feet. Pepin should know more about what to do. How do we get to my room?”

Conrad didn’t question why he had no common awareness of his own castle. “Through there,” he gestured.

Kai grabbed him and forced him to his feet, and then propped Conrad’s weight with his own body. “Don’t worry, buddy, we’ll make you as good as new.”

To his surprise, Conrad began laughing softly. “You’re so strange sometimes.”

“Yeah, yeah, you must imagine it because of all that loss of blood,” Kai said quickly.

It was rewarding to see how easy it was for him to drag a dude the size of Conrad after him. Still, he didn’t have time to think about such things, as he needed to find his room and Pepin fast. He was no doctor, but he could bet that just freezing a wound wasn’t that great a strategy to take care of such a serious problem.

“I must inform you that I’m summoned tomorrow at Milo’s house to study,” Sebastian told the mother as soon as he reached home. Operating the elevator by himself had been quite the experience, but it was in his blood to be unafraid of the unknown.

The mother was in her room, reading something while already in bed. She wore something over her eyes, a metal frame of some kind, and took it off when he entered after knocking politely. “Kai, are you all right?” she asked.

“Yes, thank you for your question.”

“Did you suddenly decide to practice being polite?” She smiled.

“I don’t understand.”

“Never mind. So, are you and Milo really going to study tomorrow? I know you don’t care much about school, but you should at least consider graduating. I don’t dare to say anything more.”

Sebastian was intrigued. “Please, do dare say.”

The mother abandoned the book she was reading. “Come and take a seat here.” She patted the bed.

“I would rather stand.”

Mrs. Martin sighed. “I know things haven’t been easy ever since your father passed.”

Oh, that explained their situation. The family’s patriarch must have fallen in battle.

“Do you need someone to put food on the table?” he asked directly.

Mrs. Martin stared at him, a bit confused. “Are you offering to do the groceries, or are you making fun of me? Just so you know, Kai, you’re not that funny right now.” She wagged a finger at him in warning.

“It is quite obvious that this family is down on its luck,” Sebastian said. “Tomorrow, I will do some hunting. We will not go hungry.”

With that, he addressed Mrs. Martin a polite ‘goodnight’ and stepped out of her room. She was still staring in obvious surprise when he closed the door behind him.

Now, he had more important things to learn about. He took out his phone. “Soon, we will be alone, and you will spill all your secrets,” he whispered.

“Milo’s here,” he heard the mother’s voice from behind the door. “Are you still asleep?”

Sebastian woke up and stared around, feeling completely disoriented. He had talked to the phone all night long to learn about the proper way to speak like a high school student, as well as about studying, along with many other wonderful things.

“Just let him... I’m coming!” he yelled, remembering that his natural way of talking was considered too formal for this world.

He pulled a shirt on and a pair of pants and rushed to the door.

“I have to go to work. Make sure to grab at least a sandwich. I left enough for you and your sister on the table,” Mrs. Martin said quickly.

He nodded without questioning anything from what he had just heard. One thing he had decided was to keep quiet when there were things he didn’t know and just ask his phone about them later.

Milo appeared from behind his mom. “Dude, what the hell? You’re still sleeping?” he asked cheerfully.

Sebastian ran his hands through his hair. “Yo, dude,” he said, too, putting up a stiff arm. Hmm, he had to be more relaxed while talking like that. More chill.

The mother shook her head. “You two, make sure you’re not running late, okay?”

“We won’t run late, Mrs. Martin, I promise.”

It looked like Milo could assuage the mother’s worries with just a few words. Sebastian decided that it was a skill he should master, as well.

He pulled Milo inside after bidding a hasty farewell to the mother. “What classes do we have today?” he asked.

Milo snickered. “You’re hopeless, right? Math, chemistry, and physics. And the bane of our existence.” He made a face as he had just had sour grapes. “French.”

Sebastian searched his brain. He had also studied some literature last night, but he knew at least the basics of the topics Milo mentioned. And he hadn’t found French that difficult. In his world, he was a master of foreign languages. His superior intellect helped a lot, too.

“I’ll go wash,” he informed Milo. Now he knew what a shower was, and he considered it a pretty marvelous invention, as well. To have a waterfall indoors sounded like decadence, but it appeared to be a common occurrence in this world. Also, it was an enjoyable experience.

When he returned, Milo was stretched on his bed and had a silly smile on his face. He kept one hand on his lower belly and looked dreamily at Sebastian. “I’ve dreamed about you last night.”

“I studied,” Sebastian said promptly.

“You did? That’s a first.” Milo snickered like he found that amusing.

“I must graduate,” he said.

“Well, yeah, that’s true. Come here,” Milo said and blinked lazily.

Going to school was part of the graduation quest, but it looked like Milo didn't care about such priorities. Last night, Sebastian had stumbled over some peculiar videos, and he had found himself in the impossible situation of being aroused and having no one to help him get rid of it.

He climbed on the bed and placed one hand over Milo's crotch. "Yours appears to be of a good size," he said as he fondled the young man's manhood. It had to do for what Sebastian had in mind.

Milo pushed his hand away and laughed. "Oh, man, you're something." He hesitated for a moment, but then he grabbed Sebastian by the front of his pants, too. "And yours is not small, either."

They had no time for that. Sebastian only wanted to assess the situation. And the situation, well, was quite satisfying. Even if Milo wasn't schooled in the art of lovemaking, with what he had, there was promise that he would become a most pleasant lover.

He surely didn't lack passion. Milo bit his bottom lip and grinned. "I can't wait. I thought about it last night, and man, I want to do everything you want to do. I even stopped by the drugstore this morning, for, you know." He wiggled his eyebrows and winked.

Ah, drugstore. Milo wrongly thought that one of them would need the help of miracle potions that caused their manhood to grow. Sebastian didn't believe they required such a thing.

"You don't need it. And neither do I," Sebastian said sternly. He found such magic at least a bit disturbing. What was gained had to be gained through natural means. Like he got his ice magic from his mother, the Ice Goddess. The size of one's manhood didn't have to be modified using obscure means. He was starting to think those vivid images of nude men were following him everywhere.

Milo stared for a moment at him and then burst into laughter. "If you say so. I have a feeling we'll need them, though. A lot of them." He wiggled his eyebrows again.

Sebastian consulted the time on his phone. Among its many uses, the magic item was also capable of telling him that. He had already decided that he would carry the phone with him all the time. It was as trustworthy as his sword, and, in this world, people didn't carry swords, as far as he could tell.

Preoccupied as he had been with studying and learning about arousing topics, he had failed to find the needed time to establish an important aspect.

"Where do you go to hunt for food?" he asked Milo.

Ah, he must have said something strange again. He looked at his phone and typed in the question. "Ten best places to hunt in --" he began to mumble.

“What would you like to eat?” Milo interrupted him. “I have all kinds at my house.”

“I need to support this family,” Sebastian said. “I cannot rob your home of its supplies.”

“Ah. Well, you still have your part-time at the supermarket, right? If you care about helping your mom with grocery shopping, maybe you can get some discounts. Wait, is the situation that bad? I thought your mom worked full-time.”

“It’s rather vexing... It pisses me off,” Sebastian reformulated quickly, “that she has to do that.”

Milo shrugged. “You told me she loves her job. And that it’s not like you don’t have money. Everything you make goes on video games and manga, and I never heard your mom complain. Or you.”

Ah, well, maybe they still had their pride as the house of Martin. He would have to figure out things without Milo’s help. He didn’t appear aware of the direness of the situation, and Sebastian believed that Mrs. Martin shouldn’t be made to feel ashamed about their household’s situation.

“Don’t tell me,” Milo said teasingly, “that now that you got yourself a boyfriend, you suddenly feel all responsible and grownup?”

“What boyfriend?”

Milo chuckled. “Me.” He pointed at himself.

Well, he was a boy and a friend. Hardly a boy, though, Sebastian thought, while giving Milo another once-over.

“You are so totally undressing me with your eyes,” Milo said in a funny voice and laughed. “Now let’s go or we’ll miss first period.”

“Sure.”

“Don’t forget to grab your sandwich. And your sister.”

“Do I have to?”

“She’s a freshman at our school. Of course you do.”

If that was what he had to do, he had no qualms with it. He put his uniform on, ignoring Milo’s annoying whistles, and walked out of the room. Tani was already in the kitchen, wolfing down her sandwich.

“What took you so long?” she asked with suspicious eyes. “Don’t tell me you two kissed all this time.”

“No,” Sebastian said sharply. “And a young lady like you shouldn’t ask such questions.”

Tani rolled her eyes. “Sure, grandpa.”

Puzzled by her words, Sebastian hurried to correct her. “I am not your grandfather. I am your brother.”

Tani stared over him at Milo. “Did he hit his head?”

“Not that I know of,” came the reply.

“I didn’t hit my head,” Sebastian intervened sternly.

Tani shrugged. “Just my luck to have a weirdo for a brother. But, don’t worry,” he patted him on the shoulder, “you’re my only brother, so I love you.”

Sebastian stopped and looked at her.

“What?” she laughed. “You know I do.”

“If your thirteen-year-old sister tells you that, you should believe it, man,” Milo chimed in.

Love? That was a strange word to throw around.

“Now, tell me,” Tani whispered, ignoring him completely, and her whole attention trained on Milo, “did you two, you know?”

“You’re only thirteen. You’re not allowed to know that.” Milo took the liberty to pull Tani’s pigtails upward, making her look like a rabbit.

“Almost fourteen,” she objected and pulled her hair free from Milo’s hands. “And it’s not like I didn’t know you two were suspicious.”

“Suspicious? In what way?” Sebastian asked.

Tani rolled both her head and eyes to stare at him. “No girlfriends? Spending all your time together? And you’re already eighteen? Bruh, that’s pretty sus.”

“For your information,” Sebastian began, “until yesterday, we didn’t even kiss.”

Tani stared at him for a long moment and then began shouting. “I knew it! I knew something was up! You two were staring at each other with lovey-dovey eyes yesterday! Who’s the seme? Who’s the uke?” She turned around fast, looking at Milo, then at him, and then back at Milo.

“Man, are you spilling the beans to your sister like this?” Milo complained.

Sebastian looked around and saw no beans spilled. It was probably a way of saying that he shouldn’t have told Tani about how they kissed.

“I didn’t know it was a secret,” he said primly.

“A secret?” Tani started again. “Don’t you dare keep secrets from me!”

If only she knew who he truly was. That was quite an important secret her brother was keeping from her right now.

“Come on, my dudes,” Milo said, grabbing him by the shoulder and taking Tani’s hand. “We should get to school today.”

“Why are you holding my sister’s hand?” Sebastian asked.

Tani burst into laughter. “You’re barely boyfriends for a day and he’s jealous. Don’t worry, big bro, I’d never steal your boyfriend. Sister honor.”

That wasn’t what he thought. It was just inappropriate for a girl her age – and a princess on top of everything – to hold hands so casually with a commoner.

But, as he had learned from his mistakes already, he chose to remain quiet.

Chapter Seven – Am I Supposed To Make Dragons Cry?

Luckily, Pepin was already inside the royal chambers, busy dusting around with a feathery implement.

“What happened?” he asked and hurried to them.

“Conrad’s hurt. Bring the court’s physician,” Kai said in a steady voice. It was all a fantasy or a dream or a BL show, and probably he would get pulled to the real world anytime soon, but that didn’t mean that he would take the situation lightly.

“Right away,” Pepin replied without asking for additional details.

Kai carried Conrad to the bed and helped him lie down. “Are you all right? Any nausea? Dizziness? Is your whole life flashing before your eyes?”

Conrad tried to laugh, but then he winced in pain. “Why are you so different?” he asked.

“I’m not. That’s who I really am,” Kai retorted.

“Then I’ve been told a lot of lies,” Conrad whispered, and his eyelids grew heavy.

“Hey, hey, don’t you dare feint on me. I have no idea what to do if you suddenly died.”

Conrad’s eyes snapped open. “Why would you care?” he asked, looking pretty suspicious of Kai’s reasons to say such things.

“How could I not? You’re in my care or something.”

“Why would you feel responsible?” Conrad insisted. “I am but a tool for you to use.”

Oh, please, don’t say it.

Conrad continued. “Your concubine, your slave to use as you wish.”

Kai closed his eyes, squeezed them hard, and then released a drawn heavy sigh. “It’s only because you insist,” he said and pointed a finger at Conrad.

“Don’t worry, Your Majesty. I know you would quickly discard me if I failed to have my uses.” His eyelids were closing again.

Kai snapped his fingers in front of him. “You didn’t lose that much blood, right? Why do you keep falling asleep?”

“It... hurts,” Conrad hissed. “I’m so tired.”

“No,” Kai said in a determined voice. “No, you’re not allowed to sleep. I have no idea why you shouldn’t, but that’s how they say in those – I mean, I order you to stay awake, dammit!”

The doors opened, and Pepin, followed by a man with long grey hair, rushed in.

“Your Majesty,” the physician said and took a long and unnecessary bow.

“Yes, yes, I know. Just come here and fix him.”

The physician didn’t have to be told twice. He stepped closer to the patient and began examining him. Kai moved out of the way, not wanting to interfere with the medical act, whatever it entailed in this world.

Pepin touched his arm. “Who did this to Conrad?”

“A suspicious hooded figure,” Kai said promptly.

“Are you joking?”

“I’m serious,” Kai protested. “I think it was someone sent to assassinate me.”

“Assassinate? And you didn’t call the guards?” Pepin raised his voice.

Kai shushed him. “There’s a patient in the room, what the hell? And he was gone, like in an instant. Plus, I had to take Conrad to safety.”

Pepin appeared surprised. “You let the assassin get away,” he said slowly like he was just starting to realize something.

“Well, if it means so much to you, go and tell the guards to search the castle for suspicious hooded figures. Actually, not so hooded, since Conrad grabbed his robe. He was dressed all in black if that helps.”

“The robe, where is it?” Pepin asked impatiently.

“In the hallway, where the attack took place.”

“Let’s go get it, and you can inform the guards on our way to search for this assassin.”

“It sounds like a waste of time, but as you wish,” Kai said, a tiny bit vexed. “Hey, who’s ordering who around here, um?”

Pepin threw him a pointed look. “With all due respect, Your Majesty, you appear to forget how important you are for the kingdom of Ifigia.”

It hadn't occurred to Kai until now that he hadn't even known the name of the place where he had been transported by, apparently, a whim of fate. "Again, Pepin, I'm not letting this guy," he pointed at Conrad, "die on my watch."

"Why?" Pepin asked and pouted like a petulant child. "Are you in love with him?"

Kai groaned. "Stop being jealous. I just don't like it, you know, people dying and stuff."

"So you're not in love with him," Pepin concluded for himself.

"He's a dude," Kai said. "Why would I be in love with him?"

Pepin exhaled, more relaxed now. "Should we see about that robe, Your Majesty?"

"All right, let's go, if it means so much to you. Will Conrad be safe, only with the physician here?"

"Why wouldn't he?" Pepin asked.

"Well, there's an assassin on the loose," Kai pointed out. Maybe he was a scatterbrain, but Pepin didn't seem much different. The servant seemed to have already forgotten about calling the guards and ordering a full-scale manhunt.

"Yes, the assassin," Pepin said, and his alertness returned in full force. "After you, Your Majesty. And are you sure that you're not doing this because you love Conrad?"

"Oh, shut up already, you annoying jealous..." Kai hesitated, not knowing what to say so that it didn't sound too insulting to those delicate and quick to pass judgment ears.

"I am not jealous," Pepin said airily. "Just concerned."

"Yeah, concerned someone might take your place. Don't worry, Conrad seems like the kind of guy who would be completely useless with a feather duster." Kai grabbed Pepin's hand. The servant looked at him with loving eyes. He was so hot and cold, it wasn't even funny. "Now let's grab the robe and put the guards on high alert, yes?"

"Yes," Pepin said quietly and let himself dragged away.

The robe was still on the floor, which meant that the assassin hadn't thought of coming back to wipe his traces. Pepin took the garment and began studying it intently. "As I suspected. The house of Uxilan." He pointed at a small dark red crest that would have been easy to miss on that black fabric.

"Who are they?"

“You destroyed them,” Pepin said. “They were dealing in black magic and tried to keep you from marching through their territory.”

Kai didn’t dare to ask more about that. “Apparently, I didn’t do that good of job, if some of them are still alive and trying to stab me with pointy blades.”

“Pointy? Oh, no,” Pepin gasped.

“What? What is it?”

“Let’s hurry back to Conrad,” Pepin said quickly. He was the one to grab Kai’s hand.

“Now who’s in love with the guy?” Kai tried to joke.

“It is possible that he was poisoned,” came the hasty reply.

“Poisoned? Oh, shit, that’s bad.”

They started running.

The physician must have reached the same conclusion if his drawn face and worried eyes were any indications.

“How bad is it?” Kai asked directly.

Conrad had his eyes closed, and his face had a sickly pallor. He was sweating profusely and looked gone to the world.

“You did well to freeze the blood, Your Majesty,” the physician replied. “But it is poison, and not even ice magic will prevent it from spreading.”

“Is there an antidote?”

“Yes, there is one, but not easy to get. Leaves of angelica, hyssop root extract, and --” the physician hesitated.

“And?” Kai asked, tapping his foot.

“The tear of a dragon,” the old man finally answered.

“Are you kidding me? I mean, is this a joke?”

“No, Sire.”

“How am I supposed to make a dragon cry? Should I tickle him? Have him watch sappy movies?”

“I do not know, Sire,” the physician said apologetically.

“All right,” Kai said and began to pace the room. “I was heading over to that dragon cave anyway. I’ll figure out a way. Pepin, get my horse ready, and whatever I need to take with me to fight dragons.”

“Just killing a dragon won’t make him cry,” the physician pointed out. “They are creatures made of fire and anger.”

“Well, then I won’t kill him. I’ll find a way,” Kai said. “The rest of the ingredients, do you have them?”

“Yes, of course,” the old man replied. “But, Sire, it is a perilous quest. Of what I heard, to touch a dragon’s heart, one needs to reach it. Cold steel and magic won’t work. And the few who ever succeeded if we were to believe the tales, went against dragons alone.”

“Fine by me,” Kai said. “I’m overpowered anyway, and I need to put my skills to the test. So I’ll go face this dragon by myself.”

“Don’t you dare,” Pepin shouted, ignoring that they had an audience.

Kai frowned. “Don’t lecture me, Pepin. I’m going, and that’s final.”

“Sire, if you allowed me a piece of advice,” the physician intervened, “allowing this man who until yesterday used to be your enemy, to perish, wouldn’t be seen as an act of malevolence. You could always get another concubine.”

“Talk to the hand,” Kai said and put one palm up in front of the physician.

That made the old man confused enough to stop making his case against Conrad.

“And make sure to keep him alive until I get back, or there will be consequences.”

What consequences those would be, he had no idea, but, at the moment, putting the fear of Prince Sebastian into those old bones looked like the right course of action.

The physician went back by the patient’s side right away. “Of course, Your Majesty,” he said grimly.

Kai felt a little bad about lying to the old man, but dire times called for dire measures. “Pepin, get guards to the door. They should be here at all times, in case someone tries something shady.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Pepin replied as a servant should. “But you’re not going alone to the dragon’s cave. I’m coming.”

“Why? I don’t need a sandwich while I’m sneaking into that beast’s lair.” Actually, he might get hungry, but whatever, he’d just grab some supplies.

Pepin seemed calm and composed. “You need me.”

Of course, he had no idea about the way to the dragon cave. “Why?” he chose to play his hand. “Do you happen to know how to get there?”

“Of course I do,” Pepin replied, now full of indignation of being suspected of such lack of knowledge.

“Then you’re coming,” Kai said like it was the most natural thing in the world to change his mind at the drop of a dime.

“I’ll make all the arrangements,” Pepin informed him. “We’ll be riding west before nightfall.”

“Yeah, let’s hurry. And you know what? Grab some sandwiches for the road.”

“What are those, sandwiches?”

“You take a slice of bread --” Kai began, “oh, shoot, never mind. Some food and water.”

“Of course. What kind of royal servant do you think I am, Your Majesty?” Pepin bristled, now taking offense over this underhanded attack at his skills.

With Pepin rushing through the door, Kai started looking around for things he might need in his quest. His eyes fell on Conrad. Even pale and worn by the poison trying to wring the life out of him, he was still handsome.

He took a step toward the bed, then another. He hovered and whispered, “I promise, you’ll get better.” He touched Conrad’s face with hesitant fingers, taking in the contour of his nose and lips.

The physician shifted in his place. “Your Majesty,” he cleared his throat, “you might need this.” He offered him an empty vial. “For the dragon’s tear.”

“Oh, right.” Kai shook his head. A warm and unfamiliar feeling deserted his heart as he pulled his eyes away from Conrad’s face. “Don’t worry. I’ll make him cry a river.”

The physician inspected him with clever eyes. “They keep gossiping about a change in our cold but just Prince Sebastian.”

Oh, no, Kai groaned internally, not this again.

“But it was foretold,” the old man added, “that love would do that to our protector.”

Love? Even this old dude thought he was in love with Conrad?

“What change? I have no idea what you’re talking about, man.” He used a harsher voice than usual to stop the physician from talking nonsense.

“Forgive an old fool, Your Majesty.” The physician cowered and looked down.

Well, even to his ears, he sounded like a total prick. Everyone was right to fear him. And since it served, he could use that to his advantage. But better not get used to it, Kai thought. If he were to re-write this story, he would do it his way.

Eventually, Tani had settled for walking between him and Milo after they got off the subway, so now she was chirping happily while swinging their arms around. Milo appeared to be quite fond of his sister. Could it be that he intended to marry her once she was of age?

The thought annoyed him. Tani was from a royal house, regardless of her manners that left plenty to be desired. He was still unsure of Milo’s position. He wasn’t a scholar and didn’t appear to have the sternness required by a knight’s education. Asking directly would be considered an affront, so it was another thing he had to figure out on his own.

That wasn’t all. Milo pledged loyalty to him. He belonged to him, Sebastian decided. And as someone who belonged to him, he should have known better than to try to use the attention lavished on him to get to the princess.

Tani’s hand was warm, clammy, and slightly unpleasant, but Sebastian held it tightly. He had never had siblings and not exactly a family either. At least, not one that resembled what everyone else had. He had been born into his role as the protector of the realm, and that left no room for unnecessary sentiments.

To begin with, sentiments were a bother. They fogged one’s mind and weakened the spirit. For that reason, he had to be careful around this family. They appeared to be prone to excessive emotions. Tani was too loud and joked about everything, and the mother worried too much about his wellbeing.

At least Milo appeared to be a lustful creature. Lust, he could understand. He saw its uses, and the sensation of elation that came with it succeeded where sentiments couldn’t. It cleared the mind. It strengthened the spirit.

“You’ll have to walk back home by yourself today,” Milo told Tani.

“Why? What are you two going to do?”

“Study,” Milo said in a deadpan voice.

“Study, right.” Tani snickered.

Sebastian couldn't imagine what could be so funny about studying that his sister had to neigh like a horse at every mentioning of it.

"Yes, we will study," he said sternly.

Tani disentangled her clammy hand from his and gave him a quick hug. "See you at home." She dashed to a group of girls her age, dressed in the same fashion. The yard was full of young men and women between Tani's age and his and Milo's age. This system of education that involved so many youngsters flabbergasted Sebastian. He couldn't imagine how someone could learn anything in that clamor.

Reminding himself that this strange world needed to have its rules obeyed, he followed Milo inside the building. They entered a class, and each one took a seat at an individual desk. Sebastian was all eyes and ears.

"Mr. Martin? Mr. Martin?" Someone shook him. He blinked and looked around.

"Dude, wake up," Milo whispered.

Sebastian straightened up and stared around. Then he remembered that he was there to study. The lesson had been so unexciting, and the teacher's voice so lulling that he had fallen asleep.

"Mr. Martin!" The teacher's voice boomed.

She was an elderly woman dressed in clothes that looked fit as a home for moths.

Finally, he understood that she was calling for him. Her small owlish eyes were also set on him, which was another sign. "Yes?" he replied.

"Will you be so kind and come here?"

He stood up and walked to the blackboard on which symbols were written. Oh, yes, that was math, and he had learned new things last night. Apparently, they were a bit more advanced in the study of that topic in this world.

"Don't just stand there. Solve the equation." The teacher pointed at the symbols.

Sebastian turned and looked at them. Yes, he was starting to remember something. "X multiplied by --" he began.

"Here." The teacher threw a piece of chalk at him.

Now, he recalled everything.

"For the record, Mr. Martin, if you fail to solve this, your grades are going to suffer quite a bit."

“Suffer? Do you intend to torture them? How?” he asked, puzzled.

Soft snickers could be heard from the class.

“Ah, you think yourself smart, on top of everything.”

“I do not think myself smart. I am smart,” Sebastian replied, triggering another bout of laughter from the class.

The teacher’s owlish eyes grew wide. “Then prove it.” She tapped against the table with her knuckles.

He turned toward the blackboard. Yes, he remembered this quite well. His hand began to dance on the surface. Math had been one of the many topics he had been taught while growing up. And he enjoyed a challenge.

The entire class fell silent, and it appeared that everyone was scribbling on their papers. The teacher tapped her foot while watching him. She looked a bit like a witch. Maybe she was there to test him.

Very well. He would not falter. And it was good that finally, everyone was silent.

He finished and turned toward the teacher. She was staring at him in disbelief. “Where have you been all these years of high school, Mr. Martin?”

Oh, it was a question meant to catch him in a tangle of lies. Maybe she wanted him to deny his true nature. But he had always faced witches without running or hiding. “I’ve been fighting monsters and protecting the land,” he said proudly, squaring his shoulders.

This time, the class erupted. Sebastian couldn’t fathom why they reacted as if he were some jester brought there for their entertainment.

“Go back to your place!” The teacher yelled, now red in the face. “And stop being a smartass!”

A smartass? What did his behind have to do with his intellect?

“Dude,” Milo whispered at him from his right, “what was that all about?”

Maybe his decision to answer honestly had been wrong. “I just said it in jest,” he told Milo, also in a whisper.

“In what?” Milo leaned toward him more, unable to hear him over the commotion in the room.

“Mr. Bennett, stop talking to Mr. Martin! Quiet, everyone!”

She slammed her palm against her desk. Everyone fell silent.

So, Sebastian found himself saying out loud, “What a witch!”, rightfully impressed by her ability to steal everyone’s ability to speak.

“That’s it, Mr. Martin! I don’t care that you appear to have turned into a math genius overnight! You’re going straight to detention after classes!”

“Am I to be jailed?” he asked, utterly flabbergasted and forgetting that he was speaking in a too formal manner for a high school student. “What for?”

“For being a smartass!” the teacher yelled again.

Sebastian fell quiet. He didn’t have his magic, and this witch was sending him to jail. For the moment, he would accept his fate only so he could have a deeper understanding of what the curse wanted from him.

The ring of the bell announced the recess, and the witch left the room. Sebastian had a mind to go after her and provoke her, but he felt that he was too weak in this world to emerge victorious from such an encounter.

“Dude,” Milo started. “What the hell, man? You don’t just provoke Mrs. Marwin like that.”

If only he had realized that before ending up in jail. “Is she going to send guards after me?”

Any moment now, that would happen.

“No, man.” Milo snickered. “But it’s a bummer that you got detention. You won’t see me practice.”

“Or sweaty, and then naked, taking a shower,” Sebastian said matter-of-factly.

Milo blushed and punched him in the shoulder. “Dude, what the hell?” he mumbled.

Someone brushed his hair forcefully from the back to his face. Sebastian turned, in righteous outrage, only to be met by an ugly, pig-like face. The young man was large and smelled of grease. He pushed himself into Sebastian’s face. “Am I to be jailed?” he mocked in a high-pitched voice.

“I beg your pardon?” Sebastian ran his hands through his hair.

“Chet, cut it out, man,” Milo intervened.

“What?” the pig-faced young man asked. “I didn’t do anything. Stop protecting your girlfriend so much. What, he can’t defend himself or something?”

Sebastian noted the presence of two other boys, relatively as ugly as Chet, right behind him. He was about to open his mouth when Milo spoke again. “Chet, beat it. Or we’ll have a problem.”

“All right, man. Whatever.” Chet brushed by him on his way out, followed closely by the other two. “Fucking nerd,” he whispered.

What was that, a nerd? He had so many other questions to ask his phone. He took it out of his pocket, decided to learn the meaning of that word right away.

“Don’t mind them,” Milo said. “They’re just douchebags.”

“Who is your girlfriend?” Sebastian asked while typing quickly on his phone.

“Are you kidding me now? They’ve been teasing us since forever.”

“I’m not kidding,” Sebastian protested.

“You’re such a weirdo,” Milo said with affection, “but you’re my weirdo.” He took him by the shoulders. “Come, let’s stretch our legs a little.”

During the last period, Sebastian began to understand that he appeared to be doing a lot better in school than Kai Martin had used to. However, the curse seemed to involve graduating, and there was only one way to secure that, according to the teachers: study hard.

He was overly conscious of the curious eyes staring at him from all directions as the French words rolled off his tongue with ease. This teacher, unlike Mrs. Marwin, was much younger and had a pleasant demeanor. She appeared engrossed with him as they conversed, and for the entire duration of the class, she didn’t care about the other students. Maybe she was a good witch, and it would be advisable to have her on his side.

The dreaded time had come to be escorted to his cell. Milo had kindly informed him that he would only be in detention for two hours, so it wasn’t that hard a sentence. Of course, Sebastian had feared to ask him if any torture was involved, but he was bracing himself for the worse. As an enforcer of the law in his position as a prince, he understood that obeying the law was essential for his survival in this world.

He walked into a classroom not much different from the one he had just been in. Other boys and girls were there, apparently for the same reason. So far, this detention didn’t appear so bad.

He took place at a desk and waited patiently for the jailer to speak. The jailer was a man in his forties dressed up quite unconventionally. From what Sebastian could gather, he looked like a Physical Education teacher.

“All right,” he said. “Everyone, surrender your phones.”

Sebastian stood there, in stunned silence, as the others shuffled around and placed their phones inside a crate. No, that couldn't be. "That's not fair," he said out loud. "My life depends on it!"

"Martin, it's not often that I see your face in here. But now, please, hurry up, before you make your situation worse."

Worse? Sebastian didn't want to know what that meant. What could be worse than having his phone taken away from him?

With wooden moves, he walked over to the teacher's desk and gave up his phone. He dragged his feet back. What would he do without his phone? It was his only way of understanding this strange world!

He sank into his seat and covered his face with his hands. He would have to find another way.

What a cruel and unusual punishment!

Chapter Eight – New Feelings

Detention so far meant nothing else but more studying, so Sebastian felt more and more intrigued by the punishment system in this world. Maybe it was cruel enough that his phone had been taken away, so the powers that be didn't intend to crush his spirit any further.

"Hey, don't worry," a girl from his left whispered. "He'll give us the phones back once detention's over."

"Oh," Sebastian said. Now that was a refreshing thought. While the history book in front of him was quite interesting, he couldn't stop sighing and burying his face in his hands from time to time. He straightened up in his chair. "So what's the real punishment, then?" he asked the girl.

She appeared to be a slave of sorts and possibly a much-cherished one by her master, he thought, as he observed the amount of jewelry she wore. She even had a ring piercing her eyebrow, while her ears were entirely covered by intricate designs. However, she wore black clothes, so she could also be a carer for the dead. An ominous skull adorned her shirt, and she wore a necklace with crossed bones around her neck. There was still so much he had to learn about the customs of this world, and he didn't have his phone.

"Punishment?" she laughed. "Other than let us be bored to death?"

"How can you be bored?" Sebastian wondered.

"How can I not be?" she shot back.

The teacher in charge of them seemed very much absorbed by his phone, and Sebastian envied him. However, that also meant that he could whisper with the girl without being shushed all the time.

"Here," Sebastian pointed at a line in the history book he was reading, "did you know that, in Ancient Rome, the closest relative had to give the dead a last kiss and close their eyes?"

The girl stared at him, expecting something, and then she grinned. "Really? That's pretty hardcore, man."

"I thought you would say so." He had no idea what she meant by that. "It is your area of expertise, after all."

"What's that? Ancient Rome?" She grinned again.

He pointed at her shirt. "No, the dead."

This time, she burst into laughter.

"Quiet," the teacher ordered, but without ungluing his eyes from his phone.

“You’re cool, man. I’m Beatrice, but everyone just calls me B,” the girl whispered.

She pushed one hand toward him, and Sebastian debated how he would manage to kiss her hand – she was, most probably, not a slave – or if it was appropriate at all to have any physical contact with a carer for the dead. He eventually took her hand, and she shook it shortly before releasing it.

“Kai,” he said promptly. It was strange to use another’s name, but he was getting used to it.

“So, what are you in for?” she asked.

“In detention?”

She nodded.

“I said that my math teacher was a witch.”

“For real?” Her eyes glinted. “So hardcore.”

That was surely a term he would have to ask his phone about later when alone. Remembering what he had last searched, he asked, “Are nerds hardcore?” Before Milo had dragged him along, he had managed to read the definition of the term used by that pig-like face young man from before. He was convinced that he had been insulted, although he saw nothing wrong with enjoying one’s studies. Of course, he took offense at being accused of having no social skills, but otherwise, he couldn’t understand why the word was used as an insult.

“You are,” the girl pointed out. “Hey, do you have any plans on Friday night? You should come see us play.”

“Play what?”

Beatrice grinned. “Music for the dead.” She stretched her shirt so that Sebastian could read the two words above the skull.

“Edible Insanity,” he said slowly. “Is nourishment included?”

Beatrice snickered. “You’re a frigging riot, man. Do you see that guy?” She pointed at a young man two rows in front of them. He wore the same black clothes and had his hair styled in a strange arrangement. The sides of his head had no hair, and the orange top was braided. “That’s Cain, our drummer. And that’s our growler,” she added, pointing at another girl to their left who stared at them with a scowl. Her jaw was moving with bored lassitude; then she blew into a small balloon that came out of her mouth until it popped. That startled Sebastian for a moment, but then he relaxed. Most magic in this world appeared to have no purpose and no sense. Or rather said a mundane one.

“You are a group of musicians,” Sebastian concluded. “What’s your role?”

“You talk so weirdly, it’s so cool,” Beatrice said with a snicker. “We’re a deathcore band. But we’re not all for labels, you know? A bit of thrash, noise, all that.”

“Thrash? That sounds... quite upbeat,” Sebastian said, now intrigued with what kind of music that could be and why it was considered a good fit for celebrating the dead.

“You’ll see. Bring your friends, too.”

“I don’t have friends,” Sebastian replied. “Only a boyfriend.”

Beatrice winked at him and smiled. “Bring him. I bet it’ll beat reading about Ancient Rome.”

“If you say so,” Sebastian said. He highly doubted it. Attending funerals had always been an obligation and not something to be enjoyed. But his role in this world had to include getting accustomed to its customs, and going to a funeral had to be done sooner or later.

“How was detention?” Milo welcomed him with a broad grin. He wore short pants that let his strong legs show and a sleeveless shirt.

Sebastian looked him up and down without a word. His weakness chose to act up at impossible moments. Just now, a vision of letting his hand wander along Milo’s lean and shapely thigh took over his mind. “We are invited to attend a funeral on Friday night,” he said matter-of-factly.

“A funeral?”

Beatrice tapped him on the shoulder. “Hey, don’t forget about Friday, okay? Is this your boyfriend?” She gestured at Milo.

“Hi, I’m Milo. Whose funeral are we supposed to go to?”

Sebastian watched as Beatrice and Milo shook hands. That was a custom he needed to remember.

“Your boyfriend is awesomely weird,” Beatrice said. “We’re playing at The Pit. Free entry.”

“Cool,” Milo said. “We’ll be there.”

Beatrice waved them goodbye and joined her group of performers.

“So, ready?” Milo hooked one arm over his shoulders. Sebastian was starting to get used to the familiarity. And it was difficult to deny the pleasant sensation spreading throughout his entire body when Milo held him close like that. If he didn’t pay the proper attention, his knees would end up buckling under him.

It wasn't fair that handsome men could have such a devastating effect on him. He would have never taken Conrad as his royal concubine otherwise. It was a dangerous move on his part to invite an enemy to his bed. But as the fight had raged on, with every occasion he had been presented to take down Conrad for good, he had hesitated. In the end, he had just restrained the beautiful man and forced him into slavery.

There was no need for that with the young man walking by his side. Milo was astonishing if he thought about it. As far as Sebastian could tell, he was an innocent, but he was daring too, in the most natural and endearing way. He spoke his mind, and he walked with his head high, without being arrogant or phony.

He watched Milo as he talked animatedly. What a handsome young man, Sebastian thought, feeling the familiar warmth and pleasant slight dizziness that came to him each time he lost himself in admiring an attractive male.

"Hey, do you even listen?" Milo laughed as he stared at him curiously.

Sebastian shook his head. "I'm afraid I'm a bit famished," he said instead of admitting the truth.

"You still didn't tell me how detention was. I see that you made new friends."

"Yes, the musicians," Sebastian replied. "They perform for the dead," he added.

"Should we paint our faces and go as zombies, then?"

What were zombies?

Milo pushed against him, not too hard. "Admit it," he whispered, "you weren't paying attention because you were fantasizing about me."

Sebastian felt rightfully annoyed with having been discovered so quickly. "How could you tell?"

Milo burst into laughter. "For real? I was just pulling your leg."

"Pulling my... And what of it? You are the one enticing me with lewd imagery."

"What's that?" Milo asked. "Ah, by the way, you still have to tell me why you kept it a secret that you knew so much math and French. That means that you will have to tutor me from now on."

"Do you need it?"

"Yes, and not only that," Milo said and winked at him. "I need a lot more from you."

Demands didn't bother Sebastian at this point. It would be all for the better if Milo started to take the initiative.

“Did you take a shower?” Sebastian asked, anticipating disappointment. The detention had robbed him of his phone and also of watching Milo’s delightful body under that artificial waterfall, water slushing down those muscles... He bit his lip fiercely in an effort to dominate his own response at the fantasy his mind was conjuring.

“Yes, the practice was pretty intense,” Milo replied.

“Too bad I didn’t get to watch.” Sebastian was acutely aware of the strained sound of his voice.

“Hey, what do you sound so deflated for?”

“I wanted to see you shower,” Sebastian said petulantly.

“Well, that was kind of a bad idea, to begin with.” Milo chuckled.

Sebastian hated him a little. What right did he have to look so enticing, with those plump limbs stretched in a smile? It was like he knew of Sebastian’s weakness and took advantage of it.

“I mean, I suppose I can take another once we get home. You know, just for you,” Milo teased him. He looked around and kissed him on the cheek quickly.

Sebastian was surprised. “What was that for?”

Milo’s chuckle now sounded endearingly embarrassing. “I don’t know. I just think you’re cute.”

Cute? Cute?! He wasn’t...

But, of course. He currently inhabited a different body, and Kai Martin surely didn’t have a princely body or a princely face. Nonetheless, the correct assumption was that, indeed, he could be called cute.

And it was a compliment.

“Thank you,” he said primly. “And I think you are very handsome.”

“You do?” Milo smirked.

“Yes.” Sebastian frowned slightly. “I can’t entirely tell when you’re wearing clothes, but you appear to have quite a well-proportioned body.”

“Our bus is here,” Milo said.

He had been caught up in admiring Milo and conversing with him that he had failed to notice that they had reached something called a bus station. This time, he wouldn’t travel underground, and Sebastian tried hard to repress a new sensation of excitement at being able to watch the scenery going by fast from inside one of those shiny contraptions.

Unlike him, Milo didn't live in a high building. His family had a house built close to others similar in design. Sebastian had to reconsider what he had so far thought of Milo being a commoner. His home was considerably larger and had more rooms. The yard was extremely small, but at least his family had one. It was far from being anything like a mansion, but it spoke of a level of wealth Sebastian's current family didn't own.

Therefore, Milo had to be at least part of the nobility, although it appeared that people in this world didn't care about using royal titles and such. Except for Tani telling him that she was a princess, which, by association, made him a prince, as well, and the mother a queen, he hadn't heard anyone mentioning anything about their titles.

The arrangement of the interior was different, as well. The light filtered through the tall windows created a sensation of space which Sebastian enjoyed. He noticed a bowl of fruits on a large table, and, without thinking, he grabbed one of an elongated shape.

"Help yourself," Milo said. "My mom leaves plenty of those around. It's her credo that I should eat bananas every day, to keep up with the physical effort."

Sebastian smelled the fruit. He broke it in half and examined the inside, which was made from a soft pulp. That meant that it had to be peeled, which he did quickly. He took a delicate bite. It had a creamy pleasant taste. "Bananas are good," he said shortly.

"So," Milo said, leaning against the wall and watching him intently, "do you want to eat first or watch me shower?"

Sebastian looked at the fruit in his hand. Bananas were quite filling. Food could wait. "I'll watch you shower," he said with finality.

"All right," Milo replied and bit his bottom lip. And then, he blushed. "My folks are gone until Sunday," he added.

Sebastian had a mind to ask him whether they were out on a quest but reminded himself to keep his thoughts for himself instead of arousing more suspicion. Apparently, it was enough to be capable of solving a math equation, and people threw him in detention.

"Which means," Milo added in a soft voice as he moved closer, "that we have the house all to ourselves."

There was a subtle change in their interaction, Sebastian noticed. A knot formed at the base of his throat, making it impossible to swallow. What if Milo was the one bewitching him? What if his weakness had finally caught up with him, and it was the end for him?

If that was, he thought, as his eyes rose to meet Milo's emerald gaze, then he was doomed because he couldn't move, trapped as he was in that tender yet bold stare.

He remained silent as Milo brought his hands up to touch his face. "I still can't believe I gathered the courage to tell you how I feel. I mean, you're always so oblivious... It doesn't matter." He shook his head gently.

What was that strange sensation like myriads of ants under his skin? No, that wasn't it. It wasn't unpleasant, just hard to bear. Sebastian caught Milo's wrists to stop that gentle, unbearable caress.

"You were saying something about a shower," he said in an unnatural, hoarse voice.

Milo chuckled, and even that simple sound sent eddies of warmth throughout his body, throwing him out of balance. But just as he was about to spread out his arms to steady himself, Milo caught him and pulled him into a gentle kiss.

He couldn't make sense of any of it. What sort of curse made him wish it would be possible to get out of himself and wrap around the young man in front of him with everything he had?

As Prince Sebastian, the Protector of Ifigia, he had never known fear. He had known duty, and for it, he had always walked forward. People praised him for his bravery, feared him for his ruthlessness, and believed that nothing and no one ever would be capable of bringing him down.

Yet, now, a new feeling was taking root inside his soul, and it was foreign and hot like an iron held in the fire, branding his heart.

Milo's lips were soft and needy, so Sebastian found it only natural to open his mouth and welcome them as his eyelids fluttered shut.

Milo withdrew and chuckled nervously.

"Why are you laughing?" Sebastian asked.

"You'll think I'm a bit nuts."

Nuts? Sebastian said nothing.

"It's not like I don't want us to do, you know," Milo continued. "But I didn't really think about it before. I mean, I wanted us to become boyfriends and kiss, but... I wasn't thinking so far ahead. I thought we would take things slowly --"

What was with all the talking? Sebastian grabbed Milo by the front of his shirt and pressed their mouths together hard.

“You’re so hot,” Milo whispered. “I’m not sure I know what to do. How come I’ve never known you’re like this?”

This young man was considerably larger in height and size, and yet he acted so timidly at times. As endearing as he was like that, Sebastian felt that none of them had control over the situation, which meant that Milo was merely a tool in the hands of a more powerful being in the unfortunate case that he was part of the curse.

He took Milo’s hand. “Where is your bathroom?” he asked, in the same ragged, unsteady voice that betrayed the storm inside his heart.

“Upstairs,” Milo replied and let himself dragged along without opposing.

Kai felt as if he had just had three energy drinks. He was going to face a dragon by himself – well, Pepin was there, but his weapon of choice was a feather duster – and he didn’t feel one smidge of fear. Too bad Milo wasn’t there; they would have a blast together.

The wind brushed his hair back as he rode the stallion Pepin had suggested as capable of taking them the fastest to where they needed to be. The servant rode behind him and had his arms wrapped around Kai’s waist, holding him tightly. He had stubbornly refused to ride on a different horse, claiming that it would only slow them down.

At first, he had been overly conscious of having the servant’s arms wrapped around him like that, but now he couldn’t deny that it was pleasant to feel someone so close. Pepin was the kind of guy that anyone would like. He was pretty, dutiful, honest, and determined. Much like Milo.

Ever since he had been transported to the kingdom of Ifigia, he hadn’t thought much about the real-life that he had left behind through no fault of his own. Well, he wasn’t entirely blameless since he had wished to disappear the moment Milo had confessed.

That brought more tangled thoughts to his mind. Could it be that Milo had felt like that about him for a long time? Since when? And where had he been while that happened? And if he was here, could it be that the prince had been transferred into his body? He had no answers, and all the anime series with people getting plunged into worlds different than theirs hadn’t involved body swaps.

Maybe he was making history. Yeah, he smiled. His story was unlike any other, and he wouldn’t google that to check, especially since he couldn’t as there was no internet in Ifigia.

The kingdom Prince Sebastian ruled over was a beautiful place. So far, they had traveled through large fields of cultivated lands and forests with lush greenery, rolling hills, and gentle rock formations. The night was falling, coloring the skies in tones of orange at the horizon.

“What do you know of dragons’ habits, Pepin?”

“What do you want to know?” Pepin replied with a question of his own.

“Like, do they sleep at night, or are they nocturnal? I bet they are nocturnal.”

“They enjoy dark places,” Pepin explained. “But villagers living close to the caves have reported attacks both during the night and day.”

“Hmm, maybe we’ll have to wake up the dragon, but it’s all for a good cause. Yet, is it more than one?”

“They are quite solitary creatures,” Pepin said. “I doubt we will find more than one.”

“All right. For my first time, I think it would be better to go against only one.”

“Your first time?”

“My first time going with you into battle,” Kai said promptly. “It’s not like I take you along all the time, right?”

Pepin wrapped his arms tightly around him. “You never take me with you. Sometimes I think you’re overprotective.”

“I don’t understand why. You seem like a guy who can hold his own,” Kai offered.

“I know,” Pepin replied, somewhat excited by those words. “Hey, do you think you can finally give me a sword?”

Hmm, he was starting to smell a trap. So Prince Sebastian didn’t let his manservant get anywhere near danger, which could mean one of two things. Either he was, as Pepin said, overprotective, or two, he thought his servant couldn’t hold a sword, to begin with.

“Let’s not rush,” Kai said. He had to learn about Prince Sebastian and his habits on the go, and it didn’t serve to change everything in a single day. “We’ll see about that.”

“I’m glad it’s not a ‘no’,” Pepin said happily.

“Can’t you tell that I’m only trying to protect you?” Kai asked, now more cautious than before.

“I’m not as puny as you think I am. And I’m capable of more than just drawing a bath and picking your outfit.”

“And cooking the most amazing food I’ve ever tasted,” Kai reminded him.

“True,” Pepin said proudly. “Still, you treat me like I’m some weakling. I’m sure that’s the only reason why you haven’t taken me to your bed until now.”

“Yeah, totally,” Kai said and sighed in pity for his own self and the predicament he was in due to Prince Sebastian’s taste for beautiful men.

“You see? I knew it! You like Conrad because he’s strong and a master swordsman.”

“I don’t like Conrad,” Kai denied. “I just don’t want him to die, well, because --” he stopped, not knowing exactly what kind of argument would be enough to convince Pepin he wasn’t into his captive-prince-slash-sex-slave-slash-royal concubine.

“Because?” Pepin insisted.

“Because it would make me sad,” Kai opted for the truth, as he saw it with sudden clarity.

Pepin remained quiet for a while. “People say you’re cold,” he began in a soft voice. “They say that it’s good that you have a strong sense of duty or else we would all be doomed. That everyone could die around you, and you wouldn’t shed a tear. Only fight until the bitter end.”

“Wow, no wonder no one has any lost love for me,” Kai said with a slight grunt. There was nothing he could compare with the feel of the wind in his face while riding on the back of that magnificent animal. He decided on the spot that horses were his favorite animals, starting now.

“That’s not true. I love you,” Pepin said simply.

“Oh, that’s, um, I mean, that’s... Thank you, Pepin,” Kai eventually managed to get the words out of his mouth.

“It’s all right. I don’t expect to hear the words back.” Much to his surprise, Pepin didn’t sound sad as he spoke.

That was one more thing to admire about the royal servant. He didn’t expect anything in return, and Kai felt guilty. There were so many things he should have been thankful for, like his mother’s love, Milo’s friendship, and even Tani’s sisterly nagging. Instead, he had glided through it all for the last couple of years, like he didn’t care where the ship of his life chose to sail.

But now, things were different. Now, he had a purpose, a goal. He had to make a dragon cry so that he could save the man dying in his chambers because he had chosen to put himself between a poisoned blade and Prince Sebastian, a guy who, so far, seemed quite the badass, but one without that much of a heart.

The wind brought a faint scent of sulfur. They must be getting close if his experience with video games had taught him anything.

Chapter Nine – Why You Have To Be Mad?

“Look, Pepin,” Kai said as they got closer to the cave that was letting out the now overpowering smell of sulfur, “you don’t have to come with me. Just wait here.”

He dismounted the horse and pulled out his sword. Like everything else so far, he would wing it and be fine. When holding court, everything had gone smoothly, right? Getting a dragon to cry his heart out couldn’t be that much of a problem.

“No,” the servant replied stubbornly. “I didn’t ride with you all this way to abandon you here.”

“That sounded almost like a joke. There,” Kai pointed at the cave’s entrance, “lies a dragon. A fire-spitting angry mofo.”

“Mofo?”

Kai waved impatiently. “That’s a creature that could turn you into way too crispy steak in a second. Like this.” He snapped his fingers to get Pepin’s attention, who was busy tending to the horse. The animal had sensed the smell, too, and he was showing signs of impatience.

Pepin finally turned to face him. “No. You brought me with you.” He crossed his arms. “You always enjoy these things on your own. It’s not fair.”

Kai could see the other’s bottom lip quivering. It had to be so boring to be a servant, albeit a royal one. All the other boys got to play with swords and fight dragons, while Pepin had to do the laundry and cook eggs Benedict or whatever. Yeah, he could sympathize with that. Nonetheless, he had a hunch now that Prince Sebastian wanted to keep Pepin safe, and in the off-chance that they ever switched back – the cold royal must be in his body right now if the rules of body swap logic were obeyed – he would get pretty pissed if anything happened to his precious manservant.

“All right,” he said. “Just take the horse... wait, what’s his name?”

“Thunder,” Pepin replied and grabbed the reins.

“Cool name. Take him somewhere out of the way. I don’t want him to get scared.”

“He should get used to the smell of monsters. He’s not a young colt anymore,” Pepin argued.

“Well, he’ll get plenty of other opportunities to get used to that. Maybe start with something easier, like goblins and such.”

“But you hate going against goblins. You always say that their smell is disgusting and you need to throw your sword away because nothing takes their stench out of the blade.”

“All right, so not goblins. Trolls?” he offered.

Pepin made a sour face.

“Hey, I’m the royal dude here,” Kai said. “Take Thunder somewhere he cannot smell the dragon so much and make sure to secure him well so that we don’t have to return by foot. That if you want to come with me, after all.”

“Yes, Your Majesty,” Pepin said primly.

It was a bit of fun to pull Pepin’s leg and also great that he was easy to fool. Kai waited until Pepin was at a fair distance from him and hurried toward the mouth of the cave, his sword drawn.

The moment he was inside, he started coughing. No wonder dragons were so pissed off all the time. They had to live in a dank, smelly place, and heroes and adventurers wanted to hunt them down all the time.

That was, however, the highest sympathy he could muster for that kind of creature. After all, they were a pain to go against, and they were high-level enemies. That meant that he needed to tread carefully and keep his eyes open.

He walked slowly until he reached the edge of an abyss opening up under his feet. He didn’t need any light because there was plenty of it coming out. First, he thought it was some sort of a giant forge, but looking down, he realized that the orange light came from clusters of fiery crystals. Wow, now that was some epic loot right there, only if he could figure out a way to pull them out. Plus, he didn’t have an inventory, and his trousers didn’t have any pockets.

“What right have you to stir my wrath, human?” a booming voice asked, coming somewhere from behind.

“Shit,” Kai said and turned on his heels. For a few moments, he lost all ability to speak. Before him, a giant dragon stood blocking the way he had come from. His scales were red, and the eyes staring him down were orange like the fire coming from within the crystals below. “Glad I found you,” he said, finally gaining back his voice.

The dragon loomed above him, and Kai expected to become scared shitless any moment now. Well, it looked like Prince Sebastian’s cold blood helped a lot because he couldn’t feel anything like that.

“Look,” he said, raising his arms, “I just need a little something from you.”

The dragon rose high above him, so he had to tilt his head back to keep him in sight.

“You need something from me?” the dragon boomed and lunged, fire coming out his nostrils – or mouth, Kai couldn’t be sure.

He stepped out of the way just in time. “Hey, is this really the way you treat a guest? No wonder nobody ever comes to visit.”

“You’re brandishing your sword at me and yet, you speak of that?” The dragon launched another attack, and Kai deftly avoided it just in time.

Oh, right, he had entered with his sword drawn. Of course, anyone, let alone a dragon, would have thought he had some not so pure intentions while walking in there. He sheathed his sword. “Look, I put it away. Can we talk like normal people now?”

He briefly wondered if Prince Sebastian had any skill in his set regarding high-level speech because this looked like a quest requiring him to be clever enough to convince a dragon to surrender a tear to him.

Like, what was a tear, to begin with? Practically nothing.

“Normal people? I know who you are, Prince Sebastian, and I know why you are here.”

“Oh, are we playing riddles? Try me. I’m telling you; you have no idea why I’m here.”

He could dance around the dragon like that all night, but he was starting to worry about how well those walls could hold while the creature spat fire.

“You are here to destroy my legacy,” the dragon said. “To finish my race.”

“Well, that was yesterday,” Kai said. “Today, it’s a totally different thing. And really, stop spitting fire all the time. Why you have to be mad?”

“Mad? Why am I mad?”

Kai put one finger into his ear and pulled it out quickly. “I think I’m going to be deaf in one ear if you keep shouting like this.”

“I will not go down without a fight. I see that you came on your own. How arrogant of you,” the dragon hissed. “You will meet your end here.”

“Not if I can help it.” Kai hoped he wouldn’t get a cramp from all that hopping around. Things were getting nowhere, and his speech abilities didn’t appear to work on dragons. “Hey, let’s just talk.”

“Talk about what? How you want to destroy my kind?”

“Well, I have nothing against you personally, but you’re a giant bird that terrorizes entire villages, burning them down, destroying crops, and all that.”

“Is that what you think? I only hunt when I’m hungry,” the dragon replied.

Kai wondered briefly how no one had ever thought of using dragons’ fire breathing as a renewable energy source. That would solve a thing or two. “Well, humans shouldn’t be on your menu.”

The dragon roared. “I only ate their goats!”

Goats. Right. Unfortunately, not the wandering herd, Kai thought. “You ate their goats, all right. All of them?”

“I was hungry!”

“Man, you have quite the appetite. Aren’t you afraid of getting too fat to get out of this cave? And I thought dragons ate crystals.”

“Crystals? What kind of nonsense are you spewing, human?”

“Never mind. Now, about my quest --”

“Your quest to finish me off?”

“No, if you just let me talk, you’d know. I’m talking about my real quest, which is to get a tear from you.”

“Ha! You’ll never see me cry! Cut me with your sword, froze me with your magic, drain the last drop of life out of me, and you won’t get a tear from me!”

Kai sighed. “Exactly what I was worried about. This quest is way too high-level for where I am in the story.”

For a moment, he forgot to get out of the dragon’s way and jumped back at the last moment. That had been a bad choice because the next thing he knew, he was falling. He extended one arm in a futile gesture, and vines of ice shot from his hand, wrapping around the crest of a tall crystal and helping him swing through the air like Tarzan. “Yippee,” he shouted. “I’m so friggin’ awesome!”

He wasn’t so awesome at landing because he began rolling down the crystal cave floor, incapable of stopping.

When he did stop, he found himself in front of a giant nest, in which a large egg lay. “Wow, you’re going to have a baby!”

“Stay out!” the dragon ordered and fired another shot at him.

Kai barely managed to roll out of the way. “Hey, stop being like this! Aren’t you afraid that you’re going to hit the egg by mistake?”

“You humans came in here and hurt my egg! And you dare to say that I’m the one to blame for all the bad blood between us!”

Kai had climbed a cluster of crystals and could look at the egg. Indeed, there was a long crack going from the crown to the middle. “Oh, no,” he said, “is it cracked?”

“Did you come to finish what the others started?”

“No! How many times,” Kai jumped from one cluster of crystals to another, “do I have to tell you? I’m not here for that! I just want your tear! A single little tear!”

“You can have it only you give back to my egg the life you stole!”

Kai stopped and put one hand up. The dragon stopped, as well. They stared at each other. “Wait, do we have a deal?”

The dragon huffed through his nostrils, readying for another attack. “The egg is dying. I won’t believe your lies!”

“Hey, stop spitting fire already! We can work something! It’s just cracked a little... well, a little more, but it can be fixed.”

“How?” the dragon roared while chasing him.

“I know how!” someone shouted from above their heads.

Both Kai and the dragon looked up. Pepin was there.

“Hey, I told you to stay put!” Kai yelled at him.

“No, you fooled me! Get me down there, and I’ll take care of the egg!”

He saw the column of fire shooting from the dragon’s throat one moment too late. Without thinking, he began shooting arrows of ice from his eyes, pinning the dragon’s wings to the wall.

“Pepin! Pepin!” he began shouting. “If you killed my favorite servant, I’m going to turn you into steak, and your egg into dragon omelet!”

The dragon was whining and struggling against the ice arrows keeping him in place.

“I’m here,” Pepin called from above.

“Oh, great.” Kai turned toward the dragon. “Forget what I said about steaks and omelets. We’re going to save your egg.”

“Don’t you dare touch my egg,” the dragon boomed. He started shooting fire again.

That was a problem. Prince Sebastian’s cold blood helped him a great deal, and he wasn’t even slightly hot, but for an average person like Pepin, the heat inside the cave had to feel hellish.

“I need to come down to you,” Pepin shouted.

“Yeah, but it’s not that easy,” Kai shouted back.

First, he needed to put the dragon’s shooting fire abilities out of commission for a bit. He focused on his ice magic. So, he practically thought of something, and...

“A-ha!” he said, full of himself. In mere seconds, a vine of ice was wrapped around the dragon’s muzzle.

The dragon pulled back and smashed his head against the wall. Kai watched in horror as Pepin, who stood on the edge, lost his balance and fell.

He didn’t even think. Blocks of ice rose beneath his feet, and he hopped from one to another until he reached Pepin in midair and caught him in his arms.

“Gotcha!”

Pepin wrapped his arms around Kai’s neck. His eyes were shiny gemstones in the orange light of the cave. “Your Majesty,” he breathed out.

“Yeah, yeah, I know, I’m totally awesome. Now let’s get to the egg and repair it before the dragon manages to drop the entire cave on our heads.”

Pepin just nodded and held tightly as they descended. He had his bag with him and began to take things out of it. In the meantime, the dragon continued to struggle, letting out muffled sounds of anguish.

“So, about the egg, do you really know how to do it?”

“Yes, it wouldn’t be the first hatchling I’m saving,” Pepin confirmed.

He took one small pot and filled it with water; then, he used another to throw in some candlesticks. “I’ll clean the cracked part first with warm water, and then I’ll pour molten wax.”

The ground beneath their feet was cracked in places, and small fires burst through them once in a while. Pepin got to work right away with Kai’s help. He quickly wrapped a wet cloth around the egg while he took care of the wax.

“It’s a good thing that it appears to have been cracked only recently,” Pepin explained. “The chick should be still alive inside. Even with the crack, it probably just slowed down its heart to survive.”

“That’s pretty awesome,” Kai admitted.

“We will need the mother dragon to light a crystal for us to see the chick inside,” Pepin said.

“Mother dragon? Right. I thought it was a ‘he’. But, of course, it’s a mom.”

Pepin poured the molten wax carefully along the crack. “It should be sealed enough to allow the egg to get to maturity. Although we need that crystal --”

“I’m on it,” Kai said.

He used his sword to cut through one of the small crystals nearby, and then he jumped on the steps of ice he had improvised earlier to get to eye level with the mother dragon. Holding the crystal cautiously in one hand, he pushed it toward the creature. Large eyes stared at him. Something of the molten lava in them reminded him of Conrad.

“Look, mother dragon – sorry about that, I didn’t realize you were a lady – you will need to lit up this crystal for us so that we can check on your chick.”

The dragon said nothing and just puffed warm air through her nostrils. That was like a gust of wind, and Kai had to fight hard to keep on both feet.

“Ah, you cannot speak, of course. Here.” Kai focused, and the vine around the dragon’s muzzle untangled and fell to the ground.

“You’re trying to hurt my egg!” the dragon roared.

“Ugh, just how many times – ouch, that was close!” The dragon managed to shoot one flame toward him, and it grazed his cheek. “If you could just concentrate a little, that would be fan-frigging-tastic. Look, aim at this crystal.”

It looked like the dragon didn’t care about his reasoning and kept shooting fire randomly. However, it was enough for Kai to move the crystal finally in the way of the flames, and the object in his hand became alive with new power.

“I have it, Pepin!” he yelled victoriously.

He jumped to the ground and hurried toward the servant. Pepin took the crystal from him and touched the shell gently.

“Wow!” Kai expressed his amazement as the interior of the egg lit up, as well, showing a small creature inside. “Wait, how can we tell --”

He sensed the dragon's wrath and grabbed Pepin just in time.

"Ah, damn, I forgot about tying up mother dragon's muzzle again!"

Kai was on top of Pepin, hoping to keep him safe until he figured out a way to immobilize those nasty fire-breathing abilities before his servant got hurt.

But the dragon suddenly stopped. "My chick," she exclaimed. "It moved! It just moved!"

"Did you hear that, Pepin?" Kai shot to his feet and stared in wonder at the illuminated shell. The chick was moving its little feet. "You saved a frigging dragon's egg!"

"You... you saved my egg," the dragon said, her voice suddenly filled with emotion.

Kai rubbed the back of his head and laughed. "Yeah, I guess we did."

Pepin touched his elbow. "Your Majesty, fast. Now!"

Kai looked up and noticed immediately what the servant was talking about.

"Pepin, climb on my back. We're getting out of here with what we came for!"

Pepin obeyed without a word. Kai took the vial out of his shirt's pocket and climbed up to the dragon's eyes. A single tear was shimmering in her right one.

"Sorry about this, mother dragon, but we need this." He placed the vial right under her eye and caught the tear.

Pepin let out a small cough, and only then Kai noticed he was wheezing. He clearly needed out, in the fresh air. He quickly sealed the vial and rushed upwards, jumping from one block of ice to another.

"Why?" the dragon asked behind him. "Why did you help me?"

Kai shouted back, "Because no egg or concubine dies on my watch!"

He held Pepin as he coughed and retched. Being outside helped, but he didn't like to keep Pepin breathing in that sulfurous air for another moment. He took the servant in his arms and rushed as far from the cave's mouth as possible.

"Where is Thunder?" he asked.

Pepin pointed out with one arm. "I'm fine, Your Majesty. You don't have to carry me like this."

“You were just coughing your lungs out. No way I’m letting you walk. And call me Sebastian; we’re alone now. Ah, do you think the mother dragon will be able to get out of those arrows I shot at her?”

“She’ll be fine. It’s extremely hot in there.”

“I’ll take your word for it because we’re not getting back there. Now, let’s head back home, because we have someone to save!”

Kai didn’t let Pepin ride in the back and held him in front. The servant wrapped his arms around him and sighed. “Let’s not talk about Conrad until we get home,” he whispered.

“Silly, who’s talking about him?” Without even realizing what he was doing, he placed a small kiss on the crown of Pepin’s head.

“Ah, ah,” Pepin started as if he was suddenly in pain.

“What?” Kai asked, startled by that reaction.

“You... you kissed me!”

“On your head, it’s not a big deal, geez.” Kai tried to downplay it, but he knew how that looked.

Like a sign of affection. Yes, but it wasn’t, really, a big deal. It was like a bro kiss or something. They had just solved a high-level quest, so a bro kiss was okay.

Milo stepped under the shower and threw Sebastian an unsure look. “All right, so this sounded cool and sexy when I first told you about it, but now, I guess it’s pretty cringey.”

Sebastian found it difficult to talk. Watching Milo shed his clothes had been a bit too much for his, apparently, frayed nerves. He pulled dejectedly at his collar, the hotness flushing his skin hard to handle. As someone who had never before been troubled by heat, he was flabbergasted by the shortcomings of the body he was inhabiting.

“Maybe you could get out of that uniform and join me. Then it won’t feel so weird.”

Sebastian debated. On the one hand, he wanted to watch the beautiful young man’s body in full display. On the other, the offer was enticing. He began undressing, dropping the clothes all over the floor.

Milo watched him with hazy eyes. It was maybe an unconscious gesture, but he was biting his bottom lip, and Sebastian felt rightfully distracted by it.

“I’ll still watch,” he said petulantly. “Show me,” he added as he stepped under the shower.

He gasped as Milo turned off the knob. He must have had it wrong because the cold water landing on his head was an unpleasant surprise.

But no, the mischievous youth was laughing out loud and sticking his tongue at him. Sebastian narrowed his eyes. Milo fiddled with the shower controls, and finally, the water was just the right temperature.

“Why did you do that?” he inquired, crossing his arms.

Milo threw him a lopsided grin. “You were too serious. You got me a little scared.”

“I’m scaring you? I’m...a bit shorter,” Sebastian admitted with great difficulty. “And you’re a bit stronger. How could I scare you?”

Milo shrugged and then pulled him close, one arm wrapping around his waist and the other around his shoulders. “Ever since I confessed to you, you’re so, I don’t know, intense.”

“You dislike me, then?” That would be both a blessing and a curse. A blessing because he would escape those magnetic green eyes and a curse because of the same reason.

“No. It’s just that,” Milo made their foreheads touch, “before I got the guts to tell you how I feel, I thought I wanted you. Just that I wasn’t thinking about doing naughty things with you. And now,” he sighed, “now I feel like I want to do everything with you, all at once. Does it make any sense? You make me... like this.”

Sebastian wasn’t in the least surprised when Milo took his hand and placed it over his hardened manhood. Yes, he always had this effect on the men he brought to his bed, even on Conrad, who claimed to hate him.

Only that it was strange for him to provoke the same fascination while in a different body. For the love of all that was holy, he couldn’t understand why Milo was so infatuated. As he pondered over the mysteries of this world, and particularly this one, he began moving his hand up and down Milo’s stiff member.

“Oh,” Milo gasped, “Kai, what...” He let his head back, allowing Sebastian to admire his stretched throat and then the water slushing down his chest and abdomen.

Curious with Milo’s tremendous sensitivity at being touched, he increased the rhythm. It wasn’t usually his preference to touch his bed warmers in such a manner, but the beautiful youth’s reactions encouraged him to do more, explore, and enjoy the effects of his actions on the other.

“If you keep it like this --” Milo breathed out.

He didn't finish his phrase. Sebastian smirked as Milo's seed broke free, splashing all over his hand and abdomen. It was pleasant and rewarding, despite always having liked to have his lovers spill themselves inside him.

"Oh, so sorry," Milo mumbled and began to run his hands over Sebastian's abdomen. "I came over you like a moron."

It was hard to keep a giggle in as Milo's fingers tickled.

"Next time, you'll do that inside," Sebastian said promptly. "How it's done."

Milo slowed the pace of his moves. His face was slightly red, and his breath was still uneven after his earlier exertion. "Inside? Like inside the bedroom?"

Sebastian snorted. "No, silly boy. Inside me."

Milo's jaw became slack. His pupils were dilated, and he appeared to be in some sort of shock.

"What is it?" Sebastian asked. "I watched videos," he added defensively. Most probably, he was rising suspicions again by appearing too well versed in *ars amandi* - a Latin expression he had just learned and much to his liking.

Milo shook his head and then pulled him into a short kiss. "Then I'm glad," he said quietly. "It's nice to know that at least one of us knows what to do."

Sebastian let out a small exhale. The danger of being discovered was averted for now. Milo's hand was suddenly between his legs. "What are you doing?" he asked.

"Returning the favor," Milo replied and kissed him again, this time more eagerly.

Chapter Ten – BL Hell, What Do You Have Against Me?

Sebastian grabbed Milo's wrist to stop him from doing that thing. No wonder the other had spilled his seed so quickly. Having a hand move over his manhood like that was bound to make him mad with desire. Before, he had enjoyed only the act itself, and touching usually involved other parts of his body. How could such a simple crude method feel so overwhelming?

"It's too much," he whispered.

Milo kissed him and ignored his protests while his hand did its thing. Surely enough, it didn't take him long to follow Milo's example from earlier. He was panting hard, his release still overpowering. Watching the white droplets that had landed on Milo's lean thigh wasn't helping, either.

He let out a slight sound that sounded weak in his ears as Milo rushed one hand through his hair, pushing back the mop that always hanged over his eyes.

"I can see better," he said in surprise.

Milo chuckled. "Now that's a useful side effect." He embraced Sebastian and kissed him some more, without the clumsiness from before. As already guessed, it took little for the youth to become well learned in the art of kissing, and Sebastian had a great appreciation for that.

He was, annoyingly so, in a state of a daze as Milo pulled him out and handed him a towel to dry himself. Usually, Pepin handled such mundane tasks as his thoughts had focused entirely on the good of the people of Ifigia. But, here, he didn't have to do that, and the absence of that burden he had grown with was strange and gave room to a type of awkwardness he had never experienced before. Just as Pepin's absence, his trustworthy manservant who was always at his beck and call.

"Hey, did I break you?" Milo joked and waved a hand in front of his eyes.

Lost in thought, he had ended up standing there, water dripping from his hair.

"Let me." Milo took the towel from his hands and began rubbing it against his head.

His weren't Pepin's gentle hands trained from a young age to offer nothing but perfect service. Sebastian grimaced when, a few times, his hair felt like it was about to be pulled from its roots.

That changed when Milo began wiping his body. Again, the green eyes were turning thoughtful and foggy while the boy's hands moved slowly.

Milo let out a small laugh. "It's still so strange to think that a few days ago I was, I mean, we were..."

“Don’t talk.” Sebastian placed one hand over Milo’s mouth. Words like those provoked something inside him, something he wasn’t ready to acknowledge or even take the time to understand. “Where is the food?”

It wasn’t like him to lack manners, and he usually would have waited patiently until the host offered nourishment, but, in this case, dire times called for a different approach. At the pit of his stomach, an emptiness opened, while his chest was too full. Anything was better than enduring that sensation.

“Hungry, huh? But I’m, too,” Milo admitted and grabbed his hand.

“Are we going to run through the house completely naked?” Sebastian asked.

“Why not? I told you. My parents won’t be back until Sunday evening.”

At the same time, having a late lunch while naked sounded both decadent and enticing. Sebastian couldn’t help but follow Milo’s example and ran along to keep up with the other’s large steps as they rushed out of the bathroom.

“Is he still alive?” were the first words leaving Kai’s mouth the moment he set foot back into the royal chamber.

The old physician was bent over his patient, busy placing a cold compress on his forehead. “Your Majesty!” He turned and stared at Kai and Pepin in disbelief. “Back so soon? Did you --”

“Yeah, of course,” Kai replied. “We wouldn’t be here otherwise. Here’s the dragon tear.” He handed the vial to the flabbergasted doctor. “Now get that remedy done and fix him.” He pointed at Conrad in what he hoped looked enough like a royal gesture.

Unsure of how many times he could slip in and out of character without raising suspicion, he had decided to try impersonating Prince Sebastian as often as possible, especially when there was a small audience so that he could test his acting skills.

The physician cautiously took the vial from his hands and rushed to the table on which he had laid the tools of his trade. He kept muttering something under his breath while combining the ingredients.

Kai walked to the bed and stared at Conrad. “What do you think?” he asked Pepin in a whisper. “He’s paler than when we left him, right?”

“He’ll live,” Pepin assured him. “Your Majesty, is it true? That I’m your favorite servant?”

Ah, because of what he had said when they were in the cave, fighting the dragon. Or trying to reason with her. “You’re practically my only servant,” Kai whispered back. Now that the danger concerning Conrad was almost averted, he needed to be careful not to give Pepin false hopes.

“That’s not true,” Pepin retorted. “The entire castle is at your feet.”

“And yet, you’re the only guy I trust to go hunting dragon tears with,” Kai pointed out.

Pepin smiled, pleased with that. Then he stared into Kai’s eyes. “You’ll take me again, right?”

Kai pondered for a moment. Well, Prince Sebastian must be in his shoes right now, flunking tests and whatnot. And just like anyone their age, Pepin wanted adventure and fun, not to be locked in the kitchen all the time. “Of course,” he said brightly. They were the main characters in this story, so it wasn’t like anything could really happen to them. Pepin was safe, he convinced himself. “Although, you’ll have to learn how to use a sword.”

“Really?” Pepin’s eyes shone. “I’ll do my best, Sire.”

“Stop it with ‘sire’ and all that. We’re practically the same age, and we’re not strangers.”

He kept looking worriedly at Conrad. His complexion was like wax now, and Kai began to chew on his nails. How long did the court’s physician need to make that remedy?

A light touch on his arm pulled him out of his thoughts. Pepin offered a timid smile. “This night was great.”

It was true that they had had to ride through the night to get back to the castle. The dawn was not yet breaking.

“I guess.” He gave a sheepish smile of his own.

“Conrad will get well,” Pepin said with conviction. “And just so you know, Sebastian, I’m no longer upset that you love him. As long as I can become a knight, too,” he added quickly.

“A knight? Aren’t you a bit ambitious? I just said you’d be allowed to carry a sword, not lead us into battle.”

Pepin’s smile broadened. “I can convince you to let me do anything.”

“Hm. Don’t be so sure.”

“After tonight, I am.”

Maybe, just maybe, it hadn’t been that great an idea to take Pepin along for the ride. Now, the guy wanted to be a knight and wield a sword. Not that there was anything wrong with that, but Kai didn’t want his manservant to put himself in harm’s way without knowing how to fend for

himself. “Just for the record,” he said from the corner of his mouth, “I’ll keep a close eye on you. I don’t want you to trip and fall into a sword, poke your eyes out by accident, or who knows what else.”

To his surprise, Pepin started laughing. It was a quiet, gentle laugh, but it sounded so pleasant that Kai found himself leaning toward its source.

“I’ll be careful,” Pepin promised.

“You better be. As mom used to say whenever I skipped school to go swimming, ‘if you dare to come back drowned, I’ll kill you myself’.” Ah, shit. The moment the words flew from his mouth, he knew he had done it. “I mean, it’s what I heard a minstrel singing once. Weird song, if you’re asking me. It’s not about my mom. Just a mom. A random one.”

“All right,” Pepin said. “I’ll be a knight,” he added dreamily.

Phew. Good thing Pepin only cared about dreaming wide-eyed of his new career choice. He needed to be extra careful from now on.

“It is ready, Sire,” the physician announced.

“All right,” Kai said. “Now, please do what you have to. It’s a sure thing, right? ‘Cause I’m not sure I can get another dragon tear anytime soon.”

“It is,” the old man confirmed.

He moved over to the bed and began applying a poultice all over the cut on Conrad’s abdomen. Both Kai and Pepin strained their necks to check on his moves. The physician saw about his work and then pulled the blanket over Conrad’s body.

“Now, his own body will have to do the rest.”

“Then, you are free to go,” Kai decided.

That appeared to surprise the old man. “Don’t you want me to watch over him until he wakes up?”

“If anything changes, I’ll just send Pepin for you. It’s not like there’s anything else for you to do, right?”

“That’s true,” the physician admitted in a hesitant tone.

“Go rest. I suppose you’re not a party animal given your age, and you need your sleep, right?”

“Thank you, Sire.” The old man bowed. “I will come back in the morning to check on the patient.”

“Not much time left until then. Just get your sleep. Pepin has his ways to wake up anyone from his deepest slumber, I’m sure. Right?” He turned toward the servant.

“Of course,” came the immediate reply.

The physician retreated with murmured thanks after packing his medical utensils.

Kai observed Conrad. His pallor was slowly receding, and his breath was even now. “Excellent job, Pepin. We did it. High five,” he said and put up one hand.

Pepin gave him a quizzical look. What, high fives were not a thing in this world? Kai grabbed Pepin’s arm and brought their palms together. “Like this,” he said airily like it was the most natural thing for a prince and his manservant to do.

He ignored the other’s confused stare and looked around. “Hmm, now where am I going to sleep?”

In the end, they had decided that sitting at the table all naked wasn’t convenient, so they had donned some flimsy garments. Milo lent him some of his own, and while Sebastian enjoyed the soft feel of the fabric on his skin, he was once more reminded of the difference in size between them. At least, Milo’s family had, apparently, a good supply of sleepers for guests, and he didn’t have to suffer in that regard, as well.

After a day in school and enjoying themselves under the shower, they were both clearly famished. Sebastian watched Milo as he used something he recalled as being a microwave oven to heat food.

When the steaming plate was placed in front of him, his belly let out a shameless growl.

“Sorry,” he said, reminding himself over and over again that he needed to talk as informal as he could.

“No problem,” Milo replied cheerfully. “Dig in. And we can study after.”

Study. Of course. They weren’t there to do the things they had done in the shower. It was quite shameful that he needed to be reminded of the main quest. Clearly, Milo’s beauty was bewitching.

Troubled by that realization, he barely tasted the food, just bringing the fork to his mouth and chewing each bite.

“What’s wrong?” Milo asked.

“Nothing.”

“It can’t be nothing. You kept asking about food, and now you don’t look like you’re enjoying it.”

Sebastian looked at his plate. Everything looked delicious. But his mind was, indeed, bothered, and he couldn’t share his worries with the one who must be playing an essential role in the curse that had snared him.

“How do you make money?” he asked.

“More than what you do at your part-time?”

“Yes.” He had yet to figure out what the part-time job he supposedly had entailed.

“I don’t know. It can be many things. But shouldn’t you be more interested in graduating?”

“I should do both. Mrs.... I mean, my mother is worried.”

Milo put his fork down, his entire attention trained on him. “Let’s go job hunting this Saturday. Maybe we find something that pays better.”

“Can you make money fighting?” He was about to add ‘monsters’, but he knew as much now that it wasn’t a good idea to treat this world like his own.

“Fighting?” Milo grinned. “Kai, I love you, man, but you can’t fight for shit.”

Love. The word that people in this world liked throwing around like candy for the poor on royal birthdays.

“I’m positive I can. Is there an arena or something similar where I can test my skills?”

Milo watched him some more, apparently curious about something, but then he snapped his fingers. “I know! You can be a cosplayer!”

“A what?”

“Come on. You’re doing it anyway. And it’s what you like the most. Of course, we’ll need a bit of an investment first, but I can give you money from my stash.”

“I cannot take money from you,” Sebastian protested. “It would defeat the purpose of earning it myself.”

Milo waved. “Dude, that’s just like an awesome idea! And you know what they say. You gotta spend money to make money. Let’s see what cosplay events are at this time of the year.”

They left their meals half-eaten and rushed to Milo’s bedroom. Kai was immediately impressed by the gadgetry present. Indeed, his boyfriend was no commoner.

Milo opened his laptop – Sebastian secretly wished he had one of those – and stretched on the bed. “Come here, let’s hunt together.”

Hunting had a completely different meaning in this world. Of course, there was still the hunting of animals, but it looked like it wasn’t enough to know how to use a bow to qualify for that.

“Look here,” Milo pointed at the screen. “The Pit houses a cosplay event tomorrow night.”

“Tomorrow is Friday. We are expected at the funeral of Edible Insanity,” Sebastian said. “I mean, not their funeral, they’re just the musicians.”

Milo laughed. “We’ll do them both. Plus, I think Beatrice can help us with something.”

“With what?”

“Makeup!” Milo said brightly. “I won’t dare go through my mom’s stash because she’d kill me. But I bet B and her friends know all about how to put makeup on. We just need to find a wig and an outfit. What would you like to cosplay as?”

While Milo was talking, Sebastian was typing quickly on his phone, getting himself acquainted with the world of cosplay. He stopped as he saw a picture that looked uncannily familiar. “This,” he said and showed Milo the phone.

“Hmm.” Milo rubbed his chin in thought. “The guys cosplaying this character are usually taller, and, you know, better built.”

“I see. But do they have the composure they require?” Sebastian stood and held his head high. “I shall address the court now.” Without hesitating, he began giving the speech he had held the last time holding court.

Milo watched him wide-eyed. “So cool, man. It’s like you’re an actor. Okay, I’m sold. Now let’s find an outfit and a long-haired wig. Ah, by the way, you know that’s a character from a BL show, right?”

“BL?”

Milo rolled his eyes. “Boys’ Love. You know, the kind that girls are crazy about.”

Sebastian looked at his phone. In one second, his screen filled with incredible images. His eyes grew wide. “Marvelous,” he whispered.

Milo snickered. “Your sister Tani knows all about that. You should ask her.”

“She’s too young.”

“I suppose she’s only watching and reading those rated accordingly,” Milo said. “With emphasis on ‘I suppose’,” he added. “I don’t dare to assume too much when it comes to your sister. She knows more about BL than you and I combined, for sure.”

“Then I’ll seek her advice.”

Milo turned toward the laptop. “I found the wig, but now, about the outfit... I think that we could ensure your success if we picked something, um, sexier.”

Sebastian plopped on the bed and stared at the screen. How could people think that those skimpy outfits were worthy of a prince?

“This one,” Milo pointed at a particular set of garments.

The trousers were all right, pretty much looking like the ones he usually wore while riding. But the upper part consisted of nothing else but leather straps crossed over the chest.

“I would be half-naked,” he protested.

“Yeah, but you would look so sexy,” Milo said with a snicker.

“Is it important to look sexy?”

“When you cosplay a BL character? You bet. But, on a second thought, I don’t think I’m ready to let the world ogle you,” Milo added. “Maybe we should look at something else.”

“No. My success is more important.” Sebastian pressed the ‘add to cart’ button with new satisfaction. He had quickly realized that using the terrific online shops required money he didn’t possess. Now, it was Milo’s money, and he would give it back, but it still felt good.

“You know that you’ll have to pay for this,” Milo commented in a playful tone.

“Of course. I’ll pay you back.”

“I wasn’t talking about that. You’ll have to cosplay for me,” Milo added in a soft voice, brushing his lips across Sebastian’s cheek.

“Naturally. You’ll have to see if the costume fits me.”

“I have a feeling it will.”

Sebastian turned to look at Milo. They were so close and moved at the same time. It was like magic. Their lips fit together like halves of an apple, and their small tryst turned soon into a battle of sorts, each one wanting more of the other.

His weakness had always been an inconvenience. His advisors had tried to console him by speaking of a natural shortcoming that was bound to be accepted in exchange for the prince’s

perfection in all other ways. Sebastian had to admit, something that had always made him feel ashamed, that he enjoyed letting his senses prey to pleasure, each time he was accompanied at bedtime by a magnificent male.

And each morning, he would feel disappointment in himself for proving weak and lacking will to dominate that part of him.

Everything was so different now. The pleasure was heightened, even if all he and Milo did was kiss. The disappointment hadn't yet raised its ugly head, and somehow, Sebastian knew with inexplicable surety that it would never come, not when it concerned this beautiful young man.

Maybe it was all part of the curse bent on claiming his soul, and right now, while his lips were crushed with both shameless want and shy desire, he couldn't care less if that happened.

Milo rolled him on his back and climbed on top of him. Sebastian wrapped one leg around Milo's, enjoying the other's strength.

"We should study," Milo said breathlessly.

Sebastian ran his fingers through Milo's hair, drawing a small hiss. "It can wait. Give me your mouth. I'm dying without it."

And that had to be the closest thing to a confession the famous and ruthless prince of Ifigia had ever said in his entire life.

"We're crowding Conrad," Kai said, although that wasn't the issue. The royal bed had the size of three standard beds, if not more. "And since when are you sleeping with me?"

"Since we fight dragons together," came Pepin's petulant reply.

Kai had a hunch that he wasn't supposed to sleep all that naked either, but after a look at the dubious nightgown he was supposed to wear to bed, he had decided that it would be manlier of him to bite the bullet and opt for going for a shuteye in the buff.

He grimaced and pretended to be uncomfortable but didn't struggle much as he didn't want to wake up Conrad, who was still recuperating. On the other hand, Pepin had no trouble crowding him and ignoring the large part of the bed that remained unoccupied.

The only good part in that predicament was that Pepin, at least, wasn't naked. He wore the cutest pink gown Kai had ever seen – not that he had seen many – adorned with tiny flowers at the collar and the cuffs. It covered him head to toes, and it was long-sleeved, so at least they had that. Tani would love to have one of her own.

Conrad was naked, as they had had to take him out of his tight clothes, but at least he was sleeping soundly. That was one less danger he needed to concern himself with.

However, he wondered if he needed to be ready for fending off attacks from a cute pink nightgown. There was, it seemed, no notion of personal space Pepin was accustomed to. The servant threw one arm over his chest and pressed himself against Kai's body.

The strangest thing was that Kai could feel his body heat. In the dragon's cave, he had been shot at with fire – pure, unadulterated fire – and he hadn't sweated a drop. Yet, now, with Pepin half-wrapped around him, he felt as if ignited from within.

“Aren't you hot?” he asked Pepin.

“No,” came the immediate reply.

“Well, I am. How about not suffocating me?”

“How can you be hot? You don't ever feel hot.”

It looked like having cute young dudes invading his space and pinning him to the bed provoked an exception to that rule.

“My arm is getting numb,” Kai came up with another reason. “And my leg. I can't feel it anymore.”

Pepin scoffed. “Oh, stop complaining so much already.” He turned on the other side, a bit away, and Kai sighed in relief.

He looked at Pepin's back. It appeared that Prince Sebastian usually enjoyed the risk of fire because they had let a dozen candles or more burning. That, combined with the shy light of a new day rising behind the windows, allowed him to observe the manservant.

Pepin moved and lay on his belly, his head still turned away. Kai let his eyes travel down on his body and stopped at the perfectly shaped mound that had to be Pepin's ass. Was that really a dude's ass? It looked so round and squishy. Curious, he reached for it and grabbed it. So squishy. He grinned.

Pepin gasped and turned his head to stare at him. “Aren't you a bit mischievous, Your Majesty? You could just ask, you know?”

Kai pulled back his hand like it had caught fire. “Sorry about that. I just wanted, um, a glass of water.”

Yeah, lame.

Pepin sighed and climbed out of bed. He returned with a glass of water. Kai didn't need it but drank it anyway.

"Anything else?" Pepin glared.

"No. Good night," Kai said primly and gave the servant back the empty glass.

"What's going on?" someone asked in a groggy voice.

"Great," Kai said. "See? Now you woke up Conrad," he told Pepin.

The servant scoffed. "Then he must be feeling better."

"You don't know that." Kai scoffed back.

"Why not ask him? Concubine, how are you feeling?" Pepin asked.

"Pepin, don't call Conrad that!"

"Why not? It's what I am."

Kai groaned and stared at the ceiling in search of answers.

"I feel quite... good, actually," Conrad added.

Kai turned toward him. "You do? That's good."

Conrad's beautiful eyes glimmered in the semi-dark. Yeah, they totally looked like a dragon's sometimes.

"You... saved me?" Conrad asked in a ragged voice.

Kai shrugged. "I did what I could. Let's not make a big thing out of it."

Suddenly, he felt overly conscious of how naked he was. It had to be Conrad's fault who was staring at him with burning eyes.

"Then I should repay your kindness."

"Repay? Oh, no, no, no need for that," Kai protested.

Conrad ignored him and wrapped a strong arm around him. Pepin gasped in outrage and did the same. All right, so he hadn't been that uncomfortable before, but now he was.

"Why are you in the royal bed, you impudent servant?"

"For the same reason you are, you shameless concubine."

Kai didn't dare to look to know that Conrad and Pepin were shooting daggers at each other from their eyes.

"Everyone," he boomed, "to sleep, now! Royal decree! Royal order! Royal whatever, just sleep!"

That had, to some degree, the desired effect. The two fell silent, but none let go of him.

BL hell, what do you have against me?

Chapter Eleven – Do You Need Any Help With That?

“The outfit and wig will come by tomorrow,” Milo explained to him. “We’ll have time to see how you look in them before heading over to The Pit. But now, I guess we should study for a bit and then I have to take you home, right?”

It wasn’t difficult to realize that Milo was disappointed with that prospect. He must have prepared to use those manhood enlargement potions, and now they no longer had time to do so. They would have to talk about the perilous effects of such magic. Sebastian had thoroughly searched for information, and he had been flabbergasted to learn that some things could be downright dangerous to use.

“Yes. But I will come by your house tomorrow after school, too.”

Milo perked up right away. He appeared much invigorated now with the promise that they would be alone the next day once more.

“But no potions,” Sebastian said and wagged a finger at his boyfriend.

“What potions?”

“The ones you got. We don’t need them.”

Milo smirked and searched for something in a drawer. He threw some items on the bed and then rubbed the back of his neck and laughed nervously. “Feel free to call me stupidly hopeful.”

Sebastian picked the tube first and examined it with keen eyes. Good thing most items in this world came with explanations written directly on them. His eyes grew wide as he read. “Toy friendly? I’m not wasting this on toys,” he said with conviction.

Milo snickered and grabbed the tube from his hand. “I hope not.”

Sebastian directed his attention at the box next. “Large size?”

At that, Milo blushed. “Great. Now you think I’m full of myself.”

“Actually, I don’t. Let’s see it.” With steady hands, he opened the box and took one smaller item out from the many neatly arranged inside. “What is this for?”

Milo sighed and took it from his hands. He ripped the foil with his teeth and presented its content to Sebastian. “I guess I should have asked.” His cheeks turned crimson. “But you did say something about, um, inside... so it’s me who’s going to... you know. Right?”

What unfathomable thought could be torturing Milo right now?

“What is this for?” he repeated the question.

“C’mon, dude, it’s not you’ve never paid attention in sex ed, right? Or maybe you haven’t. It’s a condom. It goes on your dick. I mean, my dick.” Milo wiped his forehead with the back of the hand. “Or yours. If you want.”

“Why?” Sebastian insisted.

Milo laughed nervously now. “I... I mean, it’s how it’s done, right? Not that we have to worry about an unwanted pregnancy, and, um, you know. It’s not like we’ve had other partners,” he eventually blurted out. “But I thought we’d use some.”

Sebastian was already busy getting updated on condoms and their uses on his phone. “Ah,” he said, feeling disappointed. “So you don’t want to do it inside?”

Milo plopped on the bed, groaned, and covered his eyes. “Do you want us to study today? Like, even a little? And I thought, I don’t know,” his words came out muffled from behind his hands, “you wouldn’t want me to, you know, go raw.”

Raw. Sebastian’s fingers were so quick as he tapped away. He frowned for a moment. “But I do want it. Raw,” he added.

He understood that the strange world he had landed in had its dangers and the reasons why condoms were necessary for some couples, but there was no need for them. And he would be disappointed if he didn’t get to enjoy the sensation of Milo’s warm seed inside him.

The other boy peeked at him by parting his fingers slightly. “For real? You’re killing me,” he moaned.

“How am I doing that?” Sebastian protested. “Oh, so it is you who wants to use condoms. I see. As you wish,” he added while pretending to be unaffected by his boyfriend’s decision.

“No, no, it’s not like that.” Milo straightened up and took him by the shoulders. His cheeks were still red, but his eyes were shiny. “I would totally do you raw. Oh, man, what do you have me saying?” he complained. “How am I going to sleep tonight?”

Was that a trick question? “As you usually do,” he replied.

Milo sighed and pressed their foreheads together. “I don’t know how you can be so chill about it all. I feel like I’m about to go out of my own skin.”

Oh, so he wasn’t the only one to feel like that. It was a comforting thought. “I feel the same,” he admitted.

“You do? Because you sound so cool, and, I don’t know, knowledgeable. While I’m a total mess.”

“You have nothing to worry about.” Sebastian caressed Milo’s hair, so lovely and smooth to the touch, overly conscious of how clumsy his hands were. “I’ll watch videos about it.”

Milo laughed softly. “I suppose I should do the same. And it might help me fall asleep tonight.”

“Do you fall asleep while watching such materials?” Sebastian asked in awe. “I find them so arousing that I can hardly get any sleep.”

A small snicker was the answer. “Then maybe you should just jerk off.”

“Jerk off?” Sebastian threw a longing look at his phone, but he couldn’t let go of Milo to search for the meaning of that term.

“You know. Charm the snake, spank the monkey, toot your horn...”

“Will doing all those things make my arousal go away?” Sebastian asked, intrigued. “But where should I procure a snake or a monkey... Why are you laughing?”

“I’m so happy you’re my boyfriend, Kai. Seriously, I thought things would be so weird and awkward, but you just make me laugh, and it all feels all right.”

That made him feel rightfully annoyed, but Milo did like to laugh a lot, and, apparently, he had the abilities of a jester in this world. As much as he disliked it, such abilities were quite opportune and helped him out of situations that could have caused him inconveniences otherwise.

“Let’s study,” he said brightly. The soonest he got home, he would start asking his phone more pressing questions, such as methods for making arousal go away and also about toys that appeared to be sexual in nature.

He still had so many things to learn.

In the end, he had fallen asleep with both Conrad and Pepin wrapped around him. Waking up, however, came with its fair share of problems.

Kai opened one eye and took a cautious look down his body. “Oh, great,” he mumbled.

What he had to do right now was to get out of the bed without his loyal servant and troublesome concubine catching a whiff of it. The moment he would be up and about, his little morning problem would go away, without a doubt.

It had to be because Prince Sebastian was a sex-crazed beast, he tried to convince himself. And it had nothing, absolutely nothing, to do with how Pepin had held his hand over his chest all night

long or how Conrad had chosen to keep his thigh dangerously close to parts of his body that weren't supposed to be touched.

He barely moved an arm that Pepin raised his head. "Your Majesty," he said groggily. "Do you want to get dressed? Allow me to help you."

"No, no. Just stay and sleep. I can get dressed by myself."

That simple protest was enough to spring Pepin into action. Suddenly, he was lively like a sparrow, getting out of bed and starting to move things around. Kai watched him as he went straight for the wardrobe. "Pepin," he whispered. "I'm not getting dressed just yet. I want to grab a shower... I mean a bath and eat something first."

"Right," Pepin said brightly.

Something told Kai that his servant was not yet completely awake. Maybe Pepin wasn't used to staying up late. The always perfect servant would be so mad at himself once he realized he had overslept. Kai snickered as he imagined Pepin's lips pursing in self-annoyance. He was just so expressive and cute.

"Get back to bed," Kai ordered, still in a hushed voice.

Pepin obeyed without commenting and climbed on the bed. "Do you want me to help with that?"

Kai kept his eyes on the ceiling. "With what?" He had to congratulate himself for keeping a straight face and a steady voice as he said that.

He winced as Pepin poked the 'that' with one finger. "This."

"Pepin, I can't believe I have to say this, but seriously, dude, hands off my dick."

There was movement from his right, and a rough hand landed on his not-so-little problem anymore. "Yes, servant," Conrad said, "don't you have anything else to do but annoy your master? This is my duty."

"Conrad, down, boy," Kai ordered and whimpered as his concubine proved deaf to his complaints and just continued to tease him with his hand.

He could tell there was another hand there, lower, and it didn't belong to Conrad.

"As I well recall, such stimulations are beneath you."

"Whoa whoa whoa," Kai started and pushed against Conrad's head just in time.

Intrigued eyes stared back at him. "Don't you want me to use my mouth? It's true that you said something before --"

“I don’t want you to use anything,” Kai said as sternly as he could.

Conrad was just moving his hand while continuing to stare at him, no less confused than before. At the same time, Pepin was getting busy with his balls. Kai squirmed in a failed attempt to get away.

“But you’re like this,” Conrad pointed out.

Kai didn’t want to ask for additional information. Trying to get away from those two was completely fruitless. Their hands seemed to find his dick, no matter what he did.

What the hell am I supposed to do now?

I can’t push them away. I’m obscenely OP.

If I do, Pepin might end up with some broken bones, and Conrad is not yet fully recovered.

But this, oh, this...

“My dudes, would you cut it out already?” he asked, while a small tremble coursed through him head to toes.

He struggled lightly to get out of his bed partners’ hands, but somehow he only managed to make the situation worse. Eventually, he turned on one side. If he suddenly sprang out of bed, he might just get away.

Bad strategy. Conrad glued to his back and continued to stroke him while Pepin straddled him in that awkward position and kissed him abruptly.

Oh, damn.

That was pretty much all he could think of. The next moment, something was happening, not at all unpleasant, but too much at the same time. He let out a small weird sound and finally succeeded in pushing Pepin out of his way and getting out of bed and as far as possible from Conrad.

“You guys!” he exclaimed, feeling his entire face on fire.

The two troublemakers were staring at him in disbelief.

“You don’t just grab a guy by the dick!” He pointed an accusing finger at them. “Take him out to dinner first or something!”

“Your face is red!” Pepin was the first to find his voice.

“And you’re still like --” Conrad raised one arm.

“Shut up!” Kai closed his fists, squeezed his eyes shut, let out an annoyed grunt, and rushed to the bathroom.

He slammed the door behind him and pressed his back against it. Maybe they won’t follow him there. Yes, his message must have been clear. Loud and clear.

“How will I survive this?” he murmured to himself and banged his head against the door.

“Your Majesty,” Pepin’s voice came faintly.

“Just let me be, you pervs,” Kai shouted.

“What are ‘pervs’?” Pepin asked.

“You’re too young to know that,” Kai replied, still shouting.

“Then how can I be one? Will you please let me in?”

“No way! You touched my balls!” Kai protested.

“I always do when I wash you. How is today any different?”

If you only knew, Pepin, if you only knew... You’d probably want my head.

“I’m... sensitive today. Yeah. I don’t want to be touched.”

“But Conrad did, too.”

“And I hate him for it just the same,” Kai said back.

There was finally silence.

Oh, no, what have I said? Now Pepin thinks I hate him!

Well, it serves him right. You don’t touch a guy’s balls out of the blue like that.

But he’s the one who’s feeding me.

He’ll get over it.

After that short debate with himself, Kai sighed. Well, he needed to find a way to keep both Pepin and Conrad away from him. Not that it was unpleasant when they touched him, but that was actually the problem.

“Oh, no,” he whispered, “am I really turning into a BL character?”

Yeah, that had to be the problem.

“Pepin,” he began hesitantly. “Pepin!” he said louder as there was no answer from the other side.

If Pepin got mad, he was in deep, deep trouble. Just thinking of those blue eyes shooting daggers at him was enough to feel dark chills down his spine. Without wasting another moment, he pulled open the door.

Only to find himself face to face with the two guys who were making his experience in a fantasy world so complicated.

“I told you he wouldn’t last long,” Conrad said with a sly smile.

Pepin scoffed and turned his head. However, he peeked at Kai from the corner of one eye.

“Conrad, go train with the knights or something,” Kai said, trying to act all casual. It was Pepin who he needed to make good with.

“I’m barely out of my sick bed,” Conrad pointed out.

Kai was pretty sure he didn’t like the guy’s smirk, not one bit. “Right. Then go rest in your room or something.”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” Conrad moved slowly and walked over to him. Kai pretended he was unaffected as the guy leaned in and tugged at his cock. Now that was outrageous, so he outrageously let out an outraged sound. “See you later.”

“He will see you when he deems it appropriate,” Pepin intervened and pulled Conrad away. “Now off you go, Sir Conrad.”

“I’m a ‘sir’ now? And can’t you see I’m naked?”

“The people around here have seen worse. Now, go. I’ll deliver clean clothes later to your quarters.”

Conrad mumbled something, but it looked like Pepin had a sort of authority that Kai needed to learn from.

He sighed in relief once Conrad was out of the room. At least, he only had Pepin to worry about now.

Only. Right. As expected, the blue eyes were shooting daggers at him.

“What?” he asked, pretending to be all innocent.

Pepin set his chin high and began to make the bed.

“Are you giving me the cold shoulder?” Kai asked. “After you and Conrad thought it a good idea to molest me first thing in the morning?”

“Molest you?” Pepin smacked one pillow against the bed, making small feathers float in the air. “If I remember correctly, each time you have a new bed partner, the young maids in this place need to cover their ears in fear that they might end up losing their virginity by that alone!”

It was Kai’s turn to scoff. “Seriously, that’s so stupid. And I mostly see guys around here.”

Pepin continued to fluff the pillows, although by now, Kai was sure the feathers flying everywhere were enough to cover a bald chicken. “You are quite descriptive in your demands while being made love to. Only before, with Sir Conrad --”

“I don’t want to know,” Kai warned him. “And I thought you were on my side.”

Pepin turned brusquely on his heels. “I am on your side. But I’m also tired of waiting. When is it my turn? Was it all a lie?”

Kai stopped. “What are you talking about?”

Pepin pouted and sat on the bed. Kai considered it safe to do the same, although he allowed a few good inches between them.

“Your mother chose me for you, to be by your side forever. And I thought,” Pepin covered his face with his hands, “that it meant more than just being your servant. Only that you just keep on bringing these uncouth men to your bed, like Sir Conrad.”

Oh, no. This time, Pepin looked truly upset. Kai scooted closer and carefully grabbed him by the shoulders. “But you are more than that. You’re my friend, Pepin. My closest friend.”

He wasn’t lying. So far, the servant had proven quite helpful and also kind-hearted. Even while considering Conrad his rival in love, he hadn’t spared anything to help Kai get the dragon’s tear so that they could save him. And he had done that out of loyalty and a sense of duty which could only be admired.

Maybe it was a good idea to say all those things out loud. “Pepin,” he began, “I admire you. You have a kind heart, and you’re loyal. It’s everything I want in a friend.”

Finally, the slender hands lowered from the servant’s eyes. “A friend?”

“Yes,” Kai replied.

His heart squeezed a little as he saw Pepin’s red eyes. He hated to be the cause for someone to cry.

“A friend you go on adventures with?” Pepin asked in a hopeful voice.

Kai smiled. “Sure thing. You were really brave at the dragon’s cave. Heck, you could’ve been killed!”

Pepin moved closer. Now their faces were so close. Kai bit his lower lip and blinked hard. He doubted that he had ever seen anyone more beautiful in his life. The blue eyes were the bluest he had ever seen, and the smooth cheeks were the smoothest he had ever seen, and the pink lips were the softest he had ever seen...

“A friend you sometimes kiss?”

Kai rolled his eyes and pulled away. “You had to ruin it, right?” He turned his head. Funny thing, he could recall the way Pepin and Conrad both kissed. Pepin was sweet; Conrad was fierce.

Sweet? Fierce? He covered his face and dropped on the bed with a small moan. “I’m really turning into a BL character,” he whispered to himself. “Who really thinks guys’ kisses are sweet or fierce?”

“Which one am I?” Pepin hovered, and Kai could tell he was there, but at least they weren’t touching.

“I’m not talking to you. You’re looking to trap me.”

“In a marriage? Far from me, Your Majesty.”

“Marriage? I wasn’t thinking that far. And it’s not like you could anyway, right?” Kai laughed and opened his eyes.

Pepin was still there, hovering. Still beautiful. “Then if you’re not afraid of that,” he said, “you should feel free to kiss me anytime.”

“Yeah, okay, but do I wanna?” Kai snorted and tried to get to his feet.

Pepin pushed against his chest and forced him down. “If you kiss Conrad, you’ll have to kiss me just the same. Anything you do with him, you will have to do with me, too.”

“Well, that’s a relief, then. Because I don’t intend to do anything with Conrad. Therefore, you’re safe. I mean, I’m safe.”

“So, do you agree?”

“Totally.”

“You’re giving your word?”

“My royal word, yeah,” Kai confirmed.

“Good.” Pepin straightened up and finally released him. “Because I remember very well about a certain spell on Conrad’s heart that requires you to kiss him and make love to him.”

Kai felt his jaw-dropping. “You cheeky... ah, damn.”

“You gave me your word,” Pepin warned him.

“I did.” Kai let out a long sigh. “You should be in politics or something, Pepin. You’re sly like a fox.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty.”

“And now, you’re just teasing me by pretending to respect me. I’ll just go wash my face. Don’t come after me.”

“Sure.” Pepin was quite peppy now and no longer upset.

Good. That meant that he didn’t have to worry about someone poisoning his food, Kai thought.

“Now, I only need to do one thing before you go.” Pepin came closer and grabbed Kai’s cock. He gave it a friendly tug and then released it.

Kai rushed to the bathroom. He looked down at himself and groaned. All right, so it was the first time in his life someone else was touching his dick. Why did it have to be two dudes doing that?

And his dick enjoyed it, the damned traitor.

“Today was fun, right?” Milo held him by the shoulders as they walked.

They had studied for a while at his stern insistence, although focusing on books had been particularly difficult with Milo sitting close to him. That was a bother and an unusual occurrence. With any of his lovers, Sebastian had experienced something entirely different. His passion was short-lived, and the men in question were sent off with lavish gifts. He never kept them around, which was why he stayed away from complications that could involve any of his knights or servants.

Even Pepin. He had been surprised to learn from the Ice Goddess that it would be all right to welcome his personal servant to his bed once he was of an age at which such things could be considered appropriate. He had no intention to do so. He understood his goddess’s reasoning, but that was one particular thing he could not agree to. Pepin was precious to him, not someone to use and discard as he usually did with his lovers. Despite everything she had told him, he doubted he would ever follow her words.

On the other hand, Conrad had lit a fire in his veins that had taken him by surprise. So smitten he had been on the spot that he had cast a spell on the proud prince’s heart. Of course, as usual, his passion was bound to wear off. Only that he had never had the chance to see that happening.

And now, he was walking side by side with this young man, and everything he felt was both familiar and new. It had to be because he was caught in this new world, in a different body which he had yet to learn. An explanation had to exist.

“Fun. Yes, indeed,” he replied.

“I’m sorry about the box of condoms and the lube. I just got a little too excited. I don’t want you to feel pressured or anything.”

Sebastian stopped and grabbed Milo by the shoulders. He had stunning eyes. It wasn’t about their color or shape. It was about the look in them. It was direct, honest, and also carried in it affection. In a nutshell, different from everything Sebastian was welcomed with whenever he looked into someone’s eyes. Even Pepin feared him, although he loved him.

Milo didn’t fear him. He didn’t seem to know what fear was. In a way, this strange world was blessed.

“Are you going to say something?” Milo asked.

Sebastian shook his head. Instead, he leaned in and kissed the other boy. One that wasn’t about making love and letting the flood of passion rise. It was just a kiss.

“What was that for?” Milo asked and blinked prettily.

“For being you,” Sebastian replied.

He should have come up with better words to describe what he felt, but he lacked them. During his short time here, he had learned about so many new things.

This was the newest and least familiar of them all. It was, in fact, so unfamiliar that he didn’t know where to start to find an explanation for it.

It could be the curse. A strange curse that wrapped around his heart and made him feel.

But it was Kai’s heart, right? Not his. He was a phantom living in a shell that didn’t belong to him.

Chapter Twelve – Two Plus One Makes Three Troublemakers

Sebastian felt a slight tinge of annoyance at the excitement he felt while waiting for Milo to unwrap the package that had just been delivered to his door. The mail services in this world were equally impressive. Throughout the day, in school, he had imagined this moment, which had caused him to be caught daydreaming a few times by the teachers. Luckily, he had studied so assiduously that he had managed to avoid their wrath and possibly detention. A few of his classmates were still in awe over his newly found ability to respond correctly to the questions addressed by the teachers, but otherwise, the strange looks thrown in his direction had been fewer and fewer.

What he needed was to blend in, and feeling excited like a kid on their birthday over something that had to be considered commonplace in this world rightfully annoyed him.

“Do you want to open it?” Milo handed the package to him.

“Can I?” His fingers were tingling. To think that people could place orders on things such as clothes and get them the next day was unfathomable in Ifigia. Each garment he owed was the result of the diligent work of an army of tailors who took his measurements, searched for the desired materials, and summoned him to try those clothes at least several times until the result was perfect. All that work lasted weeks, if not more.

He ripped the foil covering the clothes, hoping that Milo didn’t consider him strange in his impatience. The fabric of the trousers felt a bit coarse, and a few threads were coming off here and there.

A grimace threatening to twist his lips was stopped in time. This outfit was destined to help him earn money and food for his family, so it wouldn’t serve to apply his usual set of standards.

“Come on, try them on,” Milo encouraged him.

He had no trouble getting undressed in front of his boyfriend, although it appeared to be perceived as a lack of modesty to do so. Secretly, Sebastian now enjoyed Milo’s small comments and exclamations as he shed off his uniform.

At first, he was surprised at how tightly the trousers fit him. Definitely, they weren’t particularly comfortable. Well, one had to suffer inconveniences, as it seemed, for the sake of duty. A pair of uncomfortable pants was nothing compared to fighting monsters.

He walked to the mirror in the hallway and took a critical look at himself. Kai’s body was nothing like his but not unpleasant to look at, either. It had a boyish charm, but Sebastian winced when he noticed how low the trousers sat on his hip bones.

“Wow,” Milo commented. “This is, um,” he rubbed the back of his head, “even more revealing than I thought.”

Sebastian turned to have a look from the back. Any lower and those pants would show way more than they should.

“Did I get the wrong size?” Milo moaned. “I suppose I should be glad that your crack’s not visible. Maybe it was a bad idea.”

“No. I can live with it. Please, bring me the rest.”

Milo came back with the thin leather straps and helped him put them on, and then offered his assistance with the wig.

For a moment, Sebastian stood frozen in place. It was just the artificial hair, but for a moment, he thought he had caught a reflection of his own. The wig was stiff and of a plain white color, nothing like his actual platinum-colored hair, but the illusion was there.

“Dude,” Milo said excitedly, “you’re totally rocking this look, I can’t believe it!”

“Dude,” Sebastian replied stiffly as he took a long look in the mirror, “I believe I do.”

“You’re so going to win the contest. I know it!”

“I must,” Sebastian said while giving himself another once-over. “Will I have to walk on the street like this? I’m afraid it would be inappropriate.”

Milo snickered. “No, of course not. I’ll have my bag with me, and we can stuff everything in there.”

“All right.” Sebastian stared at his reflection, longing to get another glimpse of his own self.

“Come on now. You’re going to put a hole through the mirror if you keep staring,” Milo joked and dragged him along. “And you need to get out of this outfit, or you’ll be in serious danger of me jumping your bones.”

Sebastian no longer had to be explained everything, and for a moment, he considered whether it wouldn’t be a good idea for Milo to jump his bones. No, they didn’t have enough time. Maybe later. Then he would enjoy the other boy’s body to the fullest, as he deserved for putting up with all the strangeness of this world.

So far, being Prince Sebastian kind of rocked. He had ice magic, he could make dragons cry, and an entire castle was at his feet. However, while it was cool and all that, he needed to find whoever had summoned him to this fantastic world.

What if it wasn't just a trip? Kai slowed down his horse. He hadn't thought of that before. Any boy his age would want to be in his shoes right now. Well, there was the downside of being caught in a BL story, but it was a minor downside. Tiny.

Still, how long was he going to be there? Wouldn't people start missing him in the real world? His mom and Tani? And Milo? Sebastian must be filling his role, but what if he started yelling that he was a prince and all that? Kai munched on his bottom lip. That could be bad. His real body might end up in a loony house or something. He had seen plenty of anime shows to know how to behave in his current situation, but certainly, a prince like Sebastian had to be clueless.

Hmm, that kind of worried him.

Lost in thought as he was, he didn't notice he had ended up quite far away from the castle. A look over the shoulder assured him that he could barely make up the silhouette of the majestic building in the distance.

"Maybe I should head back," he told himself.

He was about to turn his horse when he noticed something. His eyes were playing tricks on him, or a bush far to his left had just moved.

"Come out, whoever you are," he boomed. Yeah, it was nice being Prince Sebastian. Even his voice sounded like belonging to a royal from a fairytale.

The bush shook, and finally, someone emerged. It was a young man dressed in fancy clothes. He walked toward Kai, stopped, and made a long curtsy, in which he remained without saying a word.

"Do I have to... All right, you can stand," Kai said with a sigh.

The young man straightened up and looked into his eyes daringly. Kai groaned internally. Another bishonen? Really, he had enough trouble with dodging Conrad's and Pepin's advances. This guy was not as tall as Conrad nor as short as Pepin. He had long wavy hair, the color of ripe chestnuts tied in a low ponytail, and bright hazel eyes. A few rebellious strands caressed a tall forehead. And he was every bit the type of character one would meet in a BL anime or novel. His clothes were quite impressive. He wore dark green velvet pants and black high riding boots, while a waistcoat was accentuating his slender waist. The shirt underneath poked at the neck and the sleeves of the velvet coat, the lace decorations having been designed to draw attention to this particular character.

But maybe, just maybe, he was jumping to conclusions, and this guy wouldn't say anything outrageous the moment he opened his mouth.

"Well," Kai said impatiently, "speak. Who are you and why were you hiding in that bush?"

Much to his surprise, the young man started laughing. He stopped after a few good moments, a time during which Kai raised an eyebrow in annoyance until his forehead hurt.

“I know we haven’t seen each other in three years since you were officially put in charge of Ifigia, but I wasn’t expecting you not to recognize me, dear cousin!” The young man exclaimed and opened his arms wide.

“Cousin?” Kai sighed in relief. Good, so at least this dude wouldn’t jump his bones. He was in enough trouble already. “What cousin?”

“Your cousin Galien. Doesn’t ring a bell?” He appeared disconcerted for a moment. “Of course, I should introduce myself properly since I also received an important title since the last time we spoke. I’m Galien Ansoul, the Duke of Kelonia, Your Majesty.” Another long curtsy followed, but this time, the young man didn’t wait to be told to get on with it. “And I am here,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “on an important mission.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Kai said as his eyes thinned. “How do I know you’re telling the truth?”

Galien appeared offended by that accusation. Forgetting all about his convoluted curtsies from before, he crossed his arms and began tapping his foot. “Sebastian, how can you say something like that? After everything you’ve been through together? And how can you not recognize me?”

Well, there’s a good explanation for that, only that no one would believe it. I guess saying that I’m from another world might make things a bit more complicated than they already are.

Kai thinned his eyes further and measured Galien up and down, pretending to be thoughtful and search for memories of them doing whatever together. Then he snapped his fingers. “Galien! Right! Of course! You’re from my mother’s side, right?”

Galien nodded enthusiastically. Good, at least he had gotten that right.

“But why didn’t you come by the front door?” Kai asked.

Galien pulled at his coat and cleared his throat. “Dear cousin,” he said in a grave voice, “you are in danger. Someone’s scheming to have you assassinated.”

“Ah, that. That happened already.”

Galien lost his composure at that. His eyes grew wide. “And how did it go?”

“Seriously?” Kai was starting to have a feeling that Prince Sebastian’s cousin was not a particularly clever guy. “I’m still here, right?”

Galien nodded thoughtfully. “Who tried to kill you?”

Kai shook his head. “You don’t know? What kind of sensitive information you thought you were about to deliver? It looked like someone from the house of Uxilan.”

“But you destroyed the house of Uxilan.”

“Ah, well, it looks like I didn’t do a thorough job. Or someone just came back from the dead as a zombie. Although he was moving quite fast for one.”

“A zombie?” Galien had a stricken expression on his face. “What kind of foul creature is that?”

“Foul, indeed,” Kai said under his breath. “The guy who tried to stab me with a poisoned blade ran away but left his coat behind, and the coat had the crest of the house of Uxilan,” he explained.

“The blade didn’t touch you, right?” Galien asked, now obviously worried.

“Dude, I’m here, and I’m fine. No, Conrad got stabbed, though.”

“Who’s Conrad?” Galien seemed to search for something with his mind. Then his eyes grew wide. “Don’t tell me... Prince Conrad of Estfalia? But you were at war with his country, the last time I heard news from you.”

“Yeah. Well, I beat him, and now he’s my concubine. Long story. Also, not very interesting,” Kai said quickly.

Galien’s lips twisted in a playful smile. “Concubine? Well, now that’s quite the development. But it means that you spared his life.” A reverent sigh followed. “It would have been such a shame to kill him.”

“You’re welcome at him if you want him,” Kai said.

That would solve at least half of the problem I have right now.

“Oh, cousin,” Galien covered his mouth in a coy gesture, “I would never. Everyone knows that anyone who has the misfortune of warming your bed longs for you forever. So, tell me, how did you make the proud prince of Estfalia bend the knee? Did he fight a lot? Please, don’t spare any detail.”

Great. Another dude into dudes. At least, this one wasn’t going to try to get into his pants. Not that Conrad and Pepin had tried that since he was mostly naked around them...

Wait, why am I always naked around them?

“Let’s head back to the castle, and... talk about something else.” Kai assumed that he needed to play the host. “Where is your horse? Don’t tell me you came on foot or something.”

Galien surprised him by placing two fingers in his mouth and blowing a loud whistle. From behind him, a beautiful bay horse emerged. Kai observed the animal as he trotted toward his master.

“You’re still the prettiest, Thunder,” he whispered in his horse’s ear. Thunder snorted in agreement.

Kai watched Galien mount his horse, a bit envious at how elegant and fanciful the duke appeared to be in everything he did. He was probably a scatterbrain, otherwise, but it was clear that he knew his manners.

“Shall we?” Galien asked.

Kai nodded.

“Now, tell me everything... Wait, did you just say that Conrad was stabbed?”

“Yeah. He just thought it clever to put himself between me and the assassin.”

“How peculiar,” Galien said and tapped his lips with an index finger. “I would have thought he hated you.”

“He does, but he’s a weird guy,” Kai replied. “He constantly tries to get into my pants.”

Galien surprised him by bursting into laughter.

“What? He does,” Kai insisted.

“Where have you picked such a drole manner of speaking, dear cousin? One would not have caught you dead using such words, as far as I remember. It appears that you’ve become quite a man of the world during our time apart.”

A man of another world, actually, but Kai wouldn’t correct his so-called cousin on that.

“Well? Aren’t you going to tell me?” Galien continued.

“Tell you what?”

“How did you and Conrad come about? I know he is handsome, but --”

“Temporary insanity,” Kai replied right away. “I got hit in the head. By a horse. Not this one.”

Galien examined him from the corner of one eye with a sly smile. “That explains quite a lot, then. Has that old physician seen to your wound?”

“What wound?” Kai was busy trying to come up with believable lies so that this cousin wouldn’t start suspecting him.

“The one to your head,” Galien said slowly as if he couldn’t understand regular speech now.

“Ah, that one. I healed. No signs of it now.”

“I see.” Galien nodded, but he kept staring at Kai. “Now, tell me. What kind of lover is Conrad?” His voice dropped low, and he wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“He’s... I’m not going to tell you that! It’s rude!” Kai blurted out.

“Since when?” Galien asked in apparent disbelief. “You’ve always told me everything. But your hit to the head must have been pretty serious if you don’t remember me.”

“I do, but, you know, it’s all a little hazy. Feel free to fill me in. How’s your family?” Kai asked, trying to sound as chill as possible.

“Ah, you know. Mother is busy roasting everything and everyone in her path, and father just tries to keep out of her way.”

“Roasting? She’s a comedian or something?”

Galien chuckled and threw Kai an amused look. “She’s the Fire Goddess. I doubt anyone she roasts would find her amusing.”

Ice Goddess. Fire Goddess. Well, that was quite the family he was part of at the moment.

“So you have fire magic?”

“Me?” Galien seemed completely surprised. “Unlike yours, my mother married a human. I’m afraid I only inherited my sire in all respects.”

“And who did my mom marry?” Kai found himself speaking.

That earned him another long look from Galien. “That hit to the head must have been something. Your mother, my dear Sebastian, had you on her own. In other words, she made you using her ice magic.”

“So, I don’t have a dad?” Kai asked, feeling sorry for Prince Sebastian.

“Oh, don’t look so stricken. Not even as a child did you ever cry for your father. Or your mother who only took you with her when she wanted to teach you your magic. I must admit that you seem quite changed. Don’t tell me you’ve fallen for Conrad, and this is you, smitten and head over heels.”

Kai bristled. “No, I told you. I only hit my head.”

“All right. No need to have my head for suggesting it. And how is that lovely servant of yours? As possessive as ever? Your taking Conrad to your bed must have saddened him.”

It was true, and Kai felt guilty toward Pepin for that. But it wasn't his fault! "He'll live," he said shortly, not wanting to say yet another thing that, most probably, didn't sound like Prince Sebastian at all.

"How cold of you to say that," Galien commented. "But hey, if you ever want to lend Pepin to me, I'll make sure to offer him enough consolation to forget about you."

"I don't," Kai said brusquely. No way would this fancy man take Pepin away from him. Who did Galien think he was to ask for someone's favorite manservant like that?

His cousin let out a small all-knowing laugh. "Of course. He was your mother's gift to you, right? You'll never allow him to leave your side. Just let me know about the wedding a couple of years in advance so that I can prepare a proper gift."

"I'm not marrying Pepin," Kai protested right away.

"You're not?" Galien appeared surprised. "It's true that you've always dismissed it. I just thought that you've warmed up to the idea in the meantime."

"Not really," Kai said. "I'm ice cold to the idea."

"All right. Forget I asked. But I will ask you again in a few years' time."

"On your next visit?"

Galien burst into laughter again. "My apologies, dear cousin, but you appear to have developed a knack for comedy. Or was it a hint that I haven't visited in so long? I do apologize for that. It's just that I was made a duke, and, of course, I now have duties to attend."

"And yet, you forgot about everything and came here to tell me about the assassination attempt," Kai pointed out.

"It was a matter of life and death. I'm surely glad to find you alive and well."

"How long will you stay?"

"Eager to get rid of me?"

"No. It's just so that I know what to tell Pepin."

Galien didn't question why Prince Sebastian had to inform his manservant about his cousin's visit. "I'll be here for a few days if that's all right with you. It's quite a ride back to Kelonia."

How far was that, anyway? Kai needed a map of the world so that he could learn a bit more about his surroundings. It couldn't be that far if Galien had arrived on a horse with no supplies whatsoever.

“We’ll catch up and have some fun,” Galien continued. “You’ll introduce me to Conrad. I’m quite interested in seeing a dragonborn from up close.”

“Dragonborn?” He had thought Conrad’s eyes were like a dragon’s, in a way, but otherwise, he appeared to be completely human.

“All right, so it’s just a rumor,” Galien admitted with a slight grimace. “But you know that I like handsome men, just as much as you. And Conrad has quite the reputation.” He chuckled. “I supposed it is a merciless twist of fate for him, a ruthless breaker of hearts, to end up in your bed. Tell me he’s spitting fire each time you put him in his place.”

No, he wasn’t spitting fire, but he could be intimidating. Good thing Kai had all Prince Sebastian’s powers, or else he would be scared shitless of a guy like that trying to jump him all the time.

“He’s not spitting fire,” he retorted.

“What does he do then? Did you two --”

Kai covered his ears, risking falling off the horse. Luckily, Prince Sebastian’s good balance and training kept him in the saddle. “I really don’t want to talk about it!”

“Oh, then I pity Pepin.”

“Why would you pity Pepin? He’s fine,” Kai protested.

“What do you mean, why? You obviously have feelings for Conrad. And you still haven’t told me about how he got wounded by an Uxilan poisoned blade and survived.”

“Well, that’s a long story, but also interesting. Do you want to hear it?” Kai asked, excited at the idea of telling someone about his adventures at the dragon’s cave.

“Sure. Go ahead.”

The road back to the castle was surely more enjoyable now that Galien was silent and Kai was busy recounting his and Pepin’s quest to get the dragon’s tear.

“Master Galien,” Pepin welcomed them right outside the stables. “What brings you here?”

Kai watched his manservant and his wary manner of speaking to Galien. Could it be that his cousin was only pleasant toward people of his own rank and higher? If he talked Pepin down or did anything to make the servant feel bad, he would –

Galien dismounted and threw the reins to one of the stable boys. "Is this how you welcome me? You're breaking my heart, Pepin." He walked over to the servant, hugged him tightly, and kissed him on the lips with a loud smack.

Kai grabbed his jaw and pushed it back. "What the hell?!"

Both Galien and Pepin stared at him wide-eyed. Apparently, getting worked up over seeing his loyal manservant getting manhandled like that wasn't Prince Sebastian's usual MO. Still, he couldn't let it slide.

"What is it, Sebastian?" Galien asked. He was still holding Pepin, and Kai frowned as he pushed himself up in the stirrups and tried to see where the guy's hands were.

"Don't be handsy with my servant," he said and winced at the aggressive tone of his voice.

Galien laughed. "Would you prefer me to be handsy with you?" He wiggled his eyebrows, making Kai roll his eyes. "That reminds me of the good old times."

Kai froze on the spot. Even with his cousin? Prince Sebastian was quite the character!

Pepin took them both by surprise by pushing Galien away in a firm but polite manner. "Stop joking, Master Galien. His Majesty might just believe you."

"I'm just having a little bit of fun," Galien replied and didn't seem affected by Pepin's rejection. "He told me he hit his head, so I was trying to put some new memories in there."

"They are not memories if they never happened," Pepin argued. "And when did you hit your head, Your Majesty?" He examined Kai with keen eyes.

"You weren't there," Kai said defensively. "Now, come on, don't just stand there. Take Galien to the guestroom or wherever it is that you put him whenever he comes to visit."

"Of course." Pepin nodded shortly. "Please follow me, Master Galien."

"Make sure not to touch Pepin inappropriately," Kai yelled after them.

Galien turned and bowed. Then he threw Kai an all-knowing smirk and a wink.

"So this is the famous rake of Kelonia," Kai heard someone talking as soon as Galien was out of his sight.

Conrad was, fortunately, dressed in clothes that didn't hug his body tightly. Therefore, he wasn't as distracting as usual. He was on the back of a horse, so he must have been on a ride. Also, he appeared to have witnessed everything.

"Rake?"

“I won’t apologize, even if it’s your cousin,” Conrad said thinly, and his eyes narrowed.

Now, that was one dude ready to get into a fight if only slightly provoked.

Kai shrugged. “I’m not asking you to. But why do you call him a rake?”

“You should know better. People say that you don’t allow him to be part of your court as you fear that he might steal your lovers.”

“Really?” Kai snickered. “Then I should dare him to steal you.”

The next second, he felt hot breath on his face and Conrad’s arms around him. “You shouldn’t joke with such things, Your Majesty. You made me yours by putting a spell on me.”

Oh, great. Kai endured Conrad nuzzling his neck since he didn’t want to make Conrad’s bum meet the ground with so many people watching.

So...

One troublemaker...

Two troublemakers...

And now, three.

That was just frigging great.

Chapter Thirteen – Obnoxious Little Four-Letter Word

“All right, that’s enough,” he said meekly as Conrad held him and continued to torture his neck with small kisses and flicks of the tongue. “People are staring.”

“And since when do you care?”

“We barely know each other,” Kai protested. “It’s not like you can tell for sure whether I care or not.”

“I’ve heard enough about you. And the night we spent together was enough to confirm every rumor. Your Majesty, you’re insatiable. Lie to me as much as you want. I won’t be dissuaded so easily.”

Kai rolled his eyes and pushed Conrad away, making sure not to use more force than necessary. “And I thought you didn’t like it. Not one bit. I beat you fair and square and forced you into,” he couldn’t believe he was saying cringey stuff like that, “my bed. So how about you go back to hating me like usual, so I can finally ignore you?”

Conrad’s fierce gaze examined him, and a small smile curled the man’s lips. “You saved me from a certain death. It had to be because,” his voice dropped to a whisper, “you still want me in your bed. And I intend to repay this debt in full.”

“All right, just give me a pony or whatever, and we’ll call it even.” Conrad was still distractingly close, and Kai was itching to get away.

“Why are your jokes so cruel? Do you want me to chase you? Hunt you down? Is it part of what makes you satisfied?”

Kai growled low in his throat. “You’re driving me nuts, Conrad! Why can’t you just take my words at face value? And come on, how many times do I have to say that I don’t want to force you into my bed anymore?”

Conrad paused for a moment and stared at him. He nodded shortly. “Then I will just come to your bed willingly.” With that, he pulled at the horse’s reins and turned away from Kai.

Who gazed after him, a million thoughts per minute crowding inside his mind. He had never ever read a BL manga or watched a BL show, and now that lack of knowledge put him at a major disadvantage. However, the guys around him had to be more or less tropes found in any creation of the romance type, so he needed to take a shot at it and clear things for himself.

Therefore, Pepin was the loyal servant in love with him. He was beautiful and determined, and that meant that it didn’t matter what Sebastian – who Kai played at the moment – did, he would always love the prince.

Conrad was the fierce and proud captive who was bound to fall in love with the prince. No amount of reasoning mattered, without a doubt. Whatever happened, Kai had to put it down under 'yaoi logic'. Which was bad because it meant that he had no chance to make Conrad change his mind.

Oh, how tragic. He would be loved by two awesome guys, no matter how terrible his character was, Kai thought to himself and sighed. Still, it didn't mean that he had to give up. Maybe he could convince Galien to steal Conrad from him. Not Pepin, though.

Pepin was off-limits. Plus, he was the least dangerous. Kai didn't know much about BL and whatnot, but he was pretty sure that Conrad wanted to give it to him, while Pepin wanted... well, to be given 'it'.

But, wait, his mind began to go in circles, hadn't Pepin said something about anything he did with Conrad, Kai had to do with him, too? What if Pepin, too... No, no way. His royal behind was in terrible danger if that were true.

Well, he would be careful. No one was going to touch his behind as long as he was on guard.

"This man is rather annoying in his indecisiveness," Sebastian commented as he browsed through a digital copy of the manga featuring the character he would cosplay later tonight. "What do you think?"

At Milo's suggestion, he had started reading it on his boyfriend's laptop. In a nutshell, he would be an actor and perform on a stage. It couldn't be that difficult.

"Dude, are you trying to get me hooked on BL now? Don't make me read it, too," Milo complained.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. It might be corny," Milo replied, but he blushed and looked away.

"What do you mean?" It surely had nothing to do with food, whatever Milo wanted to say.

"You know. I heard the characters tend to be so extra."

"Extra?"

"Over the top," Milo explained and began tapping his foot. He was lying on the bed, but his long legs touched the floor.

"Why are you embarrassed?" Sebastian asked, narrowing his eyes and inspecting the other.

“I’m not,” Milo blurted out.

“You’ve read such things before!” Sebastian exclaimed as the realization dawned on him.

“I was curious, okay?” Milo stood abruptly and ran to the opposite corner of the room.

“The story appears to be quite convoluted, but I don’t see how reading such a thing can be a cause for embarrassment,” Sebastian commented as he browsed through the illustrated pages. “The art on display can be considered charming even.”

“Are you going to laugh at me?” Milo asked quietly. “If I tell you?”

“I don’t see why I would do that.”

Milo moved his weight from one foot to another. He was wearing shorts and a sleeveless shirt, and Sebastian couldn’t take his eyes off him. His boyfriend had truly attractive thighs and nice muscular arms. If Sebastian kept staring, there was a chance that he would, as they said in this strange world, jump his bones.

“I’m sure you didn’t get to those parts,” Milo said with a slight huff, pulling him out of his thoughts.

“What parts?” Sebastian began clicking through. Page after page, Prince Sendrian, who he was supposed to impersonate on stage tonight, couldn’t make up his mind about the young man he was in love with. When there wasn’t one thing or another getting in the way, the fictional royal managed to stumble upon his own self, thus delaying a satisfactory resolution.

“Just skip to chapter thirty-seven, and you’ll know what I’m talking about,” Milo mumbled.

Sebastian quirked an eyebrow and did as told. He stared for a moment, scrolled down, and lower, and lower...

He cleared his throat. While the videos he watched late at night left nothing out, he was rightfully impressed by the artful way in which the characters were depicted on the screen in their throes of passion. The words they told each other heightened the arousal, and seeing how the readers must have endured through dozens and dozens of pages of Sendrian’s clumsiness in dealing with matters of the heart, those scenes were all the more satisfying.

His eyes met Milo’s beautiful greens.

“Totally corny, right?”

“I still don’t get what you mean. You’ve watched videos, have you not?”

“You mean, porn? Yeah,” Milo admitted, although he looked away as saying that.

Sebastian had to admit his boyfriend looked quite attractive like that, embarrassed, and with his cheeks on fire.

“So, why would you feel embarrassed by these drawn characters and their complicated love affair?”

Milo looked away and then hanged his head low. “I jerked off to it,” he said quickly. “This manga.”

“Oh.” Sebastian looked at the laptop screen and shifted. The signs of early arousal were starting to inconvenience him. “I can see why. The artist made sure the readers would see everything in detail.”

“But it’s not because of that,” Milo interrupted him. “That I jerked off. Why the hell am I telling you this?” he moaned and covered his face.

“Because we’re boyfriends,” Sebastian said matter-of-factly. From the day before, he had understood the term as being one to describe lovers in this world. He would have argued that they still needed to bed each other to truly be considered that, but they were heading there anyway.

“All right. Don’t laugh.”

“As you can see, I don’t.”

Milo took one deep breath. “I came when they said ‘I love you’ to each other. Isn’t that corny?” he insisted.

Sebastian opened another tab on the browser and searched for the term. “Yes, I suppose it can be considered corny,” he said after a short while.

Milo rubbed the back of his head and snorted. “I think I like watching porn with feels,” he said.

Sebastian rolled out of bed and walked over to Milo. “Well, it may be corny, but there’s nothing wrong with that.”

“It’s not? Don’t tell me you too --”

“No,” Sebastian said abruptly. “I’m not interested in sentimentalism.”

“Oh,” Milo managed to whisper, and the corners of his eyes dropped.

Sebastian kissed him and let his hands wander down the nicely defined arms. He would take much pleasure in discovering that body and all his secrets.

“There is something else,” Milo mumbled and bit his bottom lip.

Sebastian dragged him close and took that delicious lip between his teeth, and sucked it into his mouth.

“What else?” he asked.

Milo blinked, his breath coming in a bit short. “I think I got a hard-on for the main character.”

Sebastian still had the wig and that peculiar outfit on, as he had argued that he needed to be more comfortable in it before climbing on stage tonight. “Ah, I see,” he said with a bit of satisfaction. Although it was just make-believe, he appreciated Milo’s feeling attracted to the character he would impersonate, for the simple fact that there was some resemblance between Prince Sendrian and his actual self and physical appearance.

“I can see why,” he replied. “He is very attractive. I should say that many of his mishaps are easier to be forgiven due to that alone.”

Milo snickered. “I guess. As long as the guy is hot... yeah. So you’re not mad about it?”

“Why should I be? You’re my boyfriend.”

Something that really made him experience a tingling sensation right in the middle of his chest, which felt both unbearable and enjoyable at the same time. Like a slight frisson of pleasure, it overtook him when he least expected it.

Curse or not, Sebastian couldn’t deny that his attraction toward the beautiful boy in front of him was real and different from any of his feelings nurtured toward his long string of lovers. Not even Conrad’s memory, still fresh in his mind, entangled with a certain degree of dissatisfaction over not having had him enough times to become bored, could rival with it.

“Ah, and that solves it all? You’re not jealous? Not even a tiny bit?” Milo asked and circled Sebastian’s waist with his arms.

“No.”

“I’d be,” Milo admitted. “I mean, porn is one thing, but this --”

“Jealousy is a petty emotion,” Sebastian interrupted him. “And a character created with the sole purpose of determining those looking at him to like him, despite his numerous shortcomings, is bound to cause such reactions.”

Milo sighed. “So I’m a victim of BL magic?” he asked playfully.

“Magic is a strong word. Why do you like this fictional prince? Is it only because he’s handsome?”

Milo moved his head from side to side. “Not only. I shouldn’t like, though. I mean, he’s cold and full of himself --”

“He’s not. He’s just aloof and blind,” Sebastian argued.

That earned him a thoughtful look from the other. “Are we talking about the same character?” Milo looked puzzled. “Because I’m sure I wouldn’t like in real life a guy like that.”

An irksome feeling began to grow inside Sebastian. “Why wouldn’t you? If he were just as handsome.”

“Really, Kai? A guy like that... come on, even a good guy like you can see it. Sendrian is an arrogant bastard, and, in the real world, he’d be nothing but a heartbreaker. You know, the kind your momma would tell you to stay away from,” Milo added with a small laugh.

Rightfully annoyed, Sebastian caught Milo’s chin and pressed his lips against his mouth. “Then what do you feel when you see me dressed up like him?”

Milo snickered. “Come on, man. That’s a totally different thing. This outfit gives me a boner. But it’s because it’s you in it, and not someone else.”

Of course. Milo, in his clumsy yet endearing way, told the truth. The boy in front of him was much attracted to his friend Kai, and any passing feelings toward fictional characters didn’t matter.

“What’s wrong?” Milo caressed his forehead, drawing small lines on his eyebrows.

“You can’t love a fictional character, can you?” Sebastian asked.

Milo smiled, that amazing smile of his that could make the ice melt. “I guess not. It would be weird, I suppose. Although, me falling in love with you after being friends for all four years of high school must be weird, too, right?”

Love. Again and again, that obnoxious little four-letter word.

“Are you in love with me?” Sebastian asked in a measured voice.

“Yeah,” Milo said with a slight shrug like it wasn’t a big deal.

“How do you know?”

“I just do. Man, don’t make me say corny stuff now.”

“Far from me.” Sebastian stepped away from Milo and plopped on the bed. Suddenly, the wig made him feel too hot, and the outfit he was wearing felt like nothing but a joke. “I should change into my clothes.”

“We should drop by yours,” Milo said. “I suppose you don’t want to go to The Pit in your uniform, right?”

“You’re right.” Sebastian pulled the wig away and dropped it on the bed. Then he took off the pants and started to struggle with those leather straps.

“Let me help you out of those.” Milo stood behind him, and his hands came to rest on his chest. “Just so you know, you don’t have to wear an outfit for me to like you.”

“I know,” Sebastian said prickly.

“You’re not mad because of my stupid confessions, right? I swear that I won’t touch a BL manga ever again in my life.”

Sebastian pursed his lips. Milo got it all wrong, but it was impossible to correct him. Such a thing would only lead to a long string of misunderstandings.

He was losing sight of what was important. What he had to do was to find a way to break the curse keeping him trapped in this world, not to play lovers with a young man, no matter how beautiful.

Or how warm his hands were, resting on his chest like that.

“Please do touch whatever you like,” Sebastian said in a soft whisper.

Milo laughed and caressed him while breaking him away from those leather straps. “Is that an invitation? Too bad we have stuff to do today.”

“Of course. I must earn my keep.”

“You know, you really do talk like a fictional prince. I don’t know if I should get used to it or just tease you about it until you drop it.”

“Don’t get used to it.”

He would find a way to return to his kingdom and his world. Milo should get his friend back, as well.

Sebastian frowned. What kind of mishaps was Kai causing right now while playing his role? According to the fiction in this world, traveling to distant realms that only existed in fantasy was a coveted dream, albeit seemingly impossible. Kai was probably having a good time playing the prince, but could he truly be aware of the dangers that came with being the protector and ruler of Ifigia? He was, after all, just a clueless boy.

His frown deepened. What happened if his body was killed? Maybe the curse was cruel in that way. As he was now removed from his world, he could do nothing to protect himself.

Maybe the entire kingdom of Ifigia was in danger, and nothing stood in the way of disaster but a high school boy who knew nothing about being a prince with the fate of thousands depending on him.

“Is Galien comfortable?” Kai asked Pepin. “He rode a long way.”

And hopefully, he’s already asleep and out of my hair.

The servant closed the ornate doors to the princely quarters. “He is but told me to prepare everything needed for a – I’m quoting him – little dip in the hot spring. He wants you to join him, as he thinks you need to forget about the worries of caring for Ifigia for a bit.”

“I think I’ll pass,” Kai said in a deadpan voice.

“He is your cousin, and I know him well. He is capable of running naked through the entire castle only to drag you with him.”

Kai sighed and stared at the ceiling. He counted to ten. Then he remembered the little episode from earlier. “What does Galien want from you?”

To his surprise, Pepin appeared to ignore the question. He was already busy tidying up the room, although nothing needed to be tidied up.

“Pepin,” Kai said slowly, trying to sound royal and convincing.

“What?” the servant asked suavely.

“What’s the deal with you and my cousin?”

“You know well what.”

“No, I don’t. Hit to the head and all that.”

“I thought that was a lie,” Pepin commented without interrupting his chores.

“Don’t change the subject. Come on, spit it out.”

Pepin finally stopped and threw him a direct look. “He proposed.”

Kai began laughing but then reconsidered. “To you? I mean, like a marriage proposal?”

“Yes,” Pepin replied and frowned. “Exactly like that.”

“And? What did you tell him? When did this happen? Where the hell was I?”

Kai knew very well that he must have been somewhere far away and completely clueless about a guy named Pepin who had guys asking for his hand in marriage. Still, he was curious about what Sebastian must have thought about such a thing, and it could explain, despite Conrad's explanations, why the prince didn't want his cousin around. That guy was a servant-stealer!

"It happened the last time Master Galien was here. You were getting invested in your role as protector of Ifigia. And you," Pepin threw him a pointed look, "heard everything. Because you were there." He grabbed a pillow and began to fluff it.

No wonder the servant had to tidy up all day long. He just liked to get busy with all those feathers floating around. Kai grabbed the pillow and threw it on the bed. "Aren't you leaving something out? What did you tell him?"

He towered over Pepin, but the servant stood his ground and stared defiantly at him. Maybe Prince Sebastian could drive fear in anyone around him, but not so easily in this little guy. Or maybe, just maybe, Pepin didn't fear Kai because he was nothing like the real prince.

That was a valid theory, too.

"I told him," Pepin bore his pretty blue eyes into his, "that I would think about it."

"No way!" Kai exclaimed. "Why would you tell him that?"

Pepin shrugged. "To see what you would say."

"Ah. I see. And what did I say? I said something, right?"

Pepin's eyes filled with barely contained anger. "You said," he said thickly, "that Galien was free to have me."

Kai blinked a few times. He had expected Sebastian to be possessive of his servant, who was also his mother's gift to him. Apparently, the prince was not at all sentimental.

"Don't tell me he popped the question again."

"What?" Pepin was confused.

"Did Galien ask you the same thing today?"

"Yes."

"The... damned rat!"

Pepin's eyes grew wide. Kai was pretty sure he was completely out of character right now but just couldn't stop. Who did Galien think he was to go around and steal other people's loyal servants who also doubled as great friends?

“And what did you tell him?” Kai grabbed Pepin by one arm before the servant had a chance to start dusting or whatever.

“The same thing,” Pepin said defiantly and set his chin high.

“Why?”

Pepin’s face scrunched up. “Your Majesty, it hurts.”

Kai hadn’t realized he was squeezing Pepin’s arm. He let go like he had been burned. “Oops, sorry. But, still, why?”

“Why? You don’t want to marry me, right? And I won’t be young forever.”

Kai rubbed his forehead, not knowing whether to laugh or slap himself for not knowing what to say. “Pepin, my dude, you’re twenty. You don’t exactly have to hurry to get married.”

“And do what instead? Wait for you forever?”

Kai began scratching his head. According to Pepin, he must have been pining for Sebastian for years. That could get frustrating, having a crush on a guy who clearly had no intention to return such feelings.

“I have no idea what to say,” he admitted.

Pepin schooled his face into a neutral mask. “You don’t have to worry about a thing, Your Majesty.”

“Because you’ll tell Galien ‘no’?” Kai asked, feeling hopeful.

That made Pepin set his eyes hard on him again. “What am I to make from your words, Sebastian? Do you want me?”

“As a friend, totally.”

“You know what I mean.”

Kai sighed. All right, so it wasn’t his right to tell Pepin what to do. Also, Prince Sebastian didn’t appear to care whether his mother’s gift wanted to walk into the sunset with another dude.

So, the logical thing to do was to encourage Pepin to accept Galien’s proposal.

Yeah, the logical thing. His tongue didn’t care about logical things.

He remained quiet.

Pepin turned away from him. “I have no expectations from you. I will remain in your service until I become useless. Then it won’t matter anymore.”

There was so much bitterness in those words that Kai felt like a total prick. “Useless? Do you mean once you’ll turn eighty and I should let you enjoy your retirement?”

Pepin looked completely flabbergasted when he turned to look at him. “Lately, I don’t understand what you mean when you talk like this.”

Kai waved dismissively. “You’re my loyal servant and dear friend.”

“And what does that mean?” Pepin asked.

“It means that we’ll spend our retirement together,” Kai said promptly. “It’s not like I’ll still hunt monsters when that comes. When you’ll be eighty, I will be eighty-two.”

Pepin continued to stare at him a bit longer, but then he began laughing softly. “You’re so strange these days, Your Majesty.”

“Hey, don’t laugh. It’s retirement together. I decided.”

Pepin added nothing else. He continued to snicker as he saw about cleaning up the room.

That still didn’t need much cleaning.

The hot spring was surrounded by lush greenery, and the steam rising promised relaxing delights. Kai stretched and let out a satisfied sigh. “I can barely wait to get into the water.”

Pepin was trailing after him, armed with towels and clean robes. Kai jumped in and let his body sink until the water was at his chin. “Pepin, leave those and step inside, too. This is amazing.”

“Are you sure, Your Majesty? Galien will be here shortly.”

“So what? We’re all guys.”

The moment the words left his mouth, he knew he had said something wrong. Yeah, they were all guys, but not quite ordinary guys. Still, he couldn’t take it back.

So, he stared helplessly at Pepin, who was taking off everything.

Everything...

He should look the other way.

He should.

Definitely.

“Are you starting without us?”

Kai stared at the intruders, and his eyes grew wide. “What are you doing here?”

Conrad stepped into the water, completely comfortable in his nakedness, as usual. “Sir Galien insisted.”

“That’s me,” Galien tooted happily.

They were all naked. And they were all guys. So nothing could happen, right?

Right?

Kai sank deeper into the water until it felt it closing over the crown of his head.

Chapter Fourteen – Vocabulary Problems

Apparently, Prince Sebastian's body could do many things, but surviving underwater for more than any other human being wasn't among them. Kai came back to the surface and inhaled noisily.

Three pairs of eyes were staring at him from up close. These guys didn't have any idea about what personal space meant, for real.

"I think this water's too hot. I need to get out."

Galien pushed against his shoulder playfully. "Don't even think about it, Sebastian. Life in the countryside can be quite boring. I'm dying for some palace gossip."

"Kelsonia is hardly the countryside," Pepin argued. "Your duchy is famous for the beautiful balls your family throws, Master Galien."

Kai wasn't entirely sure whether Pepin was complimenting Galien or wanted to contradict him. What was sure, however, was that Pepin's light pink nipples looked absolutely –

What the hell was he thinking now? His mouth was dry, and he had the crazy impulse of wanting to suck on Pepin's nipples just to see how they tasted like.

"No way," he whispered to himself. "I'm a total perv."

"What's that, a perv?" Pepin asked and moved slowly to his right.

Galien and Conrad chose the opposite side so they could face him. Still, Kai only had eyes for Pepin. Such dudes could only exist in BL shows. The curve of his neck belonged to magazine covers, and his skin was unblemished. His amazingly blue eyes were fringed by dark blond eyelashes that looked curly and long from up close. His lips were so soft, parted in slight hesitation, and so full. And their color... just reminded him of the last time he had tasted strawberries. Not that they were that red, but surely they had to be just as delicious. He could still recall Pepin's kiss as being the sweetest thing he had ever had.

Now, that had to be the steam getting to his head.

Kai bit hard his bottom lip and began chewing on it. That should do for now to stop the munchies.

"Sebastian, is it polite of you to ignore your guest of honor so that you can gaze upon your manservant? In a manner that leaves the rest of the audience rather vexed, if I may add," Galien said teasingly.

Kai shook his head and frowned. Galien quirked an eyebrow and challenged him with a sly smile. "I heard you proposed to Pepin," he said.

To his ears, Sebastian's royal voice sounded petulant, like a kid's that just got his candy taken away.

"You heard?" Galien chuckled. "That was three years ago, and you didn't seem troubled by it."

Ah, right. Nevertheless, he would not be caught wrong-footed this time around. "What I meant is that I heard that you proposed to him again," he said triumphantly.

Galien shrugged. "And? What of it? Don't you have Conrad? I must say," his voice dropped to a seductive whisper, "that the fallen prince of Estfalia is even more enthralling than the tales made him to be."

Conrad threw Galien a haughty look.

"A true challenge," Galien added, "but not for you, dear cousin, of course. May I touch him? He has such gorgeous shoulders." The way the duke rounded the vowels as he spoke was tickling Kai's ears like some kind of ASMR. He put one pinky in his right ear to get rid of the sensation.

"Do that, and I won't be responsible for the fate that will befall you, Sir Galien," Conrad said through his teeth.

"So hot to handle." Galien sank into the water and sighed in delight. "You're everything I expected and more, Sir Conrad." He made no move to touch Conrad. Most probably, he didn't want to end up with a broken arm or something. Kai wasn't sure he would intervene. After all, this troublesome cousin was why he was in such a difficult position right now.

Pepin stood at a polite distance, but Kai found himself drawn to him despite whatever his rational thoughts wanted to insist on, like how he wasn't really a BL character, and he couldn't find a dude cute.

"So, about that assassination attempt," Galien suddenly said.

Kai straightened up and forgot about staring at Pepin. That was serious. As OP as he was, he couldn't ignore the possibilities regarding someone trying to get rid of the obnoxious prince. BL story or not, he didn't want to gamble on bad endings and whatnot. If this was a game, and his choices influenced the final resolution, he needed to take it all into consideration.

"How did you learn about it?" he asked.

Galien no longer looked like the social butterfly from earlier. His eyes were shrewd, and he was staring at Kai like there were words in there that couldn't be spoken. What was that all about now?

"I have my sources," Galien said rather bluntly.

Kai didn't miss the short glance the duke threw at Conrad. Could it be that Galien suspected the royal concubine of being involved in that failed attempt at his life? But he had taken that poisoned blade right to the belly, so it couldn't be.

"Conrad got hurt, as I told you," he said out loud.

"I know," Galien replied, and a small smile followed. "How is it, Sir Conrad, to feel so strongly for your captor that you are willing to put your life at risk for him? Sebastian must truly be an exquisite lover."

Conrad set his chin high. "How crass of you, Sir Galien. One doesn't mention such details in polite company."

"Will you two cut it out?" Kai intervened. "Let's talk about that assassin," he added quickly, after two pairs of eyes set on him, filled with unspoken questions. "He was a dude about this tall," he gestured, "wore all black, and he was really, but really suspicious. Kind of like a ninja."

"What's a ninja?" Galien asked, his shrewd eyes still inspecting Kai.

"A dude in black that's really, really suspicious," he replied in a deadpan voice.

Galien quirked an eyebrow, and his lips twisted. Then, taking everyone by surprise, he began laughing. "I see."

"You see what?" Kai asked.

This time, the clever eyes left his face to turn toward Conrad. "Why even the proud prince of Estfalia would put himself between the man he presumably hates and a poisoned blade."

"And why is that?" Kai questioned further.

"Because," Galien blinked lazily as he looked at him, "you appear to have changed, just as the prophecy foretold."

Kai rolled his eyes. "What's that prophecy about, anyway?"

Galien ignored him. "You should allow Pepin to leave your side. I'd be happy to have him. Even if you touched him, I wouldn't mind. I'm not exactly a chaste flower myself."

That earned an offended sputter from the manservant. "I am untouched!" Pepin protested.

Kai put his arm in front of him just in time to bar a vicious but cute little dog from shredding Galien to pieces and turn the water crimson.

"That's great news!" Galien said, seemingly unaffected by furious pretty eyes and clenched fists.

Kai turned toward Pepin. "Don't mind my cousin. He's just talking smack, okay?"

Galien clapped in unhidden delight. “What strange expressions you have added to your vocabulary, Sebastian. What’s the meaning of this word, smack? And where did you pick them?”

Right. He needed to watch his mouth. So far, people had been too afraid of the real Prince Sebastian to question his new quirks, but the duke was a different matter. He was Sebastian’s equal, not to mention a clever character that must have known the prince since they had both been in diapers.

“From some barbarians,” Kai replied. “They were talking weird, and it just rubbed off on me.”

He could tell even without looking that Galien didn’t buy such obvious lies.

“It might have been part of the prophecy,” the duke commented, and it was so clear that he didn’t think that for a moment. “Now let’s enjoy our bath. We’ll have plenty of time to talk during my stay here.”

It was on the tip of Kai’s tongue to ask how long exactly Galien intended to stay but stopped. He needed to act more royal, and showing how annoying he thought his cousin to be wasn’t at all along those lines.

“Would you like me to massage your shoulders, Your Majesty?”

Pepin’s voice so close startled him. “No, I’m good, I’m good,” he hurried to say.

“Maybe His Majesty wants Conrad to do it,” Galien said in an insinuating voice.

“No!” Kai protested loudly. “I’m like completely chill. I don’t want a massage or whatever.”

“Pepin,” Galien added in the same teasing voice, “be careful. It appears that your presence so close to our esteemed protector affects him greatly.”

Kai narrowed his eyes. “No, really. In what way?”

Galien quirked both eyebrows and then let his eyes travel slowly across his body, even the part obscured from view.

Kai looked down. His cousin couldn’t see through all that steam, right? Nonetheless, he closed his legs and placed his hands in front.

“I made you look,” Galien said and laughed.

Kai scoffed and turned away from him. And Pepin. And Conrad. Couldn’t they see he was suffering?

With the fluffy robe on, he felt much more protected from Galien's wandering eyes. The duke was completely shameless, staring at each of them and commenting on their bodies. He was a wild BL character. Pepin had blushed while Galien praised his slim waist and perfect skin. Conrad had replied with small huffs and grunts as the duke proposed that he would pose for a renowned painter only so that he could look at him whenever he wanted.

The annoying cousin was, therefore, the soul of the party. They were gathered around a low table on which various delicious foods were displayed. Kai complimented Pepin on doing a swell job on the table arrangement and got a shy smile in return.

He was a great cook, and all praises were deserved.

"Why do you insist on not marrying Pepin off to me?" Galien asked with an exaggerated sigh as he delicately took a small canapé and admired it. His robe was opened in front, and Kai could stare at his chest. Did every dude in this world have perfect pecs? At least, it was natural for Conrad to have them, being a warrior and all that, but the duke didn't in the least look like a guy who cared about fighting too much.

"So that you can keep him in the kitchen?"

Galien chuckled, making Kai shudder. Yeah, if he ever traveled to the modern world or whatever Kai's real world was to these people, the duke would be an ASMR star for sure.

"Oh, but it is not the kitchen where I intend to keep him," came the reply. "It is --"

"No, no, I don't want to know," Kai said quickly.

"Why?" Galien feigned innocence.

"Because I know you'll say something dirty, like your bed or something."

There was no answer to that. Kai examined his so-called cousin, and the dude just kept staring at him with the same sly smile on his face.

"What?" he asked, unnerved by that pointed look.

"Nothing. I'm just wondering whether you've been asleep or blind this whole time and just opened your eyes or --"

To his surprise, Galien stopped. His smile didn't fade, but for some reason, he didn't want to say what he had been about to say.

"Or?" he insisted.

"Or there's more to you than even the prophecy cared to tell us," Galien said promptly.

Kai had a feeling his cousin was keeping things from him, but he couldn't just insist. Maybe if they drank something, Galien's tongue would become a bit loose.

"What's the strongest stuff we have?" he asked Pepin in a low whisper. "You know, alcohol."

The servant gave him a surprised stare. "Your Majesty and such delights do not agree too well with one another."

"It's not for me. It's for Galien. He keeps things from me," Kai put it bluntly.

Pepin nodded. "I'll see what I can do." He stood and walked out of the room.

"I hope you didn't send your manservant away for fear that I would snatch him from underneath your very eyes," Galien commented. "I am a seducer, as you know it well. I will convince Pepin to follow me to my estate on his own accord."

"I'm sure," Kai said dryly.

"I assure you, Sir Galien," Conrad said after keeping silent until now, "that His Majesty's possessiveness of his manservant has nothing to do with romantic feelings. It is a matter of loyalty," he added courteously. "He trusts Pepin with his life, and it would be cruel of you to separate them."

Good boy Conrad!

"Oh, I see. Since we're on matters of possessiveness, don't you feel at least a tad jealous of the attention Sebastian has bestowed all evening upon the servant in question?"

The molten lava eyes set on Kai. "Not in the least. His Majesty bestowed his unbridled passion upon me. If he had ever cared about doing the same to his servant, he would have done so by now."

And... you ruined it!

Still, Kai couldn't be upset about it. As far as facts stood, Conrad had a point. If Sebastian had ever wanted Pepin like that, he could have had him like a thousand times. But how could the prince be so unaffected by a bishonen like his servant? That was beyond his comprehension.

Given that Sebastian liked dudes, of course. Not from where Kai stood or anything like that.

Pepin entered, holding a black bottle with a golden inscription on the front. Kai looked closer and noticed that the strange letters seemed alive. "What's that?" he asked.

The servant smiled and fiddled with a small cup which he offered to Galien. "His Majesty doesn't treat just any guest to this."

Galien took the cup and raised it. “To golden truths, then. But, please, Pepin, don’t be a cheapskate now that you plundered the royal reserve of this incredible delight. Get everyone a cup. Including yourself,” he added with his signature sly smile.

Hmm, why was he smiling? Kai narrowed his eyes even more. And what was that thing about golden truths?

“Your Majesty,” Pepin interrupted his train of thought. “Should I proceed as Master Galien suggested?”

Kai had never had more than a glass of beer once. But, he couldn’t back down that he had been challenged. He would just dip his lips in it and pretend to drink. According to Pepin, Sebastian didn’t like alcohol, so nobody would hold it against him if he didn’t drink it all.

Sebastian had to postpone any worries he had about Kai playing his role as the protector of Ifigia since there were other challenges ahead. For years, he had heard of a prophecy concerning a change in the Ice Prince that some thought it would happen because of him falling in love with someone, while others because of much more nefarious causes. Like many other prophecies in his world, this one was ambiguous and leaving too much room for interpretations. He hadn’t given it much thought until now, but the current events no longer allowed him to overlook it.

What if the prophecy could have foreseen this strange thing that had caused him to travel through space and time to a completely different world and inhabit someone else’s body? It was a possibility and one he would have to explore at large once he had the time.

For now, pressing matters required more attention on his part. Milo was dressed in black pants that hugged his lower body nicely and a black t-shirt adorned in the same fashion as the one he had seen Beatrice wearing. He had also placed a small stud in his left ear, and Sebastian felt intrigued and enticed by it. Something of how the little stone shone in Milo’s earlobe made him want to grab it with his teeth and tease its owner.

Milo had also done something with his hair. It looked slightly wet and sexy, and Sebastian could hardly stop himself from imagining how it would feel to run his hands through those blond strands and enjoy their silkiness.

He had opted for the same plain clothes that Kai had in his wardrobe. The cosplay outfit was stashed away in Milo’s bag, and that gave him the much-needed confidence that he would succeed in earning the contest prize.

“You’re staring.” Milo threw him a shy smile. “Not that I mind, but I’d like to know what you’re thinking.”

“You’re beautiful,” Sebastian said promptly. “Why are you with...” he was about to say Kai, “me?”

“You’re beautiful, too. Oh, gawd, you’re making me say corny stuff again.”

“Compared to you, I’m barely above average.”

“I’m sure you don’t look in the mirror much.” Milo shook his head. “You’re cute as hell. Good thing you’re an airhead because that’s the only thing that kept the girls from our school away from you.”

“I have no interest in girls. Not that kind of interest,” Sebastian hurried to say.

“That’s great to know. Hey, we’re almost here. We’ll search for B and her band, first, and ask her if she has the time to help us with your makeup.”

Sebastian stopped in front of the entrance and stared at the doors that looked like they had been painted with tar. “Is this a portal to the underworld?” he asked. A lot of young people dressed in the same fashion as them were gathered there. They were laughing, talking, or using their phones. That sort of crowd attending a funeral seemed out of the ordinary, if not downright disrespectful.

Milo patted his shoulder. “It’s just The Pit. Let’s get inside.”

Sebastian didn’t ask anything more and let himself pushed through the doors. Inside, the crowd was much denser, and the people were cheering while a group of musicians was on a stage in front. He was starting to get that there was no funeral involved, only an entertainment event of sorts, one addressed to the masses that appeared to be in a state of exultation at the loud music blaring in their ears.

“B said they would be on stage after this band,” Milo shouted in his ear. “So let’s go behind the stage and search for her.”

Sebastian was in utter shock at everyone shouting and jumping. That was certainly not a way to enjoy music. He followed Milo, squeezing his hand tightly so that they didn’t get lost from one another. It served that Milo was tall and could carve a way for them through that jolly crowd, not that he did that forcefully, but with many apologies.

He took one gulp of air as soon as they were in a long hallway, and the infernal music was muffled by a door closing behind them. B was there and waved at them happily when she saw them. She was just outside a room and had a stick in her mouth from which blue smoke rose. “My dudes,” she exclaimed as soon as she saw them. She removed the burning stick to kiss them both on the cheeks. She smelled of smoke even. Maybe that was part of a ritual.

Sebastian scrunched up his nose.

“We’ll need some help because you’re staring at the next cosplayer star of all times if only you gave us a hand,” Milo said. He pushed Sebastian toward her.

Beatrice grinned. “Got your text. Let’s go inside and I’ll take care of everything, but let me finish my smoke. Want some?” She pulled a paper pack from her pocket and offered it to them.

“My body is a temple,” Milo said jokingly. “Can’t, sorry, need my lungs for practice.”

Beatrice shrugged. “No problem. What about you, Kai? Do you smoke?”

She looked at him like he wouldn’t be capable of burning a stick. “I do,” he said with confidence and pulled a stick from the pack she kept open.

“Since when?” Milo asked.

Sebastian watched intently as Beatrice brought a small implement to his face and made fire. He placed the stick in his mouth as he had seen Beatrice doing and stared as the fire touched the tip. So, what was next? Was he supposed to keep it like that and watch it burn?

He inhaled a little, and a sudden cough made his throat tight. Milo pulled the stick out of his mouth and made a move to hand it back to Beatrice. “He doesn’t smoke. I have no idea what got into him.” He patted Sebastian on the back to help him regain his breath.

“It doesn’t mean that I don’t want to try,” he protested, but his eyes were already in tears.

“You don’t,” Milo said and no longer seemed like his usual carefree self. For some reason, he seemed upset over his desire to inhale through that burning stick.

Sebastian felt annoyed by that reaction. Milo wasn’t his tender or anything like that. If he wanted to smoke, he could. So he grabbed the stick back and defiantly put it into his mouth again.

“Go slow, man,” Beatrice told him with a grin.

Milo pursed his lips and frowned. Then he looked saddened for some reason. Sebastian could tell that his boyfriend disagreed and expected him to start talking. Nothing like that happened, and Beatrice began chatting about her band right away.

The stick wasn’t pleasant at all, but Sebastian kept at it stoically, mimicking Beatrice’s moves and trying to fight off the cough that came with each time he inhaled too deeply. She looked so self-assured, and that was something he needed in this new world with its strange rules.

“You’re friggin’ sexy,” Beatrice praised him as she helped him put on the wig.

Milo had kept quiet most of the time, but since they had attended Beatrice's band's performance, it hadn't been like they could make normal conversation. Edible Insanity had a reputation for being loud, and that was about everything Sebastian could tell about it. Now, everyone was getting ready for the cosplay event, which had brought him there, in front of that mirror, with Beatrice fussing around him and applying strange substances on his face.

Even more than at Milo's house when he had tried on the clothes for the first time, he indeed looked attractive.

"Are you sure you want all the world to see your boyfriend like this?" Beatrice teased Milo.

"Yeah," Milo replied and added nothing else.

The girl moved her eyes slowly between them, hesitated for a moment, but then kept quiet. Whatever it was that she wanted to say, she eventually settled for keeping it to herself.

"Well, good luck, then," she said and gave Sebastian a short hug.

Milo took him by the shoulders as they walked out. "You are sexy," he whispered as he pushed Sebastian down the hallway. "You'll get that prize."

That was all he needed to hear. He was there, after all, with one purpose in mind.

Chapter Fifteen – Small Golden Truths

Kai licked his lips. Damn, that liquor, whatever it was, was ah-mazing. It was sweet but not over the top, and it simply made his taste buds explode! It was a bit fruity, but it wasn't wine, and it wasn't like any strong drink he had heard about. True enough, he had no experience whatsoever with alcohol, but that didn't mean that he couldn't tell a tasty thing when he tried one.

He put the cup down with a satisfied sigh. "Pepin, more," he said.

"Your Majesty," Pepin warned with both his voice and eyes. "One cup is enough."

"You're not my real mom." Kai bristled and even stuck his tongue out at the servant who stared at him nonplussed. "More."

"Did you borrow such manners from those barbarians who taught you how to talk smack, as well?" Galien asked and laughed in his face. "And I thought you disliked anything that could fog your mind. Be it an exquisite drink or," he paused for effect, "an exquisite man."

"Hey, my palace, my bottle. My servant," Kai added after a short pause. "Pepin, more. I don't want to hear a thing."

Pepin took his cup to fill it but not without throwing him a judgmental glance. Who did he think he was to stare at him like that? Yeah, he was pretty, beautiful even, and he made Kai's heart beat so fast when their eyes met, but...

What did he want to say again? Or think...

It didn't matter. Kai grabbed the cup and took a short sip. Well, those cups were really tiny, so he needed to make each one last. Maybe prolong the pleasant sensation on his tongue by savoring it. Hmm, he had drunk the first one so fast, but it was just because he hadn't been ready for such sensations.

Ah, it felt as if his heart had wings. He could even write a poem now, but what would it be about? He indulged in another sip.

"Pepin, can I write a poem about your eyes?"

"His Majesty appears to be in high spirits. I don't remember him ever being interested in creating poetry. Sir Conrad, what is your take on this?" Galien asked.

"Why would you ask me? I barely know His Majesty," Conrad replied.

All was starting to get a little foggy, but Kai could tell Conrad was pissed. Maybe he wanted a poem, too. "I could write one about your chest, too. Never seen one like it." He raised the cup to Conrad, who immediately exchanged a confused look with Galien. "I mean it. It's so... hard," he said and hiccupped.

Ah, maybe he didn't have a knack for poetry. He lacked the words and stuff.

"Pepin, I think it's time for His Majesty to call it a night. Will you see him to his quarters? I can entertain myself and Sir Conrad here present just fine."

Kai was in the mood to party now, and Galien was sending him to sleep. However, the moment he looked at Pepin, he found himself much in the mood for a trip to the royal quarters.

"We have a quite on the dot Prince Sendrian, here," the announcer said and gestured for Sebastian to walk over.

The crowd, especially the female side, erupted into shouts and applause as soon as he was on the stage. So far, the evening had gone smoothly, and it appeared that the audience was pleased with his performance impersonating Prince Sendrian. The only thing slightly irking him was Milo, or better said, his strange behavior. He hadn't said much, and Sebastian had had no time to ask him about it. It didn't matter; he was there on an important quest, which meant he had to have all his attention trained on the task at hand.

"And we also have a little surprise for you all," the announcer said.

Sebastian noticed another cosplayer walking on stage. His eyes grew wide as he recognized the clothes and overall appearance. The cosplayer was impersonating Huni, Prince Sendrian's love interest. He was a bit short for the role, but it was evident that he had put a lot of thought into representing the character to the best of his abilities. Huni had reminded him of Pepin the first time he had read the manga, but unlike Prince Sendrian, he didn't nurture any romantic feelings toward his servant. He didn't have feelings for anyone.

"It appears that we have two awesome cosplayers with us tonight," the announcer continued. "After seeing the others, we might be getting closer to a winner, right?"

The crowd cheered.

"Now, if the prince and his chosen would like to offer us a little moment..." The announcer wiggled her eyebrows and grinned.

The guy who cosplayed as Huni snickered and looked away.

"Hmm, it looks like Huni got his role down to a tee. He's too shy to take the initiative."

Ah, Sebastian had a feeling he knew what was expected of them, now that they happened to be both on stage. He walked over to where the other boy stood and wrapped one arm around his waist. The cosplayer stared at him wide-eyed as Sebastian tipped his chin and then kissed him.

The announcer dropped her microphone, and the entire building shook with the reactions of those present. There were cheering, hooting, and all kinds of noises. When Sebastian finally released Huni from the kiss, the other boy was in complete shock, his lips parted and his cheeks on fire. And his eyes were filled with adoration, as they had to be.

“Well,” he said as he turned toward the announcer, “I believe it is the time for you to announce the winner.”

The girl nodded while staring at him in a daze.

“It was, indeed, a lucrative choice,” Sebastian commented while placing the money from the prize inside his pocket.

They were out of The Pit and on their way back home. He would give Mrs. Martin the money, and hopefully, that would be enough until he found something more reliable than being on display for people to stare at him. Not that he wasn’t used to the attention, but to charge for it seemed somewhat not as honorable as fighting monsters and defending the land.

Milo was silent in a different way than before, which meant whatever was going on had to be addressed, no matter how much displeasure that caused Sebastian. Conversation was not necessarily his strongest suit, although he would never admit to it publicly.

“You’ve been quiet all evening,” he began. “What is it?”

“Do you really have to ask?” Milo sounded both angered and upset. “First, that thing with the cigarettes, and then, on stage --” He stopped abruptly.

“I wanted to see what smoking was all about,” Sebastian said.

“For real, Kai? After your dad...” Milo didn’t add anything else and shook his head.

Sebastian continued. “And, on stage, I believe that I only did what was expected of me. I delivered a performance.”

“A performance? Didn’t you think for one moment about me?”

“Why should I...” Sebastian stopped. Milo was jealous of that boy on stage, and he couldn’t understand why. He would have thought his boyfriend to be above such petty things. Apparently, that was not the case. “It appears that I did something inappropriate,” he said hesitantly. The last thing he needed right now was a scorned lover on his hands.

“Inappropriate?” Milo’s voice rose, but then he quickly reconsidered. “Could you stop with the act for a frigging moment? Just talk like you normally do.”

That was impossible, and Sebastian felt a bit like the ground wasn't firm under his feet.

"I thought it was cute that you kept on pretending to be someone else, as you do that all the time, but the last few days, you behaved so weirdly. Can't you be honest with me for a moment? You seem so... I don't know, changed." Milo's voice came off as tortured by unpleasant thoughts.

"What do you want me to be honest about?" Sebastian asked in a gruff voice.

Milo stopped, and they stared at each other in the faint streetlight. Sebastian could tell the young man was prey to conflicting emotions, as his face was scrunched up in thought, and he was obviously fighting himself to find the right words to say. "Do you like me? Actually like me?"

Was that all? He had the answer for that.

"Why did you kiss him? Was it just for show?" Milo continued.

Sebastian sighed. "I wouldn't have done it if I had known you'd be so affected by it. And I didn't... enjoy it, not for a moment. Not like when I kiss you." That was true. "I do like you, Milo Bennett."

I don't know you as your friend does, but I do like you.

Milo seemed slightly appeased by that, but his handsome face was still all a frown. "I said the words and I have no doubts, but you --"

Sebastian stopped him with a kiss. Milo's lips were unyielding under his, but only for a moment. He relaxed slowly, and Sebastian pushed gently against his defenses. "I wish you would like me, too," he whispered.

"What are you saying?" Milo asked with a small chuckle. "I'm like crazy about you, even more now that we're boyfriends. You're the one driving me crazy, okay? Like tonight. It can't be that healthy." Despite those words, he laughed.

He was like the weather, but most of the time fair, and Sebastian felt a slight ache growing inside his chest. Kai was lucky to have such a beautiful and good-natured man fall for him. He took Milo's lips again. The boy had gotten it all wrong. Sebastian was the one suffering from petty jealousies, and he should have had no place in his heart for them. They were beneath him, and he needed to quench them right away.

"I mean, as I told you, I've always liked you," Milo continued while wrapping his arms around him. "But now, it's like you're making me hot all over. I had no idea it would be like this."

Sebastian knew why, but it wasn't possible to reveal his true self. As far as curses went, he expected nothing less but some lightning from the sky to appear and strike him down as soon as he dared to say the words.

Since when was he a coward? He steeled himself. "Milo, you should know that I'm not --"

It was Milo's turn to shut him up with a kiss. "Let's not talk anymore. Do you really mean it that you didn't feel a thing when you kissed that guy? He was very pretty in his getup and all."

"He was?" Sebastian asked, slight dizziness gripping him as Milo began nuzzling his neck. "I didn't notice. It's only you I want to be with." Another truth, albeit a small one.

"You told your mom you'd be sleeping over, right?"

"Yes. I sent her a text. She said okay."

"Then I'm not going to wait another moment." Milo sounded determined as he grabbed his hand. "Let's do it, Kai."

"Do what?"

Milo leaned in and whispered, "You know, it. Me inside you." He bit Sebastian's ear playfully. "I want you to be mine tonight. And I, yours. Is it cheesy enough for you to say yes?"

"Yes," Sebastian replied in a hushed whisper.

He was a coward, after all.

Kai was resting most of his weight on Pepin, who was grinding his teeth by the sound of it as he struggled to move him along. "Ah, Pepin," he began, "did you know you have like the bluest, most beautiful eyes I've ever seen in a dude? Or a girl. Yeah, it's like there's no girl as pretty as you in the whole world." He gestured wildly with one arm, making both of them stagger.

Pepin huffed. "You drank that only to tease me now. And what serves to know that no girl, as you say, holds a candle to me? You're not interested in girls anyway."

"Ah, but there's no guy as pretty as you, either," Kai continued and giggled.

"You're not interested in pretty men, Prince Sebastian," Pepin retorted. "Handsome ones, yes, but pretty, no. Pretty is dull."

"Ah, you're jealous again," Kai said and wrapped both arms around Pepin, stopping him completely. "Why? I like you more than Conrad."

"Your Majesty, I must ask you to stop being cruel."

"I'm not, what are you saying?" Kai slurred the words. "And why are you so formal? We're alone."

“We’re in the hallway, and someone might see and hear us,” Pepin argued.

Kai nestled his head in the crook of his servant’s shoulder and inhaled. “You smell so nice.” He let out a reverent sigh. “I’m sure you taste nice, too, like if I started to lick you, you’d be like candy. Sweet all over.”

“Your Majesty, you’re heavy,” Pepin protested and struggled to push him to stand upright. “And please, I beg you. Stop teasing me.”

“I’m not,” Kai said with a snort. “I bet you don’t know how sweet you are. Although, you’re also a little spicy, too. Like when you get mad and puff out your cheeks. You look like a hedgehog. So cute.” He started laughing at that image.

“You know, it’s not at all like you to say things like these,” Pepin said.

Kai staggered to his feet, this time helping Pepin to keep him and move him toward his chambers. There was a sudden resolution forming in his mind about convincing Pepin that he was sweet by means of licking him if that was what it took.

Pepin managed to push him on the bed once inside. Good thing he only had a fluffy robe on, so undressing him was not that big a deal for Pepin. Kai pulled at the servant’s robe and made him land on top of him. As always, a thousand candles were lit, so he could tell Pepin’s eyes were shining, and his gorgeous lips were slightly parted.

“I don’t think you’re being yourself, Your Majesty,” Pepin whispered.

“News flash, Pepin. I’m not.” Kai broke into a fit of giggles but didn’t let go of the other. He enjoyed having that lean body so close to him. That robe was in the way, so he struggled to push it away from Pepin’s shoulders. His skin was so smooth. Hmm, he needed to take a bite to confirm. Sebastian’s manservant looked like he would taste like marshmallows. With that in mind, he sank his teeth into Pepin’s alabaster shoulder, making him gasp in surprise.

Kai began to lick where he had bitten. It wasn’t marshmallows or anything like that, but it still made his mouth water.

“Your Majesty.” Pepin’s voice was now a tiny bit alarmed.

“What? Isn’t this what you want? You keep pestering me about taking Conrad’s place. Consider this an interview and let me lick you.”

He returned to the task with more determination than earlier. Maybe Pepin tasted differently in different parts of his body. Next came the elegant neck. After a short debate of whether he should bite first or not, he decided that he could just grab a bit with his mouth and suck. Pepin’s breath came in short, and then a tiny moan followed.

Kai straightened up. "You're even sweeter here!" he exclaimed. He turned the tables and moved Pepin until he caught him under his body.

The blond hair usually brushed close to the head was now tousled, and a few strands were spread around. Pepin's face was flushed, and his lips were moist, curved in a silent plea.

"Do you want to hear a golden little truth, Pepin?" Kai asked.

"I... do," the servant replied breathlessly.

"Prince Sebastian is a total dick for not wanting to marry you."

There, he had said it. For any guy into dudes, Pepin was like the ultimate catch. He was beautiful, loyal, and cooked heavenly. Plus, he could save dragon eggs, and how many people knew that? Well, he had a mind of his own, and he spoke it when he saw fit, but for Kai, who wasn't some arrogant royal ass, that was a plus, not a drawback.

His attention was grabbed by Pepin's rosy nipples. He had been wondering about them while in the bath, so now was his chance to see how they tasted. Pepin gasped again as Kai attacked one of them and began sucking on it. "Sebastian, if you keep doing that, I'll... I'll..."

"Hold that thought," Kai said and adjusted his position so that he could lick on the hard pebbles as much as he wanted. He could tell there was something funny poking at his belly in that position, but he could live with it to stave off his curiosity. "Not like strawberries, but close," he stated. "But those were your lips." He moved upward and caught Pepin's lips between his.

Oh, those were the sweetest part. Kai climbed on top of the other so that they could taste each other properly. It was for research purposes, although he couldn't precisely say what kind of research that was.

Pepin wrapped himself completely around him.

"Dude," Kai exclaimed and pulled back a little, "our dicks are touching!"

Pepin tried to pull him back into the kiss. "Yes, and it feels nice."

"Yeah, but it's gay, right? Or not, since we're, like, friends?"

Pepin stopped. Kai really needed confirmation. "What do you mean? Gay like in jolly?"

Kai began snickering. "All right, so I'm not gay, I think, but this is pretty gay."

"Whatever you say, Your Majesty," Pepin said and wrapped his arms tightly around him.

Kai moved one hand between them and touched Pepin's cock. Just like the rest of the guy, it was smooth and nice. He pressed his finger against the head and then pushed it against Pepin's belly.

When he released it, it bounced back, making him laugh. “Do you know what else would be totally gay?”

“I have no idea,” Pepin replied and squirmed as Kai continued to examine his cock and play with it.

“For me to taste you here, too.”

“Taste me where? Sebastian!”

Whatever, in this world, he could do whatever the hell he wanted. Kai moved lower until his face was on the same level as Pepin’s pretty cock. It looked even tastier from up close, with that head rosier than the rest and a small bead of moisture trapped in its tiny eye. Kai grabbed it and pressed his tongue directly in the small opening.

Pepin moaned loudly and pressed the back of his hand against his mouth.

“Does it hurt or something?” Kai asked.

“No, please, just... be gentle,” Pepin pleaded and squirmed.

His chest was going up and down rapidly. Sure, Kai could be gentle, and he just wanted a little taste. “It’s like a lollipop,” he decided as he lapped at the hard thing from all angles. He was making a lot of noise while at it, but he couldn’t help it. “And it’s pretty tasty. Have you ever tasted your cock, Pepin? Of course not, I don’t think it’s possible. But did you put some guy’s dick in your mouth?”

“No, surely not!” Pepin protested.

Kai was keeping the servant’s hips pinned to the bed so that he could have his way with his delicious lollipop. “Do you want to taste mine? I’m curious what it tastes like.”

Pepin straightened up and caught Kai’s face in his hands. They stared at each other for a couple of moments that felt like a long time. Not that he minded. Looking into Pepin’s eyes was all he wanted to do right now. Okay, maybe not all, as his lips and tongue were tingling, ready to get back to taste the lollipop.

“Are you sure?” Pepin’s blue eyes were so intense Kai wanted to drown in them.

“Totally. Plus, I think it must be pleasant. Nobody had their mouth down there. Or touched me there or whatever.” The thought made him giggle.

Pepin frowned slightly. “You know that’s a lie, and that I know it, too.”

Ah, right. He was the prince, and the prince was him. Damn, what a complicated situation. Was Prince Sebastian tasting Milo's lollipop right now? Poor Milo probably had his mind blown away since the prince had to be an absolute expert in tasting man-candy like that.

"Well, I don't feel like Prince Sebastian right now at all," Kai admitted.

Pepin blinked, but then he kissed him, and Kai forgot about how he needed to offer an explanation for something like that. Most probably, Pepin wouldn't believe him at first... but that was something for another time.

Pepin had managed to make him climb on the bed again and straddled his chest. As soon as the tasty lollipop was presented to him and he felt something hot and moist on his own cock, he didn't think of anything at all.

"How is it, Pepin? Is it sweet like yours, or spicy, or something? I hope it's not gross, though."

"It's... absolutely heaven," Pepin moaned as his mouth got busy. "I'm sorry I don't have any experience. It's only because you wouldn't let me..." He stopped as Kai engulfed his cock in his mouth.

"Let's not talk with our mouths full," Kai decided as he took a short break. "It's not polite, people say."

By how enthusiastically Pepin took to tasting him again, clumsily, but endearingly, he could only gather that the servant agreed with him. Right now, he couldn't tell which felt nicer, having his dick licked and sucked by eager soft lips and a daring tongue that lavished it with attention, or sucking on that delectable lollipop.

What he knew for sure was that something was happening. Pepin's smooth hand was working on his balls and cock, helping the mouth with added pressure, and there was a buildup of pleasure threatening to become unbearable.

There was also this thing that made him believe that there was an endgame to all that. He was giddy from the alcohol and tasting Pepin so much, but he could tell that there was something more he needed to do with the thing in his mouth.

Pepin's mouth was now moving on his dick up and down at a steady rhythm. Then he remembered what should follow, not because of experience, but because he simply knew, and it was too late.

He heard Pepin making a slight sound of surprise, but to apologize, he needed to pull the guy's cock out of his mouth, which he didn't want to do. Pepin stilled and remained unmoving, and then Kai felt something viscous coating his tongue. Hmm, that wasn't bad, either. Was it like whipped cream or something like that?

Not really, but it was nice, he decided and held Pepin by the hips until he swallowed everything.

Moments later, a very sweaty Pepin lay by his side. Kai looked at his profile, taking in the pouty lips and how moist they were. He touched them with his fingers. “You have the most beautiful mouth, too,” he said.

Pepin closed his eyes. “Your Majesty, what did we just do?”

Kai felt suddenly embarrassed as the magnitude of what he had just done hit him. No matter how he looked at it, it had been pretty crazy. And pretty gay. “Um, we traded lollipops?” he said hesitantly. If Pepin ever found out he wasn’t the prince, he would never forgive him.

“We did?” Pepin asked, too. “Did you ever... I mean, with other men...”

“No way. You’re my first lollipop.”

Probably the last, too.

Yeah, most probably.

I shouldn’t drink. Ever again.

He turned on one side, away from Pepin. Why did he have to feel so ashamed right now? Couldn’t it wait till morning? That was a weird drink. “What was that thing we drank tonight?” he asked.

Pepin moved and came back with a blanket which he wrapped gently around Kai. “It’s made from the berries that grow only on Mount Waperose. It’s like a truth potion. But you know all that, right?”

“Yeah, right,” Kai said, suddenly aware of an imperious need for self-preservation.

“Prince Sebastian knows all these things, of course,” Pepin said.

“Yeah, totally,” Kai hurried to confirm.

“I’ll sleep with you,” Pepin decided and glued to his back from behind. “And don’t tell me I’m suffocating you. I know I’m not.”

What else did Pepin know? Kai wondered for a moment, but his eyelids grew heavy, and soon, he was far away in a land of dreams.

Chapter Sixteen – Cousin Dearest

When Milo flicked open the lights in his bedroom, Sebastian closed his eyes. He was annoyed, and rightfully so. Due to some silly curse, he was in the unfathomable position to play the role of a different person, someone who was as remote from him as anyone could be. What made matters worse was his growing attraction toward this young man. Usually, he would have taken everything he wanted from someone who was infatuated with him.

But Milo wasn't infatuated with him, Prince Sebastian, protector of Ifigia. No, he was smitten and head over heels with his friend, Kai, and Sebastian couldn't stand the idea.

He was suddenly weak, and it was all because of the damned fascination he appeared to have developed concerning Milo. The boy shouldn't have elicited such a strong interest in him by any means. Sebastian had had princes, knights, and high-born nobles in his bed. All of a sudden, he appeared to have lost his coolness when it came to such matters.

It was annoying to the point of being unbearable.

"Are you getting cold feet?" Milo came from behind and began rubbing his shoulders slowly.

"My feet are perfectly fine," Sebastian replied in a cutting tone.

Milo stopped. "You are," he said with a tinge of reproach. "You're bailing out on me."

Sebastian wished his vocabulary would have been extensive enough to understand this funny way of talking. But he could quickly glean where the source of Milo's disappointment lay.

"I'm not who you think I am," Sebastian said and turned to face the other.

Milo caressed his hair slowly, pushing it behind the ears. Sebastian winced and wanted to recoil from that gentle touch.

"Things change, right?" Milo asked, his voice a little sad now. "I mean, it was quite the leap of faith for me to confess. I told myself that I wouldn't want to lose you as a friend, but the cat is out of the bag, right?"

"The cat is completely out of the bag." That had to be an expression about how lately, Kai had been acting a bit like a person not exactly in his right mind, Sebastian thought. As self-assured as he had always been in his role as a royal, this strange new world was changing everything he knew about his own self.

Right now, he wanted to lie, to tell Milo what he wanted to hear, only to feel the boy's calloused hands on his skin, touching him everywhere.

Prince Sebastian wasn't a liar, and this wasn't a change he would embrace. "Milo," he said firmly, "I'm not your friend Kai."

Milo smiled and kissed him softly. “We’ll take it easy, don’t worry. And we can just make out.”

“You’re not listening,” Sebastian insisted. It was getting progressively difficult to keep his head on his shoulders when he was being kissed gently like that. Milo was close, and the scent of his skin was maddening. They were both a bit sweaty after spending an entire evening at The Pit, and Sebastian appreciated being able to inhale Milo’s natural smell.

It was just one of the little things that made him weak to the knees whenever a handsome young man was in his presence.

“I’m listening,” Milo protested, but he giggled, making Sebastian feel the tiny hairs on his nape rise.

“I am Prince Sebastian of Ifigia, and I’m here because of a strange curse,” he continued while digging his nails into his palms and enduring Milo’s gentle assault with increasing difficulty.

“All right. What would you like to do, Prince Sebastian? Wasn’t it Sendrian, though?” Milo’s handsome face scrunched up in thought.

“No, I’m not talking about the prince from that book,” Sebastian explained. “I’m real, not a fictional character.”

Milo smiled and brushed his lips ever so slowly across Sebastian’s mouth, pouring heat into his veins. “I can tell. Do you want me to call you Your Majesty? Will that get me into your pants?” He snickered like the naughty boy he was.

“I have a feeling you believe I’m speaking in jest.” Sebastian put his hands against Milo’s chest.

His fingers moved by themselves. His weakness was getting the better of him, and he began caressing the other through the fabric of his t-shirt.

“No, no, I totally get it,” Milo protested, but he grinned as he snuck one hand under Sebastian’s t-shirt and pinched one nipple hard. “I’ll call you what you want.”

Sebastian hissed as Milo continued to attack both his nipples now. As the prince of the realm, he had always conducted matters of such a nature as the one in charge. Without a doubt, his lovers could only treat him so roughly only when he commanded it. To have it done to him without his being the one to order it was unthinkable.

And yet, so arousing, to the point that he felt turning weak in Milo’s arms.

“You brought this on yourself,” Sebastian huffed and grabbed Milo by the front of his t-shirt. “I am not to be held responsible for what will follow.”

Disobedient green eyes challenged him. “Oh, yeah?” The alluring mouth talked, so Sebastian was left with no other way to make it stop but to kiss it to perdition.

Even so, he knew he would be responsible for all eternity for stealing this young man's affection when he wasn't in the least entitled to it, and he was sneaking inside his heart like a thief.

"I want to kiss you all over, Your Majesty," Milo said, his beautiful lips curled in a mischievous smile. "Is that all right?"

Sebastian pushed him against the bed and climbed on top of him. From his vantage point, he stared down Milo, hoping he would at least have a modicum of his imposing presence while in Kai's puny body. But Milo looked not at all impressed, and instead of cowering under Prince Sebastian's well-known cool gaze, he bit his bottom lip and stared back with unhidden want in his green eyes. "I don't mind if you want to take the lead. Maybe you've watched more tutorials than me," he said with a small, embarrassed chuckle.

He was just that fine combination between someone with no experience whatsoever and one ruled by desire. Sebastian groaned as he leaned in and took Milo's mouth. He didn't hold back this time; he didn't consider it a necessity anymore to play the role of shy, inexperienced Kai.

Milo didn't believe him and treated everything as if it were a joke. Sebastian wanted nothing but to exact the proper punishment. He felt the other squirm under him as he used everything he knew about kissing a man and arousing him to no end. With one hand wrapped firmly along Milo's jaw, he conducted his sensual assault by tasting to the fullest the naughty mouth that fascinated him so much.

Milo moaned prettily as Sebastian found his way inside, teasing him with his tongue over and over until his soft grunts turned urgent with growing desire. When he finally let go of him, Milo was panting and staring at him in awe. "Is this how we're going to make out? I don't think I'll last five minutes."

Sebastian dismounted Milo and went for the prize. The other didn't utter one word of protest as he was freed from his trousers and undergarments, left naked save for the t-shirt covering his upper body.

Maybe it would be a night for firsts, after all, Sebastian decided, the rush of a new feeling coursing through his veins. He was the one to be pleased, he had always been that, but right now, Milo deserved better, no matter how playful his gaze was and how he didn't believe a word Sebastian was saying.

"Oh, wow, oh," Milo stuttered as Sebastian made a move.

His lips were wrapped around the engorged head, and the sudden taste on his tongue stopped him. The rules of his life were simple. Never indulge too much in desire or its fulfillment. Of course, he had rarely obeyed it, if ever, when it came to men, but there had been boundaries he hadn't crossed.

Until now. Milo was correct in his assumption that Sebastian had spent some valuable time perusing videos aimed at showing in detail what went on between two men when naked and driven by the same want for one another. He moved his mouth together with his hand ever so slowly, not knowing if he was doing it right.

Never before had he felt so vulnerable in front of another. And Milo didn't know of it, couldn't know, for the simple fact that the truth was impossible to believe.

He moved so that he ended on his knees, in front of the bed, between Milo's legs. It was easier like this, he convinced himself, as his own desire guided him on how to move and make it better for the man he was kneeling for.

It was a strange sort of atonement, he fought his addled mind urging him to rush. Then Milo's hands rested on his head and began caressing his hair. "I can't believe it," he whispered, "you're... you're sucking me..."

Sebastian didn't need a crude explanation of what he was doing at the moment. But Milo's low and ragged voice, the wonder in it at being tasted in that manner, were enough to make him go further.

He almost regretted never indulging before in such practices with other men. No, it wasn't regret he was feeling, but the complete opposite. He was strangely elated for experiencing such a thing for the first time, for being the one to kneel, something unheard of, something unfathomable for someone like him.

"You're too good, you're so good," Milo breathed out. "Don't stop, please, you're killing me."

Sebastian knew that Milo didn't mean that. He understood the soft plea, and it was his sole intention to make the young man surrender to him completely. All this time, he couldn't understand the power the handsome men that had passed through his life had had on him. But now he did.

"Ngh, no, too much," Milo keened, "just... I think I'm going to... Kai!" he shouted with sudden urgency.

Sebastian moved his hand faster. Those pleas were meant to stimulate him to keep going, but he was still taken by surprise when Milo stilled, only that part of his body twitching and pulsing. He knew what was in his mouth, but what was harder to believe was that he didn't mind it at all.

No, on the contrary, it was his reward.

Moments later, when he got to his feet and licked his lips, only that sentiment of fulfillment remained.

Until he looked at Milo. He had one arm thrown over his face, and his skin was flushed. “If you want to kick me in the nut sack, just do it,” he mumbled.

“Why would I do that?” Sebastian asked, rightfully puzzled.

Milo let his arm drop and threw Sebastian a look that belonged to a kicked puppy, not a handsome young man like him. “I came in your... argh, I can’t believe I did it! I’m such a jerk!” He suddenly jumped to his feet, his face all crimson. “Should I get you something? A glass of water? Juice? Mouthwash?”

Sebastian grimaced. Of all the inventions ever-present in this strange world, he found mouthwash to be unusable and downright disgusting.

Milo must have interpreted his expression for something else because his face fell. “It’s yucky, right? I’m so sorry!” He ran his hands through his hair, and then he kneeled suddenly. He brought his hands in front, clasping them together. “Please, please, forgive me for being such a huge jerk.”

It wasn’t that Sebastian didn’t enjoy watching that beautiful man at his feet, but he didn’t have to feel so troubled. He touched his lips and then licked them. “I have nothing to forgive. I must say that I wasn’t expecting it to be so palatable.”

Milo’s face went through a formidable transformation. He got to his feet and caught Sebastian’s face between his palms. Then he kissed him hard and quick. “You’re the best boyfriend ever, you know that, right?”

“Of course,” Sebastian replied, giddy at the praise and annoyed for feeling so at the same time.

Milo chuckled and rubbed their noses together. “That means it’s my turn.”

Sebastian caught him before he would kneel. “No, that won’t be necessary. I’m rather tired.”

He was lying through his teeth. He knew at least one part of his body that didn’t agree at all with him.

Milo appeared disappointed. “Are you sure? I want us to be, you know, reciprocal and stuff.”

But that was something Sebastian couldn’t allow. For the first time in his life, he realized that he had first to give to earn the right to receive.

His tongue was weighing a ton, or so it felt, and his head was pounding. Kai extracted himself from the bed and Pepin’s embrace with the only thought of hitting the bathroom and deal with whatever he had to deal with to get rid of those unpleasant sensations.

“I’ll never drink again,” he promised himself. What the hell had he been thinking, taking to the bottle like that? What if he became an alcoholic? He would be a sad drunk, he was sure.

Suddenly, the memory of what had happened after drinking that delicious liquor hit him with the power of a freight train. No, he wouldn’t be a sad drunk, but a pretty gay one. For some reason, he had taken a trip to the wild side the night before, and he could only blame it on the drinking. And with Pepin, of all people!

Pepin was supposed to be off-limits. He was his best friend in this world, and people didn’t just go around sucking off their best friends, right? Conrad would have been a different matter since he was the concubine, but –

What the hell was he thinking right now? All right, so it was a disaster, and he needed to deal with it, somehow. He half-turned and looked at Pepin, who was still sleeping. The beautiful face looked serene, and most probably, the servant didn’t believe that what had happened last night was a disaster, like he thought.

No, Pepin was in love with Sebastian, and Kai had managed to make a mess out of it. Now, of course, Pepin would expect things to evolve between them. It had been, probably, just casual sex, not that Kai had any idea about any kind of sex, as he was yet to have some.

Only that he had had some; the realization struck him and kept him paralyzed there, staring at Pepin. One look at those rosy lips and he could recall everything in the tiniest detail, how soft they had been on his... the-thing-he-wouldn’t-think-of-right-now.

Kai pushed his hands through his hair and winced at how tangled it was. Pepin was the guy in charge of brushing his hair, so as soon as he learned that they had had nothing but casual sex, he would most probably use his comb to make sure there was no hair left on His Majesty’s head.

Therefore, he needed to embrace life as a bald guy. But would Pepin stop at that? Kai began to ponder over what the ruthless fate – that he had pretty much laid down for himself – had in store for him. He would have to give Pepin satisfaction somehow, once for the simple fact that Kai would have to get back into Sebastian’s shoes and act like an unfeeling prick, and second because he had stolen the servant’s first sexual experience. And third, of course, for fooling him into thinking he was Sebastian, which might have made Pepin feel like in heaven last night.

Kai began pulling at his hair. At that pace, Pepin might not have to take his vengeful comb at him and leave him bald. He was doing a pretty good job, as things were.

“What am I going to do?” he moaned.

Pepin stirred in his sleep, and Kai panicked in the blink of an eye. If those blue eyes opened and looked at him filled with love, he could only hope that the earth would open underneath his feet and swallow him. He didn’t even ask to be spit on the other side in his real world. He deserved to

be punished for his stupid actions from last night. And he could never face Pepin again, not in this life.

Maybe a good idea was to lock himself in the bathroom forever. He would conduct the courtly duties by having his orders shouted through the door. They could carve a tiny opening and slide a tray of food at convenient times... But how would he go about fighting dragons and such if he remained locked in there?

“Your Majesty,” Pepin called sleepily, “is it morning already?”

No more time left to think. Kai panicked for real. The blue eyes were staring at him, exactly like he had expected. “Yes, and you’re still in bed,” he said in an obnoxious tone.

Pepin frowned slightly. “I’ll tend to you right away.”

Kai put one hand up. “No need. I’ll brush my hair alone. And do all the other things by myself. You can sleep some more if you want. You totally got wasted last night.” He winced as he said the words.

Good going, Kai, blame it on him.

The blue eyes blinked. “I remember clearly that you were the one barely keeping on two feet. I had to carry you here.”

Ah, damn, Pepin wouldn’t fold down like a good old towel. Of course not, he was no doormat and no towel, either.

“You did? Maybe you did,” Kai said while pretending to be thinking hard, “as I can’t recall a single thing. The last thing I remember is drinking that thing. And then that I woke up in my bed, like five minutes ago.”

Pepin frowned and straightened up. He looked amazing, even with bed hair and burning eyes. Kai hoped he wouldn’t get out of the bed to confront him, or he might break into a naked run around the castle only to escape the guy’s rightful retribution.

“You... don’t remember a thing? From last night?” Pepin asked quietly and gathered the blanket around his naked body.

Why was he covering himself? It wasn’t like Kai was ogling him or anything, right?

No, he was totally ogling him. Pepin had to feel weird because of that.

“I like totally blacked out,” Kai said, trying to sound credible. To his ears, he was practically screaming himself a liar. “What? Did something happen? Something I should know?”

Too bad he could sound like an arrogant prick so easily while in Sebastian's body. Pepin recoiled at his words. He got out of bed and began dressing up. "I'll be with you in a minute, Your Majesty."

"Hey, you don't have to call me 'Your Majesty' every single moment. And we're alone," Kai insisted.

Pepin straightened up his waistcoat and brushed his hair with his fingers. Then he gave Kai a look that could freeze water at the equator. "I do have to call you that, given that you pretend you don't remember what happened between us last night. Just so you know, a dismissal on the grounds that you like Conrad better or that you simply don't care about me would have been more honest."

Kai opened his mouth to say something in his defense, but nothing came out.

"But you are my lord and master," Pepin continued, "so I should be content with the small glimpse of happiness you spared for me last night."

Kai rubbed the back of his head. He was totally lost about what he was supposed to do. A sort of gut instinct – it had to be related to the digestive system since it came from the stomach somewhere – pushed him to walk over to Pepin, take him in his arms, and beg to be forgiven.

But he still had that other instinct that catered to self-preservation advising him against it.

"I... have no idea what you're talking about," he said with half a mouth.

Pepin didn't move his eyes away, keeping him under that scrutiny for a little more. "And I don't know you anymore. For some reason, you chose to act differently last night and now you're taking it all back. I'll always serve you, Your Majesty, but I cannot promise that I'll continue to love you the way I've done so far."

To his surprise, Pepin walked stiffly out of the room.

"Hey, weren't you supposed to tend to me..." Kai called meekly.

He hurried after him but stopped by the door. He could swear he had heard a small sob followed by running steps.

With incredible difficulty, he managed to brush his hair without pulling it all out of its roots and dress up. What was he going to do with Pepin? The guy was mad at him and for all the right reasons. The last thing the servant needed in his life was to have casual sex – even if it had only been oral – with the dude he'd been crushing on for years. Kai pinched the bridge of his nose and sniffled. He felt awful, and he didn't know what to do to correct what he had done to Pepin

without blurting out who he really was. Would he be burned at stake? Tied to four horses and then smacked on the butt? The horses, not him. Disemboweled, maybe? He had no idea what kind of punishment awaited him for impersonating someone as important as Prince Sebastian.

A knock on the door startled him. If it was Pepin, he needed to find a way to apologize without risking losing his head in the most literal sense of the words. He rushed to the doors and opened them wide, only to find himself face to face with Galien.

The duke was just as startled seeing him, which was weird since he must have known on whose door he had just knocked. “Sebastian, what is the matter?” Galien pushed him inside and closed the doors behind them. “First thing in the morning a red-eyed Pepin comes to wake me up, and now, you... are you crying?”

“I’m not crying,” Kai protested and sniffled again.

“What happened with you two?” Galien insisted.

No longer able to keep it in, Kai threw himself at his so-called cousin. He wrapped his arms around his shoulders and buried his head in the crook of a strong shoulder. “We traded lollipops and now Pepin won’t talk to me anymore!” This time, he started crying for real.

Galien patted him on the back, hesitantly at first but then more forcefully. “By Gods, you throw me off my feet, Sebastian. What is this lollipop trading you’re talking about? Come on, be a good boy and stop crying. As your cousin, I’m here to help you, but first I must understand what went on between the two of you.”

Great. Now Galien would start suspecting him even more, but Kai had no idea who to turn to. Conrad hadn’t come to the royal chambers last night, and it wasn’t like he could talk to his concubine about something involving another man. Even with his lack of experience in sex and romance, he could tell that something like that wouldn’t be well received at all.

The duke pushed him toward the bed, and they both sat. Galien pulled an exquisite handkerchief out of his pocket and offered it to Kai, who took it and blew his nose in it. He made an attempt to give it back, but he was met with an amused and slightly perplexed look. “You can keep it,” Galien said.

“But that means we’ll get into a fight,” Kai argued. “I’ll wash it and give it back.”

“Of course. Now, please tell me what happened after you two left.”

It would be embarrassing like hell, but Galien was famous, according to Conrad, for his gallant affairs, so he had to know a few things about how to deal with someone you had traded lollipops with.

Kai twiddled his thumbs and looked down. “We were both pretty wasted. I mean, I was,” he admitted.

Galien chuckled. “I was surprised to see you drink so fast. And amusing.”

Kai glared. “Are you going to laugh at me?”

“No, far from me.”

Galien wasn't to be trusted by how his lips twitched, but he was the closest thing to someone he could talk to, so Kai had to live with it.

“My lips and tongue were, like, tingling,” Kai continued as Galien nudged him. “I had this idea that Pepin must be sweet. You know, all over.” He gestured at his body and insisted on his midsection.

Galien quirked an eyebrow. “Fascinating. Please, do go on.”

Kai shook his head and blew his nose some more. “So... I tasted his lollipop. And he tasted mine,” he added quickly. He had no idea how to explain it without feeling like his head would burst from too much embarrassment.

“And by lollipop, you mean...” Galien made a small gesture toward Kai's body that left out any guessing work.

“Yeah,” Kai said and hunched his shoulders.

He sighed when Galien started to laugh. “You said you wouldn't laugh,” he mumbled.

“I am so terribly sorry,” Galien replied and chuckled some more. “I just find it hard to imagine the proud and powerful Prince Sebastian choosing to indulge in such delights. I thought you were the type who preferred to be, well, let's say, the one to receive.”

Kai pouted. “You're just making fun of me.”

Galien took him by the shoulders. “It is a bit amusing, but I won't laugh at you anymore. So, you and Pepin discovered the pleasure of getting acquainted in a more intimate manner.”

“You don't find it weird?” Kai asked. Probably not, Galien was a seducer, as he had said before.

“What? Indulging in tasting a man's most precious possession? I am quite particular and fond of the practice myself,” Galien admitted promptly.

Kai covered his ears. “That's a bit too much info!”

Galien pulled his arms down. “You want my advice, do you not? I am your cousin dearest, after all.”

Kai nodded.

“So, first thing first,” Galien began, “what seems to be the problem? Don’t tell me your performance was subpar. I could give you lessons if you so desire.”

“No!” Kai protested, absolutely terrified by the idea. “And I didn’t suck... I mean, I did, but I guess not in a bad way since Pepin came...” He choked on his own words.

“Pepin came...” Galien encouraged him.

Kai couldn’t say the words. He wouldn’t live through it. So he just opened his mouth and pointed at it. “You know, down the hatch.”

Galien covered his lips and rubbed against them hard with his knuckles. Kai could tell cousin dearest had a hard time keeping from laughing. So he turned his back at him and then threw himself on the bed, hugging a pillow and hiding his face in it. “You’re laughing at me! I hate you!”

“Now, now,” Galien patted his back, “don’t be like this. Just tell your cousin why both you and Pepin have been crying if it was so good between you two?”

Kai sighed one time long and hard. “It’s complicated.”

Chapter Seventeen – Loving Someone Else

“You say that you got cold feet and denied it all.” Galien patted his lips with his index finger with a pensive expression on his handsome face. “Indeed, I can see why Pepin is upset. But you, Sebastian, why are you so distraught? Cold feet come natural to you.”

“Is this some kind of ice joke? Because it sucks.”

“Just like you,” Galien said airily.

What a smartass.

Kai pursed his lips and punched his cousin in the shoulder. Suddenly, the duke was no longer laughing. “How am I going to fix it? I don’t want Pepin to be mad at me. He’s making all the food I eat, you know? He could like poison me and such. And I wouldn’t blame him for one moment.”

Galien sighed and smiled. “Pepin would never do such a thing. Let me let you in a little secret, Sebastian. No one ever resists me. I’ve built quite the reputation for myself, and I’m rightfully proud of it. So Pepin’s constant refusal to fall into my arms, I have to admit, it still stings.”

“What are you saying?” Kai looked at Galien with hopeful eyes.

His cousin gave him a slightly troubled look. “I am afraid I will give you too much power with what I will say next. You see, these are the methods of a rake, which I am, but you are nothing like that. Everything is black and white with you. When you send a lover away, it’s forever. Which also makes me believe that if you ever fall in love, it will be forever, as well. I can only pray that the man who’ll be so lucky to earn your affection will respond in kind, or else, you will be condemned to a life of unhappiness.”

“Will it help me? Fix things with Pepin?”

“Yes and no. Pepin loves you, Sebastian. He has loved you always, and he will continue to do so to the day he dies. Regardless of what he might tell you now, he will get over it.”

“So, you say that he won’t be upset anymore?”

“In his heart, he will be. But in his continuous and unfaltering adoration for you, he won’t show it to you. So, look inside your heart of ice and convince yourself of that. You won’t lose Pepin if that’s what you’re afraid of. If I, the famous rake of Kelonia, failed to change his mind while he knows for sure that you can never love him the way he does love you, then no one will.”

“Does it mean that I should... just continue like before? Business as usual?” Kai asked.

Galien nodded. “Can I please ask something of you, nonetheless?”

“Yeah, sure.”

“Don’t hurt Pepin more than necessary. Even you, as unfeeling as you are, must know it that his young heart, no matter how brave, can get scarred. You wouldn’t want to do that to him, right?”

Kai shook his head. “No, I like him. He’s my best friend, and I don’t want him to suffer because of me. But why did you say that knowing all these would give me power? That would make me turn into a rake like you or something?”

“When a rake knows that he’s loved, no matter what, he cannot help but continue to take and take from that person,” Galien said.

“That sounds bad. But you’re not bad,” Kai said with determination. “I don’t think you’re a rake, like people say.”

Galien shot him a surprised look. “Don’t let others hear you say that, dear cousin. My reputation is at stake. And I’ve changed as well during the last three years we haven’t kept in contact.”

Kai smiled and wiped his eyes. “I’m sure you’re not a rake, because you said that only Pepin has ever refused you. I also saw Conrad giving you the boot.”

Galien smirked and brushed a rebellious strand off his forehead, which stubbornly came back. “Hmm, I beg to differ. I had a chance to test what made you take Sir Conrad to your bed. Only a tiny bit,” he explained by offering a measuring of sorts with his thumb and forefinger, “since I respect you so much.”

“You? And Conrad? What did you do?”

His reaction was quickly misinterpreted. “I won’t tell you a thing. It’s not my place to cause jealousies. Not here, at your court, at least.”

I’m not jealous, only curious, Kai wanted to say, but Galien was already on his feet, probably keen on getting out of there and seeing about other things, much more entertaining than having to comfort a coward.

“I will apologize to Pepin,” he said loudly.

Galien turned on his feet, and his eyes narrowed for a moment. “Prince Sebastian never apologizes. Not even to a goddess,” he added enigmatically, and with that, he left the room.

Kai scratched his head. Galien’s advice was probably good, but he cared about Pepin and his feelings. So he would do what Prince Sebastian never did. He would apologize and something more. While he wouldn’t follow Galien’s words to the letter, they served to make him realize something of great importance. Yes, now he knew exactly what he would tell Pepin.

He walked throughout the castle and had to ask at least a dozen people or so if they had seen Pepin until a stable boy pointed him in the right direction. It wasn't unexpected that the servant, as heartbroken as he must have been, had chosen a secluded place to lick his wounds. Kai ignored his grumbling stomach. Since Pepin hadn't come around with breakfast, he had had nothing to eat, but that served him right. If only his suffering of hunger could have repaid Pepin for the terrible thing Kai did to him, that would have been great. Kai was sure he could go on without eating for a long time with a little bit of willpower.

He found Pepin on a bench in the large garden attached to the castle. The blond head hung low, and his hands were gathered in his lap. Kai cleared his throat, and Pepin raised his head. He quickly dabbed at his eyes and stood.

"Sit down, Pepin," Kai said and took place by his side. "I'm sorry for being such a huge jerk."

Pepin stilled, and then he stared at Kai. He didn't dare to look, but he could feel those beautiful blue eyes inspecting him, their owner most probably in shock upon hearing the mighty Prince Sebastian apologizing. As the silence stretched, he began to feel increasingly uncomfortable. "You're not saying anything. Why?"

"I don't know what to say," Pepin replied, his voice honest and direct.

Kai sighed and moved his head from one side to another. "I suppose you're right. Look, I was a major asshole this morning. I mean, I remember everything." He squeezed his eyes tightly. Only the ice magic running through Sebastian's veins kept his cheeks from burning like on fire.

"And you regret it," Pepin supplied when he didn't add anything to that.

Did he regret it? Kai frowned and started to think for once in his life. Not really. It had been pleasant; heck, it had been amazing. Not that it made things right toward Pepin or anything, but he was there because he wanted to be as honest as he could without revealing his true identity. "I don't," he said back.

"You don't? But then... I mean, Sebastian, what do you want?" Pepin asked, and this time, he sounded hurt.

"What I want is..." Kai said slowly, searching for the right words, "that you start loving someone else. You know, some guy who truly deserves it." He felt like an extra in a chick flick, giving life advice to the main character.

Pepin made a strange sound, and Kai turned toward him, alarmed. He expected to see the servant in tears, so he was in utter shock to see that he was actually laughing, although he was covering his face. "O. M. G.! Did I break you or something? What's so funny?"

Pepin uncovered his face. His eyes shone with unshed tears, but he was smiling. He was beautiful like that, and Kai wanted to caress his face and pinch his cheek, not sure in which order.

“You’re funny,” Pepin retorted. “How could I love someone else when you’re here, apologizing and saying such crazy things?”

“I’m not sure I follow your logic,” Kai said. “I’m a complete asshole. First, my mother gives you to me like you’re some kind of object, not a human being, and you’re practically sent into slavery since you’re five. Then she tells you you’re supposed to be with me forever, and you have no choice but to obey her since I bet she’s pretty scary if looking at this face,” he pointed at himself, “is any indication. Then you believe yourself in love with me, again, because it’s not like you have a choice. And then I go and mess with your head because I’m a gay drunk --”

Pepin stopped him with a kiss.

“No, no, no, Pepin, bad boy!” Kai said, too astonished to find something smarter to say and to try to pull away.

Pepin snickered. “Whatever you use on Conrad, don’t try it on me. It won’t work.”

“I see. I need to find something else, then. But seriously, wasn’t I enough of a jerk toward you all your life?”

Pepin’s smile turned secretive like the servant was privy of something he didn’t care to share with the world. “Not recently. I’m more in love with you now. Actually, I’m in love with this new Sebastian. Don’t ever turn back to being the old one, all right?”

With that, the servant stood and walked away, without one look back. His shoulders were square, and he had a spring in his step.

“That worked all wrong,” Kai said to himself with a sigh.

Several minutes must have passed when the sound of approaching steps made him raise his head. He stared at Conrad, and the other stared back with a pissed-off expression on his face. “What now?” he asked.

Conrad crossed his arms over his impossibly large and hard chest and gave him an annoyed look. “Was last night some sort of ruse? Your cousin was bent on trying to extract information from me. Information,” he added in a stern voice, “I do not possess.”

“What did he do?” Kai asked, curious about what Galien had done, indeed, to poor Conrad. The famous rake must have had his methods to make the proud fallen prince surrender his defenses.

Conrad huffed. “After we drank, and you left with your servant, he did nothing less but offer himself to me. In quite a shameless manner if I may say so.”

“You may,” Kai offered courteously.

Conrad blinked and frowned. “Given the state of inebriation I found myself in, I have to admit,” he said while setting his chin high, “that, for a moment, I gave in to the temptation.”

Kai began munching on his lips. He could imagine Galien all over Conrad, asking for a kiss. If anyone could pull a thing like that, it had to be cousin dearest. He seemed like a dude who took any challenges with ease.

“Do you find it amusing?” Conrad inquired, visibly irritated.

“Come on, dude, you’re bigger than Galien. Don’t tell me he managed to steal a kiss from you.” Kai snickered at the idea. Since he was trapped in a BL story, he had to get acquainted with all the tropes belonging to the genre.

“No,” Conrad replied and scowled.

“No? Then how did he sample the goods?” Kai asked the question but mainly himself. Galien seemed pretty sure of his success in doing that the previous evening with Conrad. “You know, did he like, touched you or --”

“He made me fondle his --” Conrad stopped with a frustrated grunt.

“His what?” Kai asked, now more curious than before.

Conrad pinched the bridge of his nose. “It is of no consequence. Nothing happened. He kept asking me about the attempt on your life, making it all too clearly that he’s suspecting me.”

Kai was pretty confident Conrad was letting out some embarrassing details, but he didn’t press on. “I know you had nothing to do with that.”

Conrad seemed surprised at that. “You do?”

“Hey, you practically risked your life to save mine. You and me, Conrad, we’re good, man.” Kai stood and walked over to Conrad to pat him on the shoulder. “And, just so you know, if you feel like, you know, doing the nasty with Galien, don’t let me keep you.”

He left a flabbergasted Conrad behind as he headed over to the castle. His stomach was still grumbling, and he had yet to have something to eat.

Sebastian stood by the bed, watching Milo sleep. He had had trouble last night convincing him that no reciprocation was needed. And then, he had struggled to sleep throughout the night, with that handsome young man wrapped around him. By dawn, he had somehow managed to remove himself from those loving arms.

He would sneak out like a thief, as that was how he entered Milo's life. Through no fault of his own, but nonetheless, he wasn't entitled, not for one moment, to Kai's best friend's attention and especially affection. He let his hand caress Milo's face gently and then leaned in and placed a small kiss on his cheek.

For a moment, Milo stirred in his sleep. He had to be dreaming something pleasant, as his full lovely lips were curled in a smile.

Sebastian sighed. This strange curse made him do unfathomable things such as caring for the feelings of this young man who was of no royal or noble descent and should have been indistinguishable from most of the people surrounding them. And yet, he was unique, and Sebastian wondered briefly when it had been the last time to think like that of anyone.

Everyone was replaceable. He was nothing but a man with a duty, and he would stop at nothing on the path to achieving it. For certain, not at considering the sentiments of a commoner, regardless of how handsome he was.

He withdrew slowly, avoiding making any sounds. He snuck out of the room and rushed toward the front door, his head swirling with new tangled thoughts that should have had no place there.

It had to be the curse. Milo could be an innocent tool of those behind it, which was all the more reason to protect him, as well.

"You got the first prize at the cosplay contest?" Tani's eyes grew wide.

"Yes," Sebastian replied matter-of-factly.

The girl thinned her eyes. "Who did you go as? And how come you didn't tell me?"

Milo had suggested before the event that he could obtain some helpful information from Kai's sister, but somehow, he had found the idea inopportune. "You are still very young. I don't see why you should be informed of your brother's questionable means of raising money for the family."

"Questionable? Since when do you know so many words? What did you do? I mean, who did you cosplay as?"

Sebastian wanted Tani out of his hair so that he could consult his phone about the means to become a warrior and earn his keep by fighting monsters.

“I went as Prince Sendrian.”

Tani was sitting on a chair in the kitchen, swinging her feet. At his words, she suddenly jumped and caught him by the arms. The reason for her excitement was difficult to glean. She just kept on shaking him and laughing. “No way! Did you take pictures?”

“Milo must have, but I don’t see --”

“I have to see them. I need to show them to all my friends.”

Sebastian knew he must have had a pretty stricken expression because Tani stopped.

Her eyes thinned again. “What kind of getup did you use?”

Sebastian frowned. He needed to admonish his younger sister. First of all, she should have never opened that manga. Second of all, she had no business seeing him in such revealing clothes. Despite having been seen by hundreds of people, he didn’t want her to see those pictures.

“What do I have to do so that you stop bothering me?” he asked in a measured voice.

Tani’s sly smile announced nothing good. “Pay me.”

He took the money from his pocket and extracted a single bill. “Here,” he said as he placed it in the girl’s open palm. “Is it enough?”

For a moment, he wondered whether Tani was having a sudden fit of sickness, as her eyes grew wide, her mouth went slack, and she stared at him without saying a word for several moments. Then, she shouted, taking him completely by surprise, “A twenty? You’re giving me a twenty?”

“What? Is it too little? I must give the rest to Mrs. ... to our mother,” he said sternly.

Tani began laughing and clapping, not before she made the bill disappear in her pocket. “You’re giving mom the money? What for?”

“I am the man of this house,” Sebastian said slowly, uncertain what Tani’s strange reactions were all about.

“The man of – This is so friggin’ precious! Wait till mom hears you!”

“I don’t intend to wait. Where is she, anyway?”

“She went to see some friends for a coffee or something like that. I don’t think she’ll want your money, though.”

“Why? Is it too little? Here.” He showed her the wad of bills.

Tani let herself prey to another bout of laughter. “No, but it’s not like we have money problems. What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?”

Sebastian felt wounded by her words. “If we don’t have financial difficulties, why are our meals such a drab affair?”

“What’s that, drab?”

Sebastian pondered. He couldn’t insult Mrs. Martin’s cooking, especially since it was nutritious and had a decent taste.

“You know what?” Tani said. “Let’s do something for her, you know, like siblings. Since you want so much to impress her.”

Sebastian’s goals were much more practical, but he was curious about what Tani had in mind.

“Let’s cook something and wait for her with a warm meal,” she decided without waiting for his input.

“Cook something?” Sebastian was certain he was making faces. “I’m not some kind of kitchen... I’m not a cook.”

Tani rolled her eyes and grabbed him by the hand. “Yeah, like I don’t know that. I’m not a cook, either. What did you say? That mom’s cooking is bad?”

That wasn’t what he had said.

“Then we’ll make something fancy,” Tani concluded and began tapping fast on her phone. “We’ll make this,” she added triumphantly and pushed her phone under Sebastian’s nose.

The dish looked, indeed, palatable. Maybe he could try cooking once. What could go wrong?

Something had gone wrong. The crust was all flaky and burnt in places, the meat inside was dry, and the kitchen looked like it had been the scene of a battle.

“It looks nothing like in the picture,” Tani decided in a dejected voice.

She was pulling at one of her pigtails, trying to remove some caked in flour.

“We failed,” Sebastian declared, trying to sound neutral and avoid expressing his disappointment and frustration. The beef fillet had cost a lot, and he had expected more from his first experience in the kitchen.

“Where did we go wrong?” Tani whined. “We roasted it just fine, right? I mean, before shoving it in the fridge.”

“Quite a questionable method,” Sebastian commented. “Could it be that we didn’t yell at one another enough?”

Maybe it was a devilish recipe, by how the chef in those videos was cursing those under him, who were slaving away in the kitchen. His yells must have served as some sort of incantation meant to keep the meat juices inside and prevent the crust from burning.

Tani groaned. “I had no idea you could be such a slave driver. Really, you could make a career in television. Although, it may be that because you yelled at me all of a sudden that I dropped the meat in the sink.”

Sebastian examined the girl with thin eyes. “You dropped it?”

“Don’t worry. It was clean,” Tani retorted. “I mean, I washed it well.”

Sebastian frowned. “Well, we should taste it.”

“Do you have the guts? It looks kind of dead.” Tani pushed against the slice of meat with her fork.

“Well, it does look like you overcooked it --”

“I overcooked it? And who said you could be the chef?”

“Hey, I was busy reading the instructions,” Sebastian said defensively.

His phone buzzed again, but he pretended not to notice. Tani surprised him by strolling over to the table and grabbing his phone. “Why are you ignoring Milo?”

“I’m not ignoring him,” Sebastian retorted. “I am just too busy right now to talk to him.”

Tani eyed him suspiciously. “Did you screw up somehow? Or did he?”

Sebastian would have much preferred Tani to shut up at this point. He had never, in his life, been made guilty of cowardice, but right now, he had no idea how to look Milo in the eyes again.

“Let’s just see how this thing tastes,” he said abruptly and grabbed his fork.

He had to work his way through the slice with the knife, and Tani followed his example. They were both leaning over the plate, and they exchanged a look before gathering the courage to push the bite-size morsels they had cut into their mouths.

For a moment, they kept staring at each other without daring to chew. Then, at the same time, they began.

“It’s, um,” Sebastian started once he managed to push the piece of meat down his throat, “dry.”

“—not so bad,” Tani said right away.

“Not so bad?” he exclaimed, surprised by Tani’s judgment of the drab affair on their plate.

“Hey, it’s our first,” Tani pointed out. “Who’s perfect from the first try?”

I am. I must be. I am Prince Sebastian of Ifigia, and people expect nothing less of me.

“It’s edible,” Tani continued. “And at least, I think we got the spices right.”

Sebastian cut another piece and tasted it. Actually, Tani wasn’t entirely off the mark. The taste wasn’t all that bad. And even if it was dry, the meat could be eaten.

“We’ll just remove the burnt edges from the crust,” Tani suggested. She jumped off her stool and headed over to the pot in which their dish lay.

Sebastian walked over to lend her a hand, making sure to avoid an egg dropped in the middle of the kitchen. “I see. It looks like a plucked chicken now, but I suppose it’s better than having to taste all those burned pieces.”

“What happened here?”

They both turned with guilt written all over their faces to witness Mrs. Martin standing in the door, with her hands on her hips. She looked surprised but not mad, which Sebastian couldn’t figure why. The state of the kitchen was deplorable, and she would probably have to clean for a long time to return it to some kind of normality.

“We cooked for you,” Tani said enthusiastically.

“You did?”

Sebastian couldn’t tell what it was about Mrs. Martin that he liked so much, but when she smiled the way she did right now, she was just so beautiful. It wasn’t an aesthete’s reaction she rose in him, and not one to have anything in common with lust since he never looked at women that way, but it was like her smile reached his heart directly, all barricades useless.

“Yeah. Kai made some cash, and we thought to surprise you with this. Ta-da!” Tani gestured toward the table with both hands.

Mrs. Martin walked over, took them by the shoulders, and then looked at the strange dish with unhidden amusement. “Let’s see what you two did.”

“You shouldn’t eat it,” Sebastian said sternly. “The meat is dry, and we burned the crust.”

“What a doomer,” Tani said with a sigh. “Just try it, mom. It’s not as bad as Kai makes it to be.”

To his astonishment, Mrs. Martin let go of their shoulders and cut herself a piece. She tasted it, chewed for a while, and then appeared to have swallowed. "It's the first time you two are cooking," she said.

She wasn't smiling anymore, and Sebastian tensed. Of course, now came the reprimand for their terrible lack of skill. He yelped when Mrs. Martin grabbed him and kissed his head and then did the same with Tani. "You're good kids, you two."

"We totally are," Tani said, full of herself. She wasn't in the least impressed by being hugged by Mrs. Martin, unlike him.

"And because you two are such good kids, you'll now clean the kitchen."

That seemed to deflate Tani in an instant. "Do we have to?" she whined.

Mrs. Martin ruffled her hair. "Yes, you do." Her voice was still affectionate as she told them that. "Well, Kai will have to trade in another chore."

"Why?" Tani was not getting ready for battle.

Mrs. Martin threw Sebastian a soft, knowing look. "Milo's in front of the building and doesn't want to come up. He's waiting for Kai."

"Just tell him you're busy." Tani pushed his phone into his hand. "No way you're leaving me behind. I'm your fallen comrade. Don't do it, Kai."

Mrs. Martin laughed. "I'll help you this time, Tani. And don't worry, Kai won't be off the hook. I'll make sure he pays his debts in full. Now, off you go, Kai."

Didn't he have a choice? He would rather stay and clean. A look at his surroundings convinced him that it would be a rushed decision. He stuffed his phone into his pocket and walked out, a lingering pleasant sensation still with him after being hugged like that by Mrs. Martin.

Chapter Eighteen – The Person Inside You

“What happened to your hair?” Milo asked him the moment he set foot out of the building.

He was dressed in an oversized t-shirt and shorts, so Sebastian took a moment to admire the young man’s muscular legs. Too bad his arms were partially covered, but it looked like Milo enjoyed wearing comfortable clothes.

Sebastian ran one hand through his hair and stared, all puzzled, for a moment, at the thing he extracted from it. Apparently, it was a bay leaf. “We tried to cook.”

“You and Tani?” Milo asked and gave him a cursory look. “That explains why you look like you just left a construction site. It must be flour on your clothes.”

Sebastian looked down at his clothes and gasped. When had he become such a slovenly person? He was known for his impeccable manners and attire as the Prince of Ifigia. “I must go change.”

“Not yet.” Milo stopped him with a hand on his shoulder. “Why didn’t you pick up?”

He had to be talking about those calls. Sebastian kept his face away. “I was busy. It was quite a demanding dish, and I couldn’t abandon what I was holding to answer your call.” He winced at the end of that terrible lie.

“Hmm,” Milo said instead of a proper reply. “That’s pretty cringey, dude. I can tell you’re lying.”

Sebastian groaned before realizing that he should have kept that to himself. “How can you tell?” He turned to face Milo.

The green eyes twinkled. What right did he have to be so handsome and have such expressive eyes? This boy would be his doom, without a doubt.

“You’re avoiding me, and I want to know why.”

“We just haven’t talked for several hours. I am not avoiding you,” Sebastian argued.

“Are you being weird about what we did last night?” Milo moved closer.

Sebastian wanted to take a step forward and meet him halfway. No, he needed to take a step back.

He just froze in place. “Why would I do that?” he asked, but his voice didn’t sound collected and cool as he desired.

Milo shrugged. “Dunno. But I’d like to find out.”

“Please, just give me a couple of minutes to get changed, and I’ll be right back with you,” Sebastian said curtly.

He needed to get away from that scrutinizing stare that was making his stomach feel strange.

“Okay. But don’t make me come after you,” Milo said playfully and offered him another gorgeous smile.

He just nodded and hurried back into the building. A few minutes were everything he got to be able to come back with a proper and credible lie that wouldn’t end up hurting anyone, and especially Milo.

He looked far more presentable when he faced Milo again. The young man surprised him by hooking one arm over his shoulders and making him walk side by side. “I thought you wanted us to go job hunting for you this Saturday.”

“Oh, right, right, of course,” he mumbled.

There had to be something particularly strange about the natural rules governing this world because Milo’s arm felt slightly heavy on his shoulders, and yet his feet were light, and he was sprinting over the sidewalk.

The silence stretched between them. “Milo,” he began.

“Was my cum weird?” Milo asked him at the same time.

“What?” Sebastian didn’t know what he meant by that until he remembered some rather bawdy titles of videos he had watched. “No, as I told you, it was quite... tasty.”

“You hesitated,” Milo pointed out.

Not for the reasons he imagined. Sebastian was just struggling to find more commonly used words so that he could sound more like Kai.

“I’m telling the truth,” he countered. “I haven’t tasted others’, but yours was truly good.”

“You’re just saying,” Milo replied and moved his head away.

Once again, a delicious shade of pink was coloring his handsome cheeks.

“I certainly am not,” Sebastian protested. “I would like to have it every day, that good it was.”

“For real?” Milo stared at him.

It was hard to meet his gaze, but Sebastian wanted nothing more but to make it clear to this wonderful boy that his seed was the most fantastic thing he had tasted in his life. “Yes, for real,” he said with determination.

“Ugh, you’re driving me nuts,” Milo huffed.

How could he not be happy with that answer? Sebastian began pondering whether some other reply was actually expected of him when he was suddenly pushed into an adjacent narrow alleyway between two high buildings.

And then, his back met a wall, and warm lips came hard on his, crushing them gently. Milo’s hands were soon in his hair, and they were kissing like they had only moments left to live. Even the way Milo kissed was so different from everything Sebastian remembered. How frustrating it felt to have so much experience bedding men and yet feel inadequate in relation to this young man.

Yet, even this frustration had a sweet tone to it, a gentleness he couldn’t fight, his arms heavy against the stream of dark honey pouring through his veins.

Milo interrupted the kiss shortly and breathed hard while pressing his forehead against Sebastian’s. “Ever since I confessed, everything’s so different,” he whispered. “Did my words change you into someone else? Did I change?”

Sebastian caressed Milo’s face and then dropped his hands on his strong shoulders. “You’re wonderful,” he said, lacking the right words to blurt out the truth. Milo would just think he was lying.

“Oh gawd, you even know what to say to make me feel...” He stopped and shook his head slowly. “Argh, I don’t know what the hell I’m saying.”

“Try, nonetheless.”

“I never... I never imagined you saying corny stuff like how I’m wonderful and stuff. Or that you could kiss the way you kiss. Did I know you so little before?”

“You couldn’t have foretold how I would be as a lover,” Sebastian struggled to offer an explanation that could make sense. Milo was right, on all accounts. But, on the other hand, Kai, the real Kai, would have reacted completely differently.

Sebastian was doing a poor job at being someone else, and he couldn’t resist, not for a moment, when Milo embraced him and kissed him like that. His entire body, no, his entire soul, wanted nothing but to make him happy. And he was not in the least in any position to do so, for the simple fact that he was who he was.

“Yeah, yeah, you’re right.” Milo laughed. “It’s just that you’re so different now. But I guess we’re both different. Love changes people, right? Oh, damn, I’m saying corny stuff again.”

“Is it bad?” Sebastian asked while caressing Milo’s shoulders. “That I’m different? Would you rather have me, the one from before?”

Would you rather have your friend?

He was just grabbing at straws like a mad drowning man.

Milo shook his head again. “No. If this is you now, heck, how can I complain? I mean, you went down on me --” He pursed his lips and blushed again.

“Just because of that?” Sebastian asked, dissatisfied about being reduced to that.

“No. Oh, fuck, you’ll think I’m a pervert, now, only thinking about that. But you’re so hot, you know? I mean, I’m so glad no one knows you’re like this on the inside. Anyone looking at you, they wouldn’t suspect, not for a moment. You know, that you can kiss like this, or touch like this, or have that kind of look in your eyes. I think I’m in love with the person inside you, Kai. Does it make any sense?”

Sebastian buried his fingers into Milo’s shoulders and looked down. A new strange feeling was growing inside him, so overwhelming that he could no longer speak or breathe.

“Kai, are you all right?”

Milo’s worried voice brought him back to his senses. He looked up. “I think I’m in love with you, Milo Bennett.” He couldn’t keep the astonishment he felt as soon as his words left his mouth.

Milo snickered. “Are you that surprised about it? I mean, come on, just look at his wonderful guy here.” He pointed at himself. “What’s not to love, right?”

Sebastian nodded. It was true. He felt drained, a bit empty, but happy and light in a giddy way that was not himself at all. Was he changing into Kai Martin? Was he losing himself? He tried to stop the bubble of laughter swelling in his chest but to no avail.

He snorted in the most inappropriate manner as he struggled against it. But then he was laughing. It was so beneath him to express emotion in such an unbridled manner, but it was beyond his power to hold it in anymore.

“Hey, I was expecting another compliment, you know?” Milo scolded him playfully. “Not to be laughed at.”

Sebastian stopped and kissed Milo one time hard on the lips. “I’m not laughing at you. I’m laughing at me.”

Milo grinned. "If you say so, dude."

They were about to kiss one more time when something cut through the air with a swish, and Sebastian felt something hard hitting his temple. He brought one hand to his head, and when he put it back down, he noticed the blood.

Milo let go of him and broke into a run. At the end of the alley, rushed steps and someone yelling insults could be heard.

"Are you okay?" Milo returned to him as it seemed like he couldn't get a hold of the assailant.

"It's just a small cut," Sebastian concluded.

If that had been an assassination attempt at Prince Kai's life, the one to carry it had to be a simpleton. He picked the stone that had been thrown and was now on the ground. He examined it and sniffed it—no sign of poison.

"Are you sure?" Milo asked, prey to a heightened state of agitation.

Sebastian took out his handkerchief and wiped the blood from his hand. Then he pressed it against his temple. "Yes. Why are you staring at me like this?"

"Correct me if I'm wrong," Milo started hesitantly, "but as much as you fight monsters and whatnot in video games, you're pretty squeamish when it comes to your own blood."

"Squeamish? About a little thing like this? Look, the bleeding already stopped." He turned his head so that Milo could see.

"Yeah. Still, we need to take you somewhere to disinfect it."

"Your place?" Sebastian said promptly.

He felt somewhat vexed about having his big moment with Milo being interrupted like that. He couldn't understand his own feelings, but he surely desired to have the time to explore them at length.

"Yeah, sure. Let's go," Milo said and took his hand. "You sure you're all right?"

"Stop worrying so much."

"How could I not? I can't lose you now that you just confessed to me," Milo said in a theatrical voice.

Ah, he was making fun of the situation. So that was quite all right. And Sebastian was now eager to be back at Milo's house where they could kiss, and maybe the beautiful young man would tell him again those incredible words.

Where could he go to find some food? He should have taken advantage of Pepin no longer being mad at him and ask about it, but he had missed his chance. Who knew where the servant was now? He most probably had better things to do than just be at His Majesty's beck and call all the time. Not that Kai minded all that attention. He had only been there for days, and he was getting used to the good life.

He wandered into the castle. He needed to have on his order of business to map the place so that he finally knew where he was going. The last time he had wandered around like that, an assassin had almost ended up killing Conrad.

Kai shivered and grimaced. That wasn't so nice, weird-looking people trying to kill him. Well, maybe they had their reasons since Sebastian was a pretty ruthless guy, but still, they were on the side of evil, and he on the side of good, so, in a nutshell, they shouldn't be able to succeed.

Of course, there was still the matter of him being trapped in some kind of game, although he hadn't noticed any possibility to level up or stuff like that. That was disappointing; he had completed a pretty huge quest, getting the dragon's tear and all that.

He stopped in front of a large wooden door. He sniffed around. There was no way that was the door to the kitchen. It smelled nothing like food. However, it smelled of something else, but Kai couldn't quite put his finger on it. There was only one way to find out, and it didn't look like a forbidden door or anything like that. No ominous runes were written above the door, and no ominous smoke came from underneath.

It was okay, he decided, as he pushed the door open. For a while, his eyes struggled to adjust to the low light in the room.

"What brings Your Majesty to me?" A female voice came from the darkness. "I thought you were quite displeased the last time you visited."

"Um," Kai started, not really sure what to say.

The room was filled with books, he noticed, and in the middle, there was a table that appeared to be covered by some velvety cloth. On it, what was that?

He walked closer. "Is this a real crystal ball?"

The woman laughed and finally emerged to make herself seen. She was tall and broad-shouldered, dressed in a long gown of a dark color that appeared to have no decorations of any sort. She sat at the table and stared at him.

At least, that was what he assumed, as he still couldn't see much. "Can you make some light? It's pretty spooky in here."

A sudden clap of the hands surprised him, but right away, the room was scalded in a pleasant light. He couldn't tell its source as much as he turned on his heels and looked around.

“How can I be of assistance, Your Majesty?”

Finally, Kai could take a good look at the woman. She couldn't be older than thirty, and her face was impressive, just as her stature. Good thing she was sitting, or he would have felt dwarfed by her presence. Her hair was black and fell in waves on her shoulders, and her eyes were deep, hypnotic green. She gestured for him to take a seat, and only then he noticed that there were other chairs in the room. He grabbed one and sat primly.

“Sorry to bother you, I actually got here by accident,” he began. “Is that really a crystal ball?” he asked again and pointed at the object on the woman's table.

He was dying to ask her who she was, but he didn't need yet another person wondering if Prince Sebastian had truly gotten a serious hit to the head. Which meant he probably shouldn't be asking stupid questions about crystal balls, either. Maybe it was better if he made for a hasty retreat.

“Nothing happens by accident,” the woman said while examining him with keen eyes. “If your steps took you here, today, Your Majesty, it must be for a very important reason.”

He waved. “I doubt that. I was just walking around, looking for some food --” He was talking too much, and he sounded weird.

The woman smiled again. She let her hand hover over a small bowl and whispered something. A small parfait-like mini cake appeared.

“Wow, nice magic,” he said without thinking.

“I know it cannot compare to the culinary delights Your Majesty is accustomed with, but please accept this humble nourishment.”

Humble, right. In the real world, probably only millionaires indulged in stuff like that. He made a move to take the offered bowl. “Ah, it looks like you don't have a spoon,” he said and pulled his hand back.

He was in a magical world, and he had been about to eat magical food offered by a magical lady. Now that was pretty reckless on his part.

The woman whispered again, and a spoon appeared inside the bowl by the parfait.

“Ah, I should cut down on sweets,” he argued. Then he patted his belly. “I'm getting fat.”

“I've never known you to refuse my creations,” she said slyly. “After all, it has always been a reason for you, Your Majesty, to wander off into Luna Celeste's humble quarters.”

Ah, so her name was Luna Celeste. The name fit her as her pleasant face was round and white, just like the moon.

“Maybe just a small bite?” Luna challenged him.

He fidgeted in his chair. That parfait was making his mouth water. “All right,” he gave up, “maybe just a small bite.”

If it were some nefarious magic, Sebastian’s strong body would fight it, without a doubt, he convinced himself. Plus, why would the prince keep a dangerous witch inside his castle? It wasn’t like her door was locked or anything, either. With all those arguments in mind, he began gobbling down the mini cake. He expressed his delight through small noises of pleasure and smacked his lips once he was done.

If it was magic, it had to be the good kind because he felt pretty invigorated and like he could take the world head-on.

Luna seemed quite pleased with his reaction. “So, have you thought about our last conversation?”

“Hmm, nope, I can’t say that I have,” Kai said, feeling apologetic on account of Sebastian. That conversation couldn’t have been a pleasant one, as Luna appeared quite anxious to learn of his opinion.

Luna leaned back in her chair and examined him some more.

“What? Do I have something on my face?” Kai asked and wiped his mouth with the cuff of his costly coat. After the deed, he stared at it a bit uneasy. Pepin would kill him if he got any stains on that.

“It’s happening,” Luna said and clapped her hands gleefully. “That means that the moment is near. Your dear mother will be so happy when she hears.”

“What? What is happening?” Kai asked.

“You are falling in love, Your Majesty. Ah, I could feel it,” Luna exclaimed and threw her arms to the ceiling as if finally, her longtime prayers were answered.

“Am not, geez, I just kissed him and traded lollipops --” Kai swallowed his words. First of all, that was way too much info, and second of all, was he admitting to having done pervy stuff to an attractive woman like that? And an older one, on top of that? At a stretch, she could be his mom!

Luna seemed not to have heard his protests. She caressed the crystal ball as her eyes wandered as if she was trying to figure out something. Kai threw a stricken look at the crystal ball. Could it be

—

“Did you watch me and Pepin doing that thing?”

Luna stared at him, perplexed. “How would I do that, Your Majesty? I don’t understand what thing you are talking about.”

“In your crystal ball,” Kai insisted and pointed at the object.

Luna looked just as flabbergasted at the item. “It’s made of glass, and I bought it at a fair down in Afrar years ago.”

Oh, phew, Kai thought. “What kind of witch are you?” He bristled. “You don’t even have a crystal ball.”

“Witch? I’m not a witch,” Luna Celeste contradicted him and stiffened in her chair. “I’m a charming lady.”

“You are,” Kai agreed.

“I deal with charms.”

Ah, that was what she meant by charming. Well, she was both, then. “Wait, did you put some charms in the parfait?” He pointed at the empty bowl. Now he was starting to have certain regrets about gobbling down all that. What if Luna’s charms were not all of the good kind?

“Just my good wishes for Your Majesty. Are you falling in love with Pepin, after all?”

“I’m not,” Kai protested. “And what do you mean, after all?”

Luna Celeste examined him again and began tapping a finger against her lips. “It is your mother’s wish.”

“Well, she cannot wish a thing like that. I’ll fall in love with whoever I want,” Kai said. “Not that I’m falling in love or anything right now. And Conrad is just the concubine. I don’t use him!”

Gosh, the things that kept leaving his mouth. But it looked like he couldn’t stop. What the hell had Luna put in that delicious cake?

“The change is happening,” Luna said, although it looked like she was mostly talking to herself. “Without a doubt.”

“What do you mean by that?” Kai asked, feeling all the more suspicious of the charming lady with charms in front of him.

“Love changes people,” Luna said matter-of-factly. “But if it’s not Pepin...” She began rubbing the glass ball with her palm.

Kai leaned forward, straining his neck.

“I see something,” she said while thinning her eyes.

“Hey, you said it wasn’t a crystal ball!”

“No, it’s made of glass, I told you,” Luna said and waved like he needed to keep quiet.

What would Sebastian do if he were there, in his rightful place? Probably he wouldn’t take kindly to being dismissed like that even by a charming lady. But Kai had no idea how to act royal and arrogant without risking insulting Luna and come across as rude.

“Who is Milo?” Luna suddenly raised her head and looked Kai in the eye.

“Milo? Milo’s my best friend!” Kai clamped his mouth shut, but it was too late. How could Luna know about Milo? So she was a witch, after all.

Luna threw him a confused look and stared into her crystal, no, glass ball some more. Kai didn’t see anything in there. “What country is he from? His attire is quite unusual.”

Kai jumped to his feet. “That’s it, I’m going. The parfait was great, but I need to go now.”

“Wait!” Luna called after him.

He was in big, big trouble. Nonetheless, he stopped. “What?”

“Remember,” Luna said, “the Shimmering Cavern is where you must go to complete the ritual.”

“What ritual?” Well, he was curious.

“To make your soul whole. Take your friend Milo,” Kai could bet Luna was laughing a little as she said that, “there, and complete the ritual together.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Luna shook her head like she couldn’t believe he was this uninformed. “Your soul, Sebastian, must combine with his, there.”

“And what will happen after I do that?” Kai asked, his ears all perked up.

“You will return home and live happily ever after.”

Just like in fairytales, Kai thought. Then, right away, something crossed his mind. “You mean, if I do the ritual, I’ll return home?”

Another puzzled look from Luna was the reply.

“Ah, so this is it. But what happens if I go with Pepin?”

Sebastian's mother's wish was for him to unite with Pepin to become a single soul or whatever. The Shimmering Cavern had to be a portal of sorts, and if he went there, Sebastian's soul would finally travel back to his body and Kai's soul to his. That was the answer he had been looking for! What Milo had to do with all that, he had no idea. It was probably because Milo had confessed right that moment –

Whatever, he got it now. But, unfortunately, he was so lost in his internal scheming that he missed what Luna was asking him.

“Why would you go with Pepin?” The lady repeated the question.

“Isn't he the one mom wants for me?” Kai said airily.

“What about this new friend, Milo?” Luna asked, the same quizzical look in her eyes.

Kai waved. “He really is just a friend. Pepin, on the other hand, has the sweetest lips ever. Gotta go, bye.” He hurried out the door before Luna had a chance to question him some more.

That was it. Sebastian needed to combine his soul with Pepin, obviously, and that meant that the moment Kai would be at the Shimmering Cavern, the switchback would occur. Easy-peasy lemon-squeezy.

“Your Majesty,” he heard himself called. Pepin was rushing to him. He stopped and bowed a bit excessively. “I forgot to get breakfast for you! Please, forgive me.”

Kai felt pretty good about solving the quest regarding how he would return home. He grabbed Pepin, straightened him up, and kissed him on both cheeks. “Don't worry. Luna gave me a parfait. It was quite delicious.”

“Luna Celeste?” Pepin asked, his voice a bit high-pitched. “She was here?”

“What do you mean, ‘she was here’? She was in her quarters. I just happened to wander about and stumbled upon her.”

“She appears only --” Pepin choked on his own words for a moment. “Your Majesty, did she remind you of the Shimmering Cavern?”

Kai puffed out his chest. “Of course.”

Pepin was the one squeezing his arms now while looking at him wide-eyed. “Who are taking there?”

“Who? Really, Pepin, how can you be so silly?” For once, Kai knew something the servant didn't. That was one great reason to feel good about himself. “You, of course.”

He yelped when Pepin threw his arms around him and kissed him hard on the lips. Kai had a mind to protest, but Pepin's lips on his were way too pleasant to do that.

"Well, I had no idea you wanted to go that much," he said once he was allowed to breathe.

Pepin began laughing. He didn't let go of his neck and kept staring Kai in the eyes. "There's nothing else I've ever wanted more."

Once they went there, he and Sebastian would switch back, and Pepin would be happy, on top of it all. It was totally a win-win situation. Only that, Kai thought, maybe they wouldn't go right now. First, he wanted to have a little more fun with dragons and whatnot.

"Well, we'll arrange something, but maybe not this month, okay?"

"All right," Pepin agreed, a bit hesitantly. "Is there a reason why you want to postpone it?" His eyes were turning sad.

Right, he was selfish for only thinking of how he wanted to play the prince a little longer. "Don't worry, we'll go. And I just want to get to know you a little better, first. We'll be united and stuff, right?"

Pepin nodded, and a small, secretive smile caressed his lips. "As you wish, Your Majesty."

Chapter Nineteen – A Little Bit Crazy, A Little Bit In Love

“Did you happen to see who threw that rock?” Sebastian asked as soon as they were back on the main road.

“I didn’t really get a chance to have a good look, but I bet it’s that asshole Chet,” Milo replied.

He seemed upset. Sebastian wrapped his fingers tightly around his. “That boy looks like there’s nothing inhabiting the vast space between his ears.”

Milo looked at him and grinned. “Nice insult.”

“I’m just pointing facts. He called me a nerd just because he is envious of my academic prowess,” Sebastian said proudly.

“Or just because he’s a douche,” Milo replied. “I wasn’t expecting him to start throwing rocks at us, though.”

“Why do you think he did it?” Sebastian asked, interested in finding out if that boy could have been hired by a higher power to cause him harm.

“Because he’s a good for nothing that cares only about putting others down? I don’t know. And on top of all his other qualities, he’s a homophobic bastard, too.”

“Homophobic?” Sebastian asked. He couldn’t just go consulting his phone with Milo watching all the time.

Milo shrugged. “Don’t ask me. Some idiots are simply like that. It’s not like we are out at school, but I’m not going to hide, neither make a big thing out of it. Are you with me on this?”

“Sure.” Sebastian nodded. He absolutely had no idea what Milo was talking about.

Milo bit his lips and threw him a naughty look. “I’m so glad it’s only Saturday. When we’re in school, I need to keep my hands to myself, and it’s so hard. But, of course, PDA in school would be bad taste, regardless of who you are with, right?”

PDA. It had to be some kind of device. Was it similar to phones? But why would it be bad taste?

“I’m also glad it’s Saturday,” he replied. “PDA would be totally bad taste,” he emphasized.

Milo laughed. “You’re such an agreeable boyfriend. Then, how about I ask you this?” He leaned in and caressed Sebastian’s ear with his lips. “Once we’re home, can we get to know each other better?”

Sebastian frowned slightly. Was Milo interested in making even more conversation once they would be alone? “As you wish.”

“What? You don’t want?” Milo teased his ear.

“I’d rather have you naked and sweaty under me,” Sebastian replied promptly. He let out a small grunt as Milo bit his ear. “What was that for?”

“Under you? Naked and sweaty? Really, how can you say such things with a straight face?” Milo complained, but this tone was playful. “Then let’s just go already.”

It was a bit of a blur how they got on the bus and out of it. Sebastian could only be aware of one thing: Milo’s warm hand engulfing his and holding it gently. But once they would get to that point, the truth would be out in the open. It was impossible for Milo not to realize that his boyfriend wasn’t who he thought he was. Sebastian had had so many men, while Kai Martin was nothing but a virgin. His life as he knew it was forfeited anyway. Yet, he needed to make Milo see somehow. And feel his love, even if only fleetingly.

“Now that I got you here, what?” Milo asked, his naughty gaze trained on Sebastian.

They were, once again, in Milo’s bedroom, and they were facing each other. The feelings from the other night came circling like wild dogs, but Sebastian willed them down. “You have too many clothes on,” he said.

His fingers were trembling as they helped Milo out of his t-shirt. Then, with more determination, he hooked them into the waistband of Milo’s shorts and pushed them down. The male underwear in this world could be particularly enticing. Sebastian took great pleasure in tracing the contour of Milo’s manhood through the soft fabric. It made him feel wanton, with an edge of desperation, cutting like a knife.

“If you ever come to regret this,” he said quietly, “you are allowed to blame it entirely on me.”

“Regret? Dude, when you said you wanted to be on top, was it that kind of top? Ah, damn, give me a second to prepare myself mentally.” Milo’s face scrunched up in thought for a moment. “All right, I’m done. You can go ahead and do it.”

He didn’t miss the playful nuances in Milo’s voice. Now he knew them all. “Right now, I’m stealing something from you,” he said.

“My cherry, you mean?” Milo snickered, not knowing what each of the sounds he was making did to him. “Well, it’s yours to take, or pop, or whatever. Now would you stop teasing me with your hand? I might just come in my underwear.”

Sebastian pushed Milo toward the bed. The young man was stronger than him, but he was letting him do whatever he wanted. Soon, he was on his back, wearing nothing but a look of adoration in his eyes and a naughty smile on his lovely lips.

Milo would regret it once he learned the truth. But Sebastian couldn't stop even if he wanted. He didn't; he wanted the young body writhing under his touch like he couldn't remember ever wanting anything else in his life. He undressed and then moved so that he could face Milo's beautiful manhood, now freed from the confines of the undergarments.

A small lick under the engorged head, and Milo was moaning softly, enticingly. Sebastian found himself liberated in that position, offering and taking at the same time. He moved his tongue along, looking for ways that would make Milo go a little bit crazy, a little bit in love.

"Wait," Milo said in a ragged voice. He turned slightly and reached for the nightstand. He offered Sebastian the lubricant. "Feel free to do me," he said with a slight shrug.

Ah, of course, this strange world also had convenient means to make it more pleasurable. Sebastian had done his fair share of research, so he took the tube with undisguised surety. It was a pleasure to move his hand up and down slowly on Milo's hardened member, making it glisten.

Next thing, he straddled the beautiful body under him and used the viscous substance on himself, as well.

"Ah, this was what you meant by me being under and you on top," Milo said with the same gleeful expression he often had. "And you think I'd ever regret this? Bring it on, baby," he teased, and as he grinned, a cute little dimple appeared on his left cheek.

"Oh, you will," Sebastian replied, somewhat vexed by Milo's easygoing manner. "I will steal your first time now, and you will hate me. Because I'm much more experienced than you, and you don't believe me."

Milo's only reply was a snort.

Once he saw how experienced Sebastian was in dealing with him, he would start to suspect that he had been told the truth but hadn't wanted to admit it. With steady hands, he aligned their bodies so that they could fuse together.

Milo's beautiful manhood was resting its head against Sebastian's entrance, and soon, there would be no turning back. Sebastian closed his eyes and pushed down, anticipating the pleasant effect of feeling full to the brim.

A stabbing sensation made his eyes pop open. What was happening? He was supposed to glide right in, his body so accustomed to being ravaged by –

He made another attempt. Milo's breath hitched. "Dude, you're so tight."

It wasn't his body. How could he not have realized that? But, still, with his experience –

Sebastian moved again. This time, the pain was so much that he jumped out of bed, holding his behind with both hands and hissing.

“Are you okay?” Milo straightened up right away.

“It hurts,” Sebastian barely managed while hopping up and down.

“Yeah, because you’re kind of crazy and think it’s enough to watch porn to know how to do it.”

“I cannot make love,” Sebastian moaned.

Milo sighed and climbed out of bed. He walked over to him and embraced him. “Let’s take it easy, okay?”

“You don’t understand,” Sebastian complained some more. “This was my way of making you understand --”

Milo shut him up with a kiss. “Each time you say something stupid, I’m going to kiss you. And you ran away from me last night. I know it. And this morning. So, make no mistake. You’re not running away from me again because I know you want me. Pretend to be a prince, do whatever you want. When you look at me like this --” He stopped for a moment and swallowed.

Sebastian watched the way Milo’s throat bobbed. He leaned forward and kissed him right there.

“You see what I mean?” Milo said. “Now let me on top, and let’s hope I’m going to suck less than you at this. Unless you want to do me, of course.”

“No,” Sebastian mumbled. “You... do me,” he added.

Milo was gentle as he placed him on his back. He helped his knees up and began to caress the skin underneath his balls ever so gently. He moaned helplessly. He couldn’t recall being held in such a shameful position, exposed, not without him ordering it first. Milo dipped his fingers in the lubricant and began massaging his ass slowly.

“I might not have watched as many tutorials as you, but the ones I read and watched were clear about one thing. That we need to take our time with this.”

Sebastian keened. In this body, the sensations he was experiencing were different from everything he had been experiencing before while in another man’s arms. Milo moved his fingers slowly in and out, leaving him wanting more with each pull away.

“I,” he whispered, not knowing what he wanted anymore, “please... Milo...”

“Na-ah,” Milo said. “I’m horny, too, and hard like a rock, but I’m not going to wreck your ass just because I’m stupid and can’t deal with my horniness. Like someone I know.” He glared a

little, his beautiful eyes searching Sebastian's face carefully. "Can't believe it. All that talk about being more experienced and me regretting it."

He shook his head and returned to his torture. Sebastian felt his chest rising and falling and couldn't fight the sensation pooling in his groin. Milo's fingers were working inside him, touching him in impossible places, and turning him into nothing but a soft and pliant body.

"Wow, nice," Milo whispered.

Sebastian opened his eyes and stared at his own manhood, which was twitching and spending itself all over his belly. He groaned and closed his eyes.

"Hey, no reason to be embarrassed. Only last night I came in your mouth like a moron. So it's your turn to feel like that," Milo pointed out. "Do you think I can try a little? It's all right if you think you're not up to it."

Sebastian reached for Milo and grabbed him before he had a chance to walk away. "Do you intend to leave me like this? Satisfied by your fingers only?"

Milo grinned. "I like it when you go all royal and haughty on me. Well, order and you shall receive, Your Majesty. What do you wish me to do?"

Sebastian shivered under the intense look in those green eyes. He couldn't gather his thoughts. Never before had anyone treated him so gently. He preferred his lovers to consider the bed they were sharing nothing else but a battlefield. It made each victory all the more satisfying.

"Maybe suck you off?" Milo teased, and his eyelids dropped. "Put my mouth on you a little. Stop me if I sound too porny or corny."

"No," Sebastian barely managed. "I want you," he said stubbornly.

"You want me to..." Milo let the words fade and smirked in the most grating way possible. "You'll have to say it, Your Majesty."

Sebastian pursed his lips. "I want you inside me."

"Hmm, I just had my fingers in. Doesn't it count?"

So, Milo wanted to make fun of him, after all. Sebastian's eyes narrowed. Did he genuinely want to be ordered around? "Fill me with your manhood," he said and set his chin high, as much as he could do that in his position, "and give me all your lust."

"Sounds kinda medieval, but I'll take it," Milo said with another grin.

He lay on one side and moved so that he would have him with his back pressed against him. Sebastian had nothing against that position, but he expected to be dominated in a different way

since he wasn't the one on top. Milo was gentle as he began to rub the head of his manhood against Sebastian's entrance. "If it hurts, tell me, and I'll stop, okay?"

"Okay," he mumbled, too wrapped in the sensation of being held so gently.

Milo kissed his cheek and then focused on trying to get his manhood inside. He was going slowly at it, so Sebastian let out a small grunt and tilted his head back. Milo stopped right away. "Is it too much?"

Sebastian brought one hand back to wrap it around the back of Milo's neck. He turned enough so that they could look at each other. "No, it would never be too much with you."

Unlike other times, that didn't earn him a playful reply. Instead, Milo's eyes became hazy, and his efforts resumed. Sebastian raised one leg and snuck his hand lower, trying to feel Milo entering him. "You have a gorgeous cock," he whispered.

Milo breathed out hard. "And your dirty talk game is top notch."

It wasn't hurting, not anymore, and there was only the sensation of fullness which he knew and appreciated. But even that was different in Kai's smaller body. Milo rested his hand on Sebastian's hip. "I'll try to move now, okay? Oh, damn, it feels so good inside you, I can't believe it."

"Please move," Sebastian begged shamelessly.

It was nothing like the way his angered lovers moved their hips with urgency, wanting both to punish him and obtain pleasure. Each of Milo's moves was smooth and fluid; all the while, the green eyes rested on him, gauging every reaction, asking him without words if he felt good.

"It feels so good," he confirmed and pressed his hand over Milo's, only to bring it in front and cover his manhood.

Milo didn't need any more guidance. His hand began moving, too, stroking gently and making Sebastian draw each breath like it was the sweetest air he was breathing. His pleasure wasn't sharp and demanding, like usually, but wide and deep like a tide that was growing higher as it moved toward the shore.

"I think I'm addicted to watching you come," Milo whispered.

Sebastian watched his lover through hazy eyes. He wanted Milo addicted to him in every way possible. That was a part he intended to indulge him in as often as their bodies could handle. He was, at the same time, aware of the other's growing pleasure. Milo could be considered a bit clumsy, especially in the way he moved, a bit too timidly, but it took nothing from the joy they were both experiencing. He was, without a doubt, well endowed, and within a short time, he would grow confident of his abilities as a bed partner.

Yet, it was this moment of uncertainty, crowned by the look of absolute bliss on Milo's face, that Sebastian desired to steal and keep forever. He pressed his head hard against Milo as his manhood surrendered for a second time.

"Is this me? I'm the one making you come like this?" Milo asked.

How could he be still so unsure? "The only one," Sebastian whispered back. "Now, please, pour yourself inside me."

Milo's immediate reaction was a barely kept in moan. "I might get a bit --" He struggled, as his hips moved a little faster.

"I want it," Sebastian urged him. "Don't hold back."

Milo shook his head as his moves became more frantic. "Don't hate me."

Sebastian knew that wasn't possible. Even as the height of his pleasure was calming down, he loved that feeling of being filled by Milo. "I would never," he said and locked his gaze with the beautiful greens.

Milo bit on his bottom lip hard and then turned Sebastian's head so that he could kiss him. At the same time, his hips stilled, and their bodies remained together as Milo's manhood pulsed inside him.

For moments of eternal bliss, they remained like that, their lips fused together, their bodies linked. Milo let go of him slowly. Then, before Sebastian could even think of not wanting that, Milo pressed him on his back, laughed, and began kissing him all over his face.

"Dude, this was like an awesome first time! How would you rate me? One to ten? One being I totally sucked, and ten being --"

"Ten," Sebastian said.

"Hey, you didn't even let me finish," Milo complained.

"Ten," Sebastian insisted.

"You sure?"

"Ten."

"All right, I'll take it." Milo moved a bit away but kept one arm and one leg thrown over him. "Are you sure it was that good? 'Cause for me it surely was. But I was the guy on top, so --"

"You're great, Milo. Wonderful, I told you."

Milo snickered and bit his lips. "Gosh, I have like the best boyfriend in the whole world!"

Sebastian didn't want to argue about that. There was no better sensation of fulfillment than being filled like that by Milo's essence.

"Would you like us to take a shower?" Milo asked.

Sebastian liked the invention called shower to the extreme. But not right now. "No. I want to keep you inside me a little while longer."

Milo threw one arm over his eyes and moaned. "Talk like that, and I might want to do you again."

"That wouldn't be so bad, would it?" Sebastian said matter-of-factly.

Milo looked at him with loving eyes. "Totally. I'm crazy in love with you, you know that, right?"

They kissed again.

Crazy was the correct word indeed because Prince Sebastian of Ifigia had never been known to feel anything remotely like this. Loss of sanity could explain everything.

"Are you certain you do not wish to have a proper breakfast?" Pepin asked.

Kai patted his belly. Well, as much as he hadn't enjoyed eating in his real world, in this one, he felt pretty hungry more often than not. "If you're going to make those tiny mushroom omelets or whatever they are, I think I can squeeze in a few. Also, how about having a picnic again?"

Pepin nodded dutifully. He no longer had to be explained what a picnic was.

Kai felt quite in a generous mood after solving the quest of his return. Of course, he still had to complete the ritual or whatever, but it was as good as done. With that checked off his list, it was time to have fun. "Do you think you can make enough for Conrad and Galien, too?"

"Will they come with us?" Pepin looked a bit disappointed.

"I don't want to ignore them since they are our guests. Let's play nice with them, Pepin."

"Our?" Pepin put a hand to his mouth like an old midwife learning of the latest gossip.

"What? What did I say?"

"What do you mean by 'our guests'?" Pepin supplied right away.

"Mine and yours, of course. Plus, you're better at this host thing than me, clearly. I can't cook. Heck, I think I could burn water if that were the only thing on the menu."

Pepin had such an ecstatic expression on his face that it made Kai feel happy, too. He was still surprised when the servant grabbed him again by the arms and exclaimed, “We are truly together!”

He dashed away, probably to start cooking, and Kai didn’t bother to correct him. After all, once the switch was done, Sebastian would be one with Pepin, whatever that meant, so he saw no reason to rain on the servant’s parade. Yeah, he could play along for a couple of weeks while he got to play around in Prince Sebastian’s shoes. Play along, play around... Yeah, it sounded like a plan.

“And this is what you call a picnic?” Galien inquired while he lay lazily on one side and helped himself at one of Pepin’s most delicious creations. “I’m all behind it. But I thought you would like to stay close to Pepin, and even spend some time alone with him.” A sly smile accompanied the last words.

“Why would His Majesty want such a thing?” Conrad asked.

Kai shook his head, and his eyes went wide as he stared at his cousin. Galien laughed. “Conrad doesn’t know, then?”

“What is that you are speaking of, Master Galien?” Pepin intervened.

Kai began to cut the air with his hand while trying to warn Galien with his eyes. Great, now cousin dearest would start running his mouth, and Pepin would know he had blabbered about what they did together.

“What? Nothing but of your very interesting night,” Galien continued, completely ignoring Kai’s agitation. “The night you two spent together.”

“You bedded your servant?” That was Conrad, who looked about to jump to his feet and provoke someone to a duel.

“I didn’t!” Kai protested. Then he remembered that denying that might hurt Pepin. But what if he got mad that he had talked about it? Whatever, he had to do something. “I mean, not all the way. We didn’t go any further than second base. Actually, it was third base. But I didn’t drive it home, okay?”

There were three pairs of eyes staring at him like he was about to grow a second head. Kai cleared his throat to fill in the silence. “And you did some heavy petting with Galien, too,” he accused Conrad openly.

Conrad seemed astonished that he would blurt out a thing like that. To his surprise, Pepin was the one to intervene. “You did what, you shameless concubine?”

“He-he,” Kai reached for Pepin, who probably didn’t know what heavy petting meant anyway, “let’s not judge Conrad after we two had our mouths you know where last night.”

“Where were your mouths?” Conrad asked, with such a stricken expression on his face that instant regret hit Kai over having this weird idea of a picnic.

Galien interrupted their angry exchanges by laughing out loud. “Sebastian, you aren’t known for keeping your proclivities a secret.” Kai had his doubts about that. “So let’s shed some light. Last night, His Majesty and sweet lips Pepin over there, tasted each other to the fullest and discovered that there’s hardly any dish that would compare to that in the entire world. Seeing how they are novices to this particular pleasure that two men can share, they appeared to have had such a pleasurable time that it’s the only thing on their minds right now.”

“That’s not true!” Kai protested.

Galien ignored him. He was about to open his mouth again when Conrad spoke. “Why would you use your servant when you have me?”

Galien used his napkin to slap Conrad over the shoulder. “As for me and the handsome Sir Conrad here present, I easily convinced him to touch my perfect behind and express his opinion on whose is rounder. Mine or His Majesty’s?”

Kai snickered. “Who won?”

Conrad huffed. “I already admitted to my transgressions.”

Kai laughed out loud. “It’s all right. You two can get freaky together if you want.” He stopped and grimaced when he noticed the dismayed expression on Conrad’s face. “Come on, Conrad, I told you. We’re good. And we don’t have to sleep together. As I can see, the spell on your heart hasn’t acted up again or anything, right?”

“So remove it,” Conrad said through his teeth.

Kai sighed. “The soonest I figure out how. I promise. Cross my heart.” He made the small sign on his chest. “But still, is Galien’s ass the roundest or not?”

Well, he was in a BL story or game or whatever, and he was surrounded by crazy BL characters. And he already knew how to return home, so it was all right to fool around a little, and act just a little bit crazy, too.

Conrad set his chin high. “I will not lower myself to indulge you in such crude jokes, Your Majesty.”

“But you lowered your hand to cop a feel,” Kai retorted and began laughing again. “What? It’s funny,” he added when he noticed Conrad’s nostrils flaring. “And I think Galien likes you.” He

snickered and grabbed a handful of tasty little morsels so that he could make them disappear in his mouth right away.

Conrad threw Galien a surreptitious glance. In return, he got a half-hooded look. Yeah, totally, those two dudes were digging each other big time. However, after their short exchange, both looked away.

Classic.

He turned his head toward Pepin. The servant looked a bit conflicted and just pretending to be busy filling their cups with tea. He poked him in the cheek with his index finger. “What’s with you?”

“Are you letting Sir Conrad go?”

“I want to. What? Don’t tell me you wanted a threesome. Until yesterday, you were a complete virgin.”

“I am still a virgin,” Pepin replied.

“Right. Well, not for long.” Once Sebastian was back, they would be fused or whatever, so Pepin would become the prince’s wife or what was that he had to become.

Pepin looked at him, cheeks on fire, and eyes as wide as saucers, for about one point three seconds. Then he jumped to his feet and ran away.

Galien broke into laughter.

“Why is he running?” Kai asked. “Why are you laughing?”

“I love picnics,” Galien declared with satisfaction. “I didn’t think eating outside would be so entertaining. Maybe you should go and ask Pepin that question, though, Your Majesty.”

“Okay, you’re right.” Most probably, Pepin was pissed at him for spilling the beans. “You two, have fun. And Conrad, you’re totally free to cop a feel again if you want to!” he threw over his shoulder as he ran after Pepin.

Chapter Twenty – You, To Me, Things

Since he could still see Pepin in the distance, it wasn't that much of a feat to reach him, especially since Sebastian's body was in top-notch condition. However, he hadn't managed that until they entered the castle. As they reached the building, Kai slowed down and watched Pepin from a fair distance. He wasn't running anymore, but he was walking fast. Well, he had been busy catching up with him, and now he didn't know exactly what he wanted to say.

Well, for starters, he had to apologize. Yes, that was a good idea. As a virgin, Pepin most probably felt embarrassed by having their little adventure together talked about like that, especially by that big-mouthed Galien.

As he turned a corner, Pepin threw a look over his shoulder. Kai could swear he could see a small smile on the guy's face, but he couldn't be sure. "Pepin," he called out. "Wait for me."

But the servant broke into a sprint again, and Kai had to do the same. It looked like Pepin had just disappeared in the royal quarters, which was convenient since Kai doubted that Prince Sebastian was used to being seen apologizing in the hallways for blurting out private stuff.

Could it be that Pepin was about to break into a cleaning frenzy? There was a possibility that it was his way of dealing with stressful situations. Kai slowed down again. But what if Sebastian didn't want Pepin upon his return, even with the fusing and all that? He hadn't thought of that. That would break Pepin's heart.

He stopped altogether. Going to the cavern and performing the ritual was necessary so that he could return home. Not for a moment had he thought what that would mean for the other people involved. But now that he did think about it, he couldn't just brush it off like it wasn't his problem.

The doors to the royal quarters flew open, and Pepin peeked from behind one of them. "Are you coming already, Your Majesty?" he asked breathlessly.

Ah, damn, he'd been caught. Kai had a mind to do a one-eighty and run in the opposite direction. However, a single look at Pepin's flustered face made him feel flustered, too. His eyes were too blue, his lips were too soft, and he was way too beautiful. Like it should have been illegal to be so beautiful and a dude at the same time. It was totally his fault.

His steps carried him toward Pepin like he no longer had a will of his own. Pepin snickered, grabbed his hand, and pulled him inside. Well, that was unexpected. He thought the guy was pissed at him or something.

Just as equally unexpected was how Pepin pushed him with his back against the closed doors, glued himself to him, and pressed his lips hard on Kai's mouth. For a moment, no, two, no, three, ah, who was counting anymore? Kai did nothing but let Pepin kiss him.

It was only after Pepin gave him a proper dental checkup with his tongue that Kai finally realized that he was supposed to protest to that. Using just an adequate amount of force, Kai pushed the servant away and stared him in the eyes.

Pepin was still breathing a little hard, his eyes were shiny, and his lips were moist and glistening from the kiss.

“Um,” Kai started, while trying to make some order in his messed up brain, “weren’t you supposed to be pissed at me?”

The confused look in Pepin’s eyes told him he wasn’t making himself clear enough.

“I mean upset,” he added quickly.

Pepin started laughing. “You said ‘not for long’, didn’t you?”

“What did I say?” Kai mumbled.

Pepin pushed his arms away and pressed their bodies close together again. “You said that I wouldn’t be a virgin for long.”

“Ah, right. Yeah, because we’ll go to that cavern and stuff.”

No, no, this was wrong. He needed to find a way to return home that didn’t involve hurting Pepin. Ah, damn it. And he had thought he had that quest in the bag.

Pepin ignored him and began undressing him. Clearly, his servant’s skills were going downhill because he simply tore Kai’s shirt, making small pearly buttons fly everywhere.

“Pepin!” he exclaimed as what the guy was doing finally caught up with him.

“We need the practice,” Pepin said with urgency.

“Practice?”

“Yes.” Pepin was completely un-servant-like when he pushed Kai’s pants down. “I know you prefer the other way with the others, so we must practice.”

Other way? Kai could feel his brain gears turning slowly like they had to wade through mush.

Pepin laughed and began discarding his clothes.

“Wait. Pepin! What are you doing?”

The servant threw him a playful look and hurried to the bed. He stopped, one knee resting on top of it, half-turned from Kai.

If that was a posture meant to seduce or something like that, Pepin had it down pat. From that angle, Kai could easily admire the gentle curve of his back, the tapered down tiny waist, and that awesome perfect ass that should also have been illegal on a dude. It was so nice and round that Kai couldn't tear his eyes away. Conrad should have tried feeling up Pepin's ass and then decide who had the roundest ass in the kingdom.

No! What the hell was he thinking now? Pepin's ass was off-limits. Wait, why was it off-limits?

"Aren't you coming?" Pepin asked and gave him the most beautiful smile that had ever been smiled in the history of mankind.

It didn't matter that they were in a fantasy land. Those were just details. Kai was in a bit of a trance as he tried to walk toward the bed. Then he almost stumbled on his pants that Pepin had inconveniently left wrapped around his ankles. He puffed and huffed as he struggled out of them and his boots, succeeding only in performing a strange choreography until he reached the bed.

Pepin laughed out loud and pushed him on his back. Then he was on top, straddling him, and leaning in for another kiss.

"Pepin," Kai warned, although he felt that his words were simply falling on deaf ears.

"No rules say that I must be a virgin when we reach the cavern. Your mother even pointed out that it would be best if we were already acquainted by the time we performed the ritual," Pepin said.

"That's a bad mother," Kai retorted, flabbergasted by Sebastian's mother's too frank ways of dealing with the matter of who her son chose to go to bed with and why. And how.

Pepin caught his chin and moved his lips slowly against Kai's mouth. His long eyelashes fluttered, and his cheeks were turning pink. "I'm so happy it's me."

The right thing to do was push Pepin aside, gently but firmly, and told him it wasn't possible to do whatever he thought would follow next.

Ah, a light bulb lit up in his brain. Sebastian was totally gay, but it looked like he preferred to be the guy who... Kai frowned as his mind struggled. Also, he, Kai, was absolutely not gay, and this time, he wasn't drunk, so his little monster wouldn't perk up, no matter how beautiful Pepin was. In the end, it would look like he wouldn't be able to do it, so Pepin would be disappointed, but that would work out because it would seem natural and not forced –

He let out a surprised gasp as Pepin suddenly grabbed certain parts of his body. No, not parts, but a part that was a traitor of the highest rank in the history of all traitors!

"Sebastian," Pepin breathed out as his hand moved slowly, "I'm ready. Please, I don't want to wait anymore."

“Wait,” Kai protested, but Pepin’s soft and tasty lips choked his words up, and his eyes were soon rolling in his head. “Hey,” he managed when Pepin let go of his mouth to lick and kiss along his jawline, “but... it’s going to hurt!” he shouted the first thing that came to mind.

“I know. I prepared myself while you were standing in the hallway.”

“You did? What kind of virgin are you?” Kai made an attempt to sound royally pissed.

“The kind in love with you,” Pepin replied promptly. “I’m ready for you.”

“Hey, wait --”

Pepin moved, and then Kai could feel the most treacherous part of his body pushing through a velvet-like channel. The sensation was to die for. “Aaaargh!” he let out.

Above him, Pepin struggled to breathe. His beautiful skin was flushed now, and there was sweat on his upper lip while his face was scrunched up in a frown.

“Pepin,” Kai whispered, “this is... I mean...” He couldn’t talk, not when that part of him was squeezed and teased like that, and he swore that soon there would be tears in his eyes because that was way too pleasant to be legal anywhere in the world and on all continents.

“Your Majesty, forgive me,” Pepin pleaded.

“I... I don’t think I can,” Kai replied. His hands came around like a foreign will dictating their movements and landed on Pepin’s round ass.

“Your Majesty,” Pepin whispered again.

Kai was sure he wanted to help Pepin up so that they would disconnect their bodies, but what he actually did was completely different. He pushed Pepin’s ass down, and then he groaned in absolute pleasure. At the same time, Pepin cried out and collapsed on top of him.

Kai froze. “It hurts, doesn’t it?”

Pepin just nodded while holding him close.

“I told you so!”

“It’s all right,” Pepin murmured. “I truly want this.”

Kai had a mind to grab hold of his mushy brain and talk it down from whatever it thought it was doing to his body or the body he was in. But Pepin moved his hips slowly, and another shot of pure pleasure hit him. “Pepin,” he mumbled, “please don’t do this. I don’t think I can...”

His words ended up a tangled mess, just like his mind. Pepin caught his lips gently. Kai could clearly see the tears hanging like crystal beads on the curly eyelashes, and his heart squeezed. Unfortunately, Pepin's ass did the same, and Kai's little monster twitched happily.

"Is this... sex? I'm having sex!" he exclaimed. "Pepin," he added with urgency, "you are doing... to me... things!"

Pepin was breathing with difficulty, and it wasn't hard to imagine he was still in pain. Kai moved and rolled him on his back. There were sounds of protests from the other, but Kai knew that he had to do something to make it better, although what that something was eluded him completely. He caressed Pepin's face slowly, then his neck and chest. With each touch, the other shivered, and his eyelashes fluttered.

"You're so beautiful," he whispered. "But I should..."

Pepin wrapped his long legs around him, keeping their bodies together. "No, don't you dare to run," he warned him in a breathless voice.

"But, Pepin, you... it hurts you... doesn't it? My little monster... is hurting you..."

"What?"

Oops, he had said that nickname out loud. Not that he was talking to the thing or anything, but it had to have a name, right?

"Ignore that," Kai said quickly. He groaned as he tried to move as even something that simple triggered another bout of pleasant sensations.

"Hold me," Pepin whispered.

That was a plea he couldn't overlook. He carefully wrapped his arms around Pepin and held him.

"Your Majesty," Pepin said after a while, "you can start... moving."

Moving? It was clear what that meant, but Kai wasn't sure he could. Pepin's ass was squeezing him so hard that any wrong move could detonate the bomb that his little monster was turning into.

"I'm afraid," he admitted.

"What of?" Pepin asked.

"Of many things." Kai allowed another groan to leave his lips as any shift in position from Pepin was making at least one part of his body act like it had a mind of its own. Of course, that was why it had its own head! Which, by the way, was brushing against something inside Pepin's body if he did as little as breath!

“You cannot hurt me,” Pepin said tenderly.

Kai keened softly and tried to adjust his position. “I’m practically stabbing you in the back with... the thing.”

“It is not my back, but my --”

Kai shut Pepin up with a kiss. The last thing he needed right now was some dirty talk. Not that the kiss was helping any; on the contrary, a hot tongue was in his mouth, doing small circles and caressing everywhere. And that was simply enough to make his skin grow hot and his eyes become moist with too much overstimulation.

His hips jerked only a bit, and Pepin gasped.

“It hurts, doesn’t it?” Kai asked reproachfully.

“No,” Pepin breathed out. He tilted his head back, exposing his neck. “Please, again.”

Kai gulped and moved; his teeth were tingling again, and he sank them into Pepin’s exposed throat, earning an instant protest from the other. It was his fault for looking so edible. He was a human being, not a cookie, so why did he have to look good enough to eat? Kai worked his way around Pepin’s graceful neck, biting only softly regardless of how much he wanted to take a huge bite and stave his hunger once and for all.

On top of it all, Pepin was encouraging him, apparently okay with being molested in that manner. Kai could hardly imagine how that was possible, but Pepin was unique, a beautiful dude, and a guy who knew how to work a feather duster. How that fit with how they moved together now and how Pepin was driving him crazy, he had no idea.

He gave up on trying to reason with Pepin and settled for listening to each and every one of his orders.

“There, Your Majesty,” Pepin whispered, and Kai obliged. “Faster.” He just went faster. His little monster was now far from little. It felt huge like it had taken some transformation magic pill, and it was squeezed by such a tight place that he groaned in despair with each jerk of his hips.

“Pepin,” he forced out of his throat, “my... dick feels funny!”

Not that he didn’t know precisely that sensation, but he had never experienced it like that, surrounded by tight heat from all sides.

“Just let it go, please, please,” Pepin begged him.

He could feel the other shuddering and trembling, small spasms shaking him now and then. He wanted to ask what was wrong, but he felt Pepin's cock rubbing against his belly, and soon there was wetness, too.

"Oh," he said. "Does it mean that it's okay if I... shoot?"

"Yes, inside me, please," Pepin pleaded with him.

It wasn't like he could pull out even if he wanted to. He was way too far, and beyond the point of no return, so with one final groan, he jerked his hips one time, hard, and held Pepin down. He was only vaguely conscious of the latest waves of extreme pleasure hitting him as he collapsed over the other and hung on to him for dear life.

"I'm so sorry, Pepin," he murmured the moment he managed to gain back the ability to talk. He could hear the servant's breathing and smell the sweet smell of his skin, but he couldn't move. It was like he belonged there, in the other's arms.

Pepin caressed his hair slowly. "What could you be sorry for, Your Majesty?"

"Why do you keep calling me that?" Kai asked.

"Because I don't feel like calling you anything else."

That was a bit strange, but Kai's mind was utterly drained, just like his body. The worst part – for Pepin – was that he couldn't move. For him, it was the best part because he could postpone a little the moment when he actually had to face the other and look at him while admitting that he had done that kind of thing to him. Yeah, it felt good, but that didn't make it right. He knew as much.

Pepin didn't protest at all. He just continued to caress Kai's hair. "This is the real you. And I love who you truly are," the servant said softly.

Now that had to be just one way of saying, Kai was sure. Horrifyingly so, he let out a small purr as Pepin stroke his head gently.

"This was the best thing that ever happened to me," he managed to mumble back. At least, he could give Pepin that. Because nobody ever had made him feel like that, and he was so drowned by a myriad of sensations that he felt he could confess to Pepin that he loved him and believed it, too.

But he couldn't do that. Pepin belonged to Sebastian, and what he had just done was so completely unforgivable that he should be hiding somewhere and hope that no one would find him and hold him accountable.

That would come later. Now, it felt too good to be held and caressed by Pepin to move one limb. He could do the walk of shame, or whatever he had to do, later. Preferably much later.

“I promised my mother that I would fold all the laundry,” Sebastian said as Milo caressed his cheeks and kissed his jawline slowly.

It was half a lie. He still had something to do around the house in exchange for escaping the cleaning of the kitchen after his and Tani’s culinary experiment. Mrs. Martin hadn’t told him what that would be, but he could use it as an excuse to get away from Milo and clear his head.

In his mind, he was more than convinced that he had crossed a line. As someone in another person’s body, he wasn’t supposed to fall in love and become so intimate with that person’s best friend. It wasn’t any solace that most probably Kai was turning Ifigia into a land overrun by monsters as he had to be completely unfit to rule the kingdom. He had professed his love to Milo, but Milo didn’t know him, not truly, and that meant that the situation, as pleasurable as it felt, was a complete mess.

“Ah, you have to go already?” Milo complained.

When he was looking at him, with those kind eyes filled with love, Sebastian wanted to forget about everything, the kingdom, his responsibilities, his true purpose. Indeed, he wanted to be no one else but a simple teenager living in this strange and wonderful world, where people like Milo existed. How simple things would be then.

“I don’t like it, either,” he said. It was challenging to keep a hold of his thoughts when Milo was teasing him like that. He only had to touch Sebastian as lightly as possible, and his body was on fire.

“At least, let me give you something for the road.”

“A kiss?” he asked.

Milo grinned. “No, it’s something I keep hinting at, and you seem not to take the bait. I want,” he said and caught Sebastian’s ear between his teeth, tugging at it playfully, “to suck you off.”

“No need,” Sebastian protested.

They were still lying on the bed, side by side, completely naked. It was impossible to hide his body’s reactions, so Milo found it the most natural to grab his manhood and tease it. As gentle as he was, his hold was firm and left little to guess regarding his intentions.

“Oh, but there’s all the need because it’s not fair that you know how I taste like, and I don’t how you taste.”

As much as he wanted to protest still, Sebastian abandoned all will and allowed Milo to slide down on his body and tease him with his lips where only his hand had been before.

He let his head back and bit his lips as Milo began to lick the length of his member with excruciating slowness. Oh, this young man knew everything about the art of seducing another. If he hadn't known better, he would have thought Milo had had plenty of lovers before him. But no, even his light clumsiness at handling things pertaining to lovemaking were endearing him to Sebastian and was the only proof he needed that this beautiful amazing being belonged to him and no one else for the fleeting time being.

Milo hummed around Sebastian's manhood as his tongue wrapped around the head and indulged in it. That only served to heighten the already existing arousal, and Sebastian unconsciously lifted his hips off the bed, pushing into the other's mouth. A slight sound of protest made him realize, but it only lasted a moment, as Milo grabbed his hips and pinned him to the bed so that he could let his mouth slide lower and lower.

He made a mistake to look down. Milo flashed a naughty look at him and even smiled like that, his mouth stretched around the thing in his mouth. Sebastian groaned partly in disbelief, partly in intense pleasure that was beginning to become too hot to handle. Whether Milo knew what he was doing to him or was of no consequence. He moved with steady grace, swallowing more and more each time.

Sebastian could tell that the head of his manhood was meeting some resistance, and it only made it difficult to think anymore of anything. He ran his hands through Milo's hair and held on to him, as he was simply falling, even as he lay there, prey to that wonderful mouth, capable of making any knowledge he had of his life and who he disappeared in a mist of desire.

Milo grabbed his manhood by the root and manipulated it so that he could suck at it like it was the most delicious thing in existence.

"No more, please," Sebastian heard himself begging.

But Milo was deaf to his pleas at this point and just continued to bob his head up and down while his hand moved at the same time, pushing Sebastian closer and closer to the edge.

When he finally rose to the heights of his pleasure and gave up, Milo's mouth squeezed around his member, and his naughty tongue moved over the head just as Sebastian's seed spilled over. He shuddered as Milo mercilessly kept at it throughout his climax. While he had been before on the receiving end of such practices, he had never been particular about enjoying it.

It had to be because he found himself, through the fault of fate, in a body belonging to another, and Kai had to be much easier to stimulate than he was. That thought alone made his eyes snap open.

“I must go,” he said.

Milo had barely raised his head. He watched him and blinked in confusion. “Was I bad at it?”

“No, no,” Sebastian protested, but the part of him that still had a conscience wanted to flee already and endure no more the look of absolute love in the most beautiful eyes that existed in all the worlds he knew. “You were too good.”

“Too good? Is there such a thing?”

Sebastian stood up and began dressing. Milo embraced him from behind. “Are you running away from me again? For real?”

“I just need to think of things. And you were terrific. You always are. You can do no wrong.”

Milo laughed and held him some more. “You’re giving me a bit too much credit.”

“I don’t think so. We’ll talk later.”

“Sure. Call me once you’re off laundry folding duty.”

“Um?” Sebastian was already trying to cope with everything that had happened within such a short time.

“Folding the laundry? Weren’t you supposed to do some chores?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” Sebastian turned. He pulled Milo in his arms and kissed him hard on the lips.

“All right, you’re free to go.” Milo let go reluctantly. “By the way, you taste amazing,” he whispered into his ear, triggering another shudder of pleasure. Milo patted Sebastian on the ass as he guided him to the door.

If anyone had dared to touch him in such a casual manner in the entire kingdom of Ifigia and even the world as a whole, he would have been punished severely. But right now, every gesture from Milo, even something as innocuous as that, hurt him because it felt too good.

He would need to deal with what was happening to him and find a way back to Ifigia before losing himself completely.

Chapter Twenty-One – From The Shadows

Even if he inhabited a clueless, clumsy body, Sebastian was aware of his senses being where they needed to be, so after wandering for a while, he could tell that someone was following him. The attempt from earlier that day rushed to mind immediately. After all, as wrapped as he had been in indulging in forbidden pleasures with Milo, he had failed to think properly of the true meaning of being thrown into a strange world like this one.

The most logical explanation was that someone wanted to bring Ifigia to its doom by removing him from the throne. Why that someone had chosen that strange manner of handling such a thing was beyond his comprehension. Unless, he thought, as he stopped, that someone had also sent a minion along to ensure that Prince Sebastian would never return to his world.

“Who are you and why are you following me?” He turned quickly on his heels to surprise the adversary that was stalking him from the shadows.

To his surprise, he found himself face to face with that pig-like-faced boy from school named Chet. The same Chet Milo had suspected to have thrown that rock only hours ago. He was accompanied by two other boys and grinned like an idiot.

Sebastian crossed his arms over his chest. “Well, what do you have to say for yourself?”

Something from his manner of speech seemed to surprise Chet for a bit because he shifted his weight from one foot to another and looked at his acolytes as if they could help him understand.

“Were you sent to assassinate me?” Sebastian asked and narrowed his eyes. Lost in thought as he had been, he had wandered off, and he had no idea where exactly he was. It wasn’t yet evening, but the alley didn’t appear to be much-circulated at that hour.

At his question, Chet and the other two began neighing like horses. As if Sebastian was some kind of jester supposed to entertain them.

“Just listen to this dork,” Chet barked and pointed at him. “Assassinate him? Who do you think you are? The king of England?”

“No,” Sebastian replied promptly. He had no idea if Kai was capable of fighting, and Milo pointed out that the body he was currently in was unfit for such endeavors, but that didn’t mean that he wouldn’t stand his ground. “I’m the prince of Ifigia, as you most probably well know.”

This time, Chet started to laugh so hard that he bent over from the waist while his companions followed his example. Things were starting to get stranger and stranger. If Chet was an assassin, he had to be of the most idiotic type. Since it appeared that obtaining information from him was a futile task, Sebastian thought it would be for the better to continue his walk and return home. The information required would surely reveal itself at the appropriate time. That or his would-be assassins were finally forced to show their hand.

The moment he started walking, Chet stopped him by putting a hand on his shoulder. Sebastian shook it off effortlessly, and that triggered a different reaction.

“Hey, where are you going, lover boy? We were talking to you.” Chet hung his arm over Sebastian’s shoulders, making him stumble under the sudden weight for a moment. The unpleasant smell of an unwashed person made Sebastian grimace the moment Chet got so close without permission.

“You weren’t talking. You were just laughing like idiots,” Sebastian said. This time, when he tried to shake off Chet’s arm, he encountered a lot more resistance. “You are not allowed to touch me so casually,” he added, slightly disgusted with his assailant’s proximity.

“I’m touching you however I want. Were you with your boyfriend?”

Why did Chet want to know such a thing? Was all this about Milo, after all?

“That doesn’t concern you,” Sebastian said through his teeth and struggled more to get Chet away from him. It was at least unnerving how feeble Kai’s constitution was.

“Did you kiss?” Chet pouted his ugly lips and made weird sounds while trying to get close to Sebastian’s cheek. His mouth smelled even more disgusting than the rest of his body.

This time, Sebastian steeled himself and managed to push Chet away. He straightened his clothes. “As I said, it doesn’t concern you.”

“No shit.” Chet pushed against his shoulder, making him half-turn without wanting to. “Do Milo’s teammates know?”

“I see no reason to continue this conversation.” Sebastian made another attempt to leave. He could make no sense of what that boy was talking about. And he was starting to have his doubts about the assassination attempt.

Chet jumped in front of him, and this time, pushed him hard enough to make him lose his balance and fall. The pig-like face loomed over him. “It’s a simple question, nerd. Do they know?”

“Know what?” Sebastian asked while he began looking around to evaluate his surroundings and find a strategy to even the odds of having to fight against Chet and his acolytes. They were crowding around him with menacing looks on their faces.

“That he’s putting his dick in a dude,” Chet said.

Sebastian grimaced. “Are you always this crass? I can imagine how your social life must be, forced to hang around with this lot.” He gestured with his chin toward Chet’s companions. At the

same time, while taking advantage of how Chet was engaged in another collective laughter with the others, he felt the ground under his fingers and began moving his hand around.

Chet hovered above him. His eyes were mean and cold. “This nerd is something else. Do you guys hear him?”

The others confirmed with another bout of laughter.

Sebastian curled his right hand around the soft soil and attacked quickly. The dirt spread into small pieces and hit Chet in the face, taking him by surprise. At a moment’s notice, he was back on his feet, pushing against Chet’s chest hard and making him stumble and land on his ass. Right away, screams of anger broke out. The fight was uneven, and he didn’t need the confirmation that Kai’s body wouldn’t handle a battle with such uneven odds too well. As disgusted as he felt with running away from a confrontation, he had no choice at the moment. Starting tonight, he would ask his phone what he could do to learn how to fight. As things looked, there were assassins sent to kill him, as unskilled as they seemed, and he needed to fend off for himself.

Unfortunately, Kai’s body wasn’t adept at running either, so an angry shouting Chet finally caught up with him and pushed him, making him hit the sidewalk, face first. Sebastian groaned and brought his hands to his face. His nose appeared to be bleeding. A minor wound, but the pain was annoyingly real. He shook his head and turned on his back to push himself up, not wanting to give his opponents the satisfaction of imagining that he was cowering in fear.

“This dude just hurt himself!” Chet laughed like an idiot. “I barely touched him, and he’s bleeding!”

Sebastian stood up and wiped his face with the back of his hand. “If you intend to fight, at least do it honorably.”

“We’re not in one of your stupid video games, dork.” Chet circled him and smacked him upside the head.

Sebastian brought his arm up without thinking and hit Chet right in the face. His weapon of choice was a sword, but that didn’t mean that he couldn’t use his bare hands if need be, and it looked that some of his knowledge of that still existed, even in that puny body.

Chet clutched his face and squealed. “You hit me! Guys, catch him.”

Sebastian wanted to reply that he had no intention to run this time, but the two acolytes grabbed him by his arms, and Chet landed a vicious punch right at his belly. As much as he tensed all his muscles before being hit, Sebastian doubled over and cursed inwardly for being forced into such an inadequate body.

“How about you cry like a baby and beg for mercy?” Chet hissed.

Deep anger was starting to blossom everywhere. Sebastian looked up. “Never,” he said with dignity.

Chet punched him in the face, and Sebastian barely kept in another groan as the pain flared. His nose was indeed bleeding, and he could feel the warm blood pouring over his mouth and chin.

“I barely touch you, and you look so messed up,” Chet said with glee. “Dorks are no satisfaction,” he told the others.

“If you met me in a fight fair and square, I would give you the satisfaction you seek,” Sebastian replied. “What is your weapon of choice?”

That only managed to make his attackers laugh again. He hated his current body; the punch to the stomach was sure to leave a painful bruise, and the blood that kept pouring from his nose appeared to come with the unexpected side effect of making him feel a bit light-headed.

“I’m not going to lose my time with you, loser,” Chet said and wagged a finger at him. “You’re not even worth beating. But leave Milo alone, or his teammates will learn about you two.”

“It is possible that they know already. I fail to see the meaning of your threat,” Sebastian said as calmly as he managed while the various pains in his body continued to torture him.

“They don’t know, or else, Milo would be off the team like this,” Chet said and snapped his fingers.

Sebastian frowned. Milo was playing basketball, and after what he kept saying, it was an essential part of his life. There were also competitions similar to tournaments, and Milo seemed to be quite adept at that sport. Therefore, what he could understand from what Chet was saying was that Milo would be excluded because they were boyfriends. He still couldn’t understand why that was a detail that anyone would have cared about and a reason to exclude someone from playing harmless sports.

“Why would he be off the team?” he asked.

Chet made a face like he couldn’t believe his ears. “Except for math and stupid French, you’re a total retard, aren’t you? Homos aren’t allowed to play!”

Sebastian’s frown deepened. He didn’t understand the word, but he could recognize an insult for what it was. The anger growing inside him was starting to bend to a different shape.

“So, if you want your boyfriend to keep playing, you’ll leave him alone,” Chet said, his ugly eyes glinting.

“You’re so smart, dude,” another boy commented. “You’re hitting him where it hurts! In his homo feelings!”

They all laughed again as they had just said something entertaining.

“But I also like hitting him in his stupid face!” Chet added.

Sebastian braced himself for another attack. He looked Chet square in the face, and under his direct stare, the other wavered for a moment like he couldn’t gather the courage to hit him again.

“What are you boys doing over there?” A male voice boomed from a fair distance.

“Shit. Let’s go!” Chet shouted at his acolytes, and they broke into a run right away, but not without pushing Sebastian down one more time.

Hurried steps approached, and Sebastian was yanked to his feet by a man in his forties, with a pair of thick glasses on his face. “Are you all right, kid? What did they do to you? Do you need the hospital?”

Sebastian winced, but the kindness of this stranger wasn’t what he needed right now. “No. It is nothing but a light wound.”

“Kids today.” The man shook his head. “Let me at least take you to a bus station just so those punks don’t bother you. Do you know them? Could you describe them if the police asked you?”

Police meant complications. Without getting to the bottom of all the intricacies of the world he was currently living in, Sebastian knew from the various series he had watched that the police were a corrupt organization that he couldn’t trust. “No. I didn’t see their faces well,” he replied politely. “But I will take you up on the offer to show me to a bus station.” According to the same series, he needed to find a way and exact his revenge without any help from outsiders.

The man handed him a handkerchief and offered him a compassionate look. “To think that people like that will escape unpunished.”

Sebastian wiped his face. “They will not escape unpunished. Do not worry about that, good sir.”

He could tell the stranger looked at him dumbfounded, but he had no time to lose now that the danger had finally presented itself. The order of things to do was simple.

Protect Milo.

Eliminate the threat.

It was fairly late when he got home. He hoped to disappear into his bedroom without announcing his presence, but Mrs. Martin was in the hallway when he entered.

“Kai,” she exclaimed, alarmed. “What happened to you?”

“A minor nuisance.”

“This is not the moment to play the smartass, young man,” Mrs. Martin scolded him as she grabbed him by the elbow and forced him to face her. “Who did this to you? Where was Milo?”

“Milo was at his home. Nobody did anything to me.”

“Don’t you dare to lie to me, young man. Come here, and let me see.”

Sebastian wanted to protest, but after a long and controlled sigh, he allowed her to drag him to the bathroom and examine his face. She then used abnormally painful ointments on his face and stuffed his nose with cotton while making him wince and pray that the ordeal was over all the time.

“Now, are you ready to talk, or should I call Milo and ask him what happened?”

“Milo wasn’t there,” Sebastian insisted. “I just got attacked by some bandits,” he said after a short deliberation of what terms to use. Assassins sent after the prince of Ifigia wouldn’t cut it as an explanation Mrs. Martin could understand or accept for that matter.

“Bandits? Do you mean, thugs? Where did this happen?”

“In a park, somewhere. I was just walking about and it happened.”

“I’m still calling Milo. Did you tell him, at least?”

Sebastian surprised Mrs. Martin by grabbing her hand. “Mother, no,” he said in a cold, measured voice. Mrs. Martin appeared to be rightfully astonished by his reaction. He let go of her hand. “I would much appreciate if you left Milo out of this.”

That was what he also needed to do. Milo and his love for basketball had to be protected. It was not his place to interfere with the young man’s life during his fleeting, unexplainable visit to this world.

And he had to prepare to eliminate the assassins sent to destroy him. They appeared ill-equipped for the task, but Kai’s body was, indeed, easy to hurt, so maybe whoever was behind it all thought that no unnecessary force had to be dispatched.

They were underestimating him, he decided, as he turned on his heels, heading for the bedroom. He needed to begin his training so that he could increase his chances of survival. Also, he had to ask his phone the best approach to breaking up with a boyfriend. Sending Milo off with lavish gifts was, unfortunately, impossible, given the rules of this world and also not at all what he truly wanted to do. He had a feeling that the breaking up part would hurt him more than when Chet had hit him. He touched his nose gingerly. It felt tender, and it could be that its shape might suffer some changes.

Nonetheless, as he had been taught, he needed to do what was right. And in this case, fleeting feelings notwithstanding, that meant that he had to ensure that Milo was safe from his enemies.

Kai blinked a few times and tried to get up, but Pepin was wrapped around him quite tightly, and he couldn't push him away without waking him up. So having sex was a bit exhausting, but a lot of fun, he decided.

What was he thinking? He had just taken Pepin's virginity! Well, he had taken his own virginity, too, but that wasn't the point. Why wasn't he at least a little bit ashamed? Why couldn't he wipe the stupid grin he had on his face? He could tell there was one because his lips were stretched, and his cheeks were hurting. And why, oh, why had he done it in the first place?

"I'm a BL character," he whispered to himself. "Let's leave it at that."

Pepin mumbled something in his sleep and rubbed his head against Kai's shoulder. It was only logical that he would end up between the sheets with a character like that, Kai thought. Pepin was, without a doubt, the most beautiful bishonen ever, and if he didn't pair with him, the fandom would surely find a way to bring them together. That usually happened, even to characters that weren't part of a yaoi or BL story. So, he was just doing everyone a big favor and turning this into canon.

"There you were," Conrad's voice boomed as the doors to the royal quarters flew open.

Kai straightened up and stared in undisguised horror at Conrad, followed closely by Galien. Didn't these dudes know how to knock?

"Don't you guys know how to knock?" he asked promptly.

"I kept telling you that they were here," Conrad said and turned to stare down Galien. "You truly didn't have to drag me around the entire castle under the pretext that they could be in the library! Or the kitchen! Or the damned stables!"

Galien had the stupidest grin on his face. And it was directed at him, not Conrad. "So, is it done?" he asked while looking at Kai. "By Pepin's disheveled state and yours, I'd say it is. Congratulations, Your Majesty."

Pepin couldn't stay asleep in all that noise, obviously, so he was now sitting on his lovely bum and staring at the intruders, just as pissed as he was. Kai looked at him and noticed right away a few red marks on his neck and shoulders.

"And it must have been quite a vigorous affair," Galien commented.

Kai frowned when he realized Galien was looking at the same thing as him. He quickly grabbed the blanket and threw it over Pepin, covering everything, including his head.

“Your Majesty,” Pepin protested right away, but this time, Kai used Sebastian’s force to push him down and hold him covered.

“You guys are embarrassing Pepin,” Kai said and glared at the duo.

“I’m not embarrassed,” Pepin said from under the blanket.

“You totally are,” Kai retorted.

“At least you’re not,” Galien said and quirked an eyebrow most annoyingly.

Busy as he had been to hold Pepin covered, Kai had ended up angling his body, so he was almost mooning his visitors. “Stop looking, you pervs!”

“Do you have any idea what he is talking about?” Galien asked Conrad, who seemed a bit annoyed and confused.

“Not in the least, just as I don’t have any about why he chose his servant when he forced me into his bed.”

“Conrad, bro, for real,” Kai protested. “I told you I’m done with the forcing thing.”

Conrad set his chin high. It was like the dude was hurt in his ego or something. “Do I gather that you lost interest in me?”

Yeap, totally his ego. “Not as a friend,” he said the first thing that came to mind. “You look like a fun guy to go on adventures with. Just not the type with the, um, snake in the hole part.”

“Snake in the hole. What a strange euphemism,” Galien decided. The guy looked like he was having a blast. “Now that Sebastian decided to heed his mother’s advice, why don’t you lavish your attention on me, Sir Conrad?”

“Like I would do such a thing with a rake like you,” Conrad said haughtily and crossed his arms over his chest.

“Are you afraid that I’d be more of a rake than you? Scared of a little competition?”

“Wait, wait, wait,” Kai intervened, “are you calling Conrad a rake, too?”

Galien sighed exaggeratedly. “Were you that unaware of whom you took to your bed, Sebastian? Rumor has it that you can fill three warships with the many broken hearts Sir Conrad here has left in his wake.”

“Three warships? Is that a lot?” Kai asked. “How much would that be in the decimal system?”

Pepin took advantage of how he lost interest in holding him down and peeked his head from under the blanket. Even worse, before Kai had a chance to notice what he was doing, he pushed away the blanket entirely and straddled his lap. From there, he stared over his shoulder, most probably to make faces at Conrad.

“Pepin, that’s not nice,” Kai said, but then he noticed that the servant wasn’t at all busy making faces and feeling smug.

On the contrary, Pepin had a guarded look on his face. “Sir Conrad,” he said quietly, “I do not mind sharing Sebastian, but please, allow me to have him only to myself a little more. Unlike you, I love him.”

If it hadn’t been for the uber-serious tone Pepin used, Kai would have said something to the effect that sharing was totally out of the question.

Conrad appeared not to remain unaffected by Pepin’s plea, and his stern face softened for a moment. But right away, he frowned. “It is His Majesty’s call, of course. Far from me to impose.” With that, he turned quickly on his heels.

“I’ll accompany Sir Conrad, if you don’t mind,” Galien said and followed Conrad out of the room.

“Be my guest,” Kai called after him, but the doors were already closing, and he was talking to no one in particular. “Hey, Pepin, do you think Conrad is mad? Like really mad?”

Pepin’s lips were very close and distracting, Kai decided. Only if he leaned in, he could just kiss him, and it would be so simple.

And wrong, he tried to tell himself, but Pepin saved him from his problem by wrapping his arms around his neck and kissing him. It had to be because they were the OTP of a BL novel that everything was so simple and accessible. Like right now, he had no qualms, absolutely none whatsoever, with how Pepin’s lips fit over his or how his tongue, so sweet and tasty, was sneaking inside his mouth.

It wasn’t only about how nice that felt; it felt right, and that was wrong because it was supposed to feel wrong. He made a small attempt to kiss back, and that only made Pepin more enthusiastic. Kai was vaguely aware that he was held so tightly to the point of being a little suffocated, but it felt too good for any life-threatening side effects to occur.

Pepin finally let go. He stared him in the eyes and smiled. “I truly mean it, about having him, too.”

“Uh, Pepin, you’re a bit too open-minded. For me, I mean. I can barely get over the fact that I’m totally a BL character right now, so I don’t think I’m ready for any kind of threesome anytime soon. Actually, ever. I think.”

“Does that mean that you like me?” Pepin asked, his pretty eyes filled with hope. “Enough to keep me by your side?”

“I thought we covered that, retirement together, you know, the whole enchilada.”

Nope, that was totally just me, because Sebastian and I will switch bodies back eventually, and then...

Kai was just starting to get entangled in his own logic when Pepin hugged him and kissed him again. And then, there was definitely something poking him in the belly.

Kai pulled away from the kiss. “Pepin, again? It’s broad daylight, you know?”

How that was important, he had no idea, but he had to say something.

Pepin moved one hand back, and Kai grunted as his dick was grabbed quite unceremoniously. “Your cock keeps rubbing against my butt, Your Majesty. I’d say I’m not the one who doesn’t know it’s broad daylight.”

Ah, well, that was true. They had already done it once, so how was a second time going to hurt? Not him, at least, and Pepin looked up to it, so --

A scream pierced through the thick walls, followed by heavy steps and clamor of armor and weapons.

“Dragon!”

Dragon? Kai thought. It looked like this time around, he needed to keep it in his pants. Or put it in his pants. Whatever. There was a dragon at the gates!

Chapter Twenty-Two – Dragons Are People, Too

Pepin was, above all, an efficient and outstanding servant. Kai had no idea it would take so little for him to be back into his pants, shirt, and boots, and out of the room, with a fully dressed and dutiful servant on his heels.

“Your Majesty, your sword!” Pepin hurried to keep up with him.

“Right, give it here,” Kai said quickly. “Say, Pepin, do you believe we could make this dragon cry like the last one? I don’t feel like fighting one for real. They’re kind of cute, don’t you think?”

“I don’t believe that Your Majesty would still find them cute once you see half of your castle on fire.”

That was a good point, and Pepin was entirely correct, but Kai still had his hopes that he would strike a friendship with a dragon or two.

They hurried out on the external wall and up to the tower. The good news was that no sign of smoke could be sensed in the air, but everyone was in a frenzy, and armed guards were aligned along the walls, armed and ready to shoot from their bows, ballistae, and whatnot. Galien and Conrad joined them shortly.

“Where is the dragon?” Kai asked impatiently.

Just as if his words had the power to summon the mythical creature, a loud flapping of wings announced that they would soon see the dragon. Kai stared in fascination as the impressive creature soared from the ground and hovered in midair, at a height enough to allow him to stare into the golden eyes from up close.

“Hey, hold your fire, everyone!” Kai shouted at the top of his lungs. “Actually, put all your weapons away! It’s the mother dragon! We’re friends!”

Maybe all dragons looked pretty much the same, but Kai was sure enough he recognized those eyes from before.

“My name is Adhe,” the mother dragon spoke. “I thought you’d like to meet my little whelp, Iri.”

“Oh, he hatched?” Kai asked with excitement. “I totally want to see him. Hey, everyone, it’s all fine!” he shouted and leaned over the wall to gesture at the troops gathered and ready to fight.

What his voice, as loud as it was, couldn’t carry to everyone, was just passed from one soldier to another, and the weapons were being lowered, although Kai could tell everyone was prey to a lot of confusion. Well, they had to get used to it because he did things differently around here.

“Where is the baby?” he asked and opened his arms, ready to hold a baby dragon for the first time in his life.

“Your Majesty,” Conrad said in a tense voice, “how are you friends with this dragon?”

“The same I’m friends with you,” Kai said promptly, “completely by accident, but you know, it was a happy accident.”

“A prince making friends among dragons,” Galien commented. “Who would have thought?”

Kai could tell his cousin was amused by the entire scene without even turning to look at him. Adhe turned her head and nudged at something hiding behind her right wing. A small creature emerged, whining softly. His mother cooed and encouraged him while Kai stretched his arms as far as he could.

The whelp was darker than his mother, and his eyes were a lighter color. But most of all, he was so pretty with his tiny scales and clumsy little feet on which he could barely stand. Kai wrapped his arms slowly around the small body and lifted the baby dragon to hold him close to his chest. “Guys, look!” he exclaimed and turned to show the little wonder to the rest of the group. “His name is Iri, you said?” he asked the mother.

“Yes.”

“It’s such a beautiful name for such a beautiful baby. Look, Iri, this is Pepin who managed to repair your egg when it was cracked. He’s a cool guy. And this is Conrad, who has eyes just like yours. He’s a big shot warrior. And a heartbreaker,” he added in a conspiratorial voice. “And this is my cousin, Galien. Don’t believe everything they say about him being a rake and all that. He’s a good guy, too.”

The baby dragon was examining everyone with curious eyes, but when he turned his attention on Galien, Kai felt him tense. “Hey, little buddy, what is it?”

Iri suddenly sneezed, sending a wave of flames directly into Galien’s face, much to Kai’s horror.

“Oh my God, Galien, are you all right?”

But instead of witnessing something horrible like a charred face, he only stared into his cousin’s eyes that looked quite amused. Galien took out his handkerchief with a fancy gesture and wiped his face of a bit of soot. “I’m fire resistant, Sebastian, don’t worry. Just a little gift from my mother’s lineage.”

“Cool gift.” Kai breathed out in relief. “Iri, I think I should return you to your mother before you sneeze into other people’s faces, people who aren’t as lucky as Galien to having been born from a fire goddess.”

“I’m so sorry about that,” Adhe said and leaned over her wing so that Kai could deposit the baby dragon behind it safely. “He has yet to understand how powerful he is.”

“He’s a strong baby,” Kai agreed.

“I wanted to thank you for saving my child,” Adhe added. “Do you think there’s a way for me to repay your kindness?”

“You didn’t tell me how you got the cure for me,” Conrad said accusingly. “I assumed you destroyed the dragon.”

“Really, Conrad? Just what kind of guy do you think I am?” Kai turned to face the other. “We solved the quest by wits. I mean, it was mostly Pepin, but I was around so it counts.”

That made Conrad look at Pepin with new eyes. Kai could tell the captive prince was pretty impressed with that revelation. Most probably, he hadn’t expected that his rival in love would do such a thing to save him.

Pepin looked down with modesty and was saying nothing.

“Yeah,” Kai insisted, “Pepin totally saved your ass. So you two should hug and be friends or something.”

Although the two didn’t move to do any of what he was so strongly recommending, he knew everyone would be fine, and that was all that mattered. Then, an idea struck him. He turned toward the mother dragon. “Adhe, do you think we could like ride on your back a little? Unless you find that insulting and you’ll only wait to get high enough to drop us and turn us into dust.”

“Please, climb on my back,” Adhe said and hovered close to the wall from one side.

“Guys, we’re going on a road trip on the back of a dragon!” Kai announced with enthusiasm. “Is it too much to take the four of us?” he asked the mother dragon.

“No, not at all,” Adhe assured him. “I will barely feel you. But you should hold Iri in front so that he doesn’t get scared with so many people around.”

“Sure. Pepin, you first, and hold Iri. He must love you the most since you’re the guy who saved him,” Kai began organizing them. “Then, I’m next, and Galien, you can sit behind me, with Conrad the last because he’s the biggest guy in our group.”

If there were any adjustments the guys wanted to make to the plan, they seemed to prefer to keep them to themselves. Nonetheless, Kai could tell that everyone was pretty excited about the prospect of riding on the back of a dragon. He offered Pepin his hand and helped him climb between Adhe’s shoulder blades, and then he took little Iri and placed him in Pepin’s lap. The baby dragon seemed quite excited, too, if one could take his cooing as a sign of that.

When he sat behind Pepin and trapped the other between his thighs, he sighed contently. He was on the back of a frigging dragon! If it was all a dream, it was one hell of a dream. Galien placed his hands on Kai's shoulders as he took his place, and Conrad followed right away. He was a bit sandwiched between Pepin, who leaned against him and tickled his nose with his hair, and Galien, who playfully wrapped his arms around him, only to be pulled back abruptly, probably by a jealous Conrad.

Well, it wasn't flying first class, but who the hell needed a boring plane ticket when they could ride a dragon?

Adhe soared into the air, and Kai began waving at the people below who were staring at them in utter disbelief. However, as soon as Adhe started flapping her wings to depart, the gathered troops broke into cheers.

Kai felt it was an important moment in the history of Ifigia, so it was a good moment for a short and unforgettable speech. "My peeps," he yelled from the top of his lungs, "this is a great day for our kingdom." Adhe was gaining speed, so he needed to make it even shorter. "Don't forget. Dragons are people, too!"

He had no idea if the last of his words had been carried by the wind or not, but it didn't matter. He was riding a dragon!

"I had no idea Ifigia was so beautiful from above," Kai commented as Adhe took them over the rich golden fields and green rolling hills.

"None of us had, I assure you, Your Majesty," Pepin said. "I've never been so high up in the air!"

It was so easy to pick on Pepin's excitement. Kai leaned forward and pressed his cheek against the other's, enjoying how warm and smooth it felt. He caressed Iri's head, and the baby dragon tilted his head to stare at him with his humid eyes.

He looked definitely happy in Pepin's arms.

"Pepin, I think you have a knack for holding babies," Kai said.

"You believe so, Sebastian?" Pepin's voice was low and quiet, almost hard to hear, as, at that height, the wind blew with a vengeance.

"Totally. You're a natural. I barely held him for a minute, and he almost melted Galien's face."

"He did nothing to me, but your hair is killing me, Sebastian," Galien protested.

Kai turned to see all of his hair smacking Galien in the face while the guy was trying in vain to brush it away while still holding on with one hand. That was really funny, so Kai laughed in his face. "Sorry, sorry." He grabbed his hair, as well as he could manage, and pulled it on one side. "Do you think you can braid this thing?" he asked Pepin.

"Of course, Your Majesty," Pepin said dutifully and got to work while still somehow managing to keep the baby dragon close.

"See, Galien? Don't ever say that I don't care about my cousin dearest," Kai threw over his shoulder.

"Indeed," Galien agreed. "You're surprisingly accommodating, Sebastian. I'm starting to wonder just how much you changed during these years we haven't seen each other. All those stories I kept hearing about you must have been exaggerations."

"Yeah, totally. I'm a good guy," Kai said with emphasis. Not a modest one, for sure, but still, compared to Sebastian, who could probably make the entire kingdom tremble with a flick of his wrist or a frown, he had to be the salt of the earth.

"Oh, Conrad, yes, hold me tightly like this," Galien suddenly moaned, taking Kai by surprise.

Too bad he couldn't turn completely to see what was going on.

"What on earth are you spewing, you rake?" Conrad asked, obviously scandalized. "I'm barely holding my arms around you."

Galien laughed. "You're so easy, Sir Conrad. I'm loving you more and more."

"And, with all due respect, I'm hating you more and more, Sir Galien," Conrad hissed back his reply.

Kai snickered. "Are you hearing these guys, Pepin? They're a total riot. I think we might be hearing wedding bells soon."

"Do you wish that Conrad would marry your cousin?" Pepin asked.

"You know how they say, couples that fight a lot love a lot, or something like that."

"And I'll be marrying you?"

Pepin's question sobered him up in an instant. Could he be convinced that Sebastian would agree to that once they switched back? Because if it were after him, he would say 'yes' to Pepin in an instant.

His eyes wandered at the horizon. Black tendrils of smoke rose in the distance, ominous and frightening. "What's that?" Kai asked.

Galien and Conrad stopped their bickering.

“Oh, no,” Galien whispered. “But how is it possible? You destroyed the House of Uxilan, did you not, Sebastian?”

“As far as I can tell,” Kai shot back, unnerved by the sudden grave tone of his cousin’s voice.

“That’s their territory. They’re rising again,” Galien said somberly.

“They what? Can you take us over there, Adhe?” Kai asked.

“Your Majesty, no,” Conrad said in the same solemn tone as Galien. “The land of the House of Uxilan is poisoned, as are the trees and everything that still lives in there. It would be sure death.”

“All right,” Kai admitted. “But what are we supposed to do?”

“Turn back to the castle,” Galien recommended.

“And prepare for war,” Conrad added.

Kai felt a cold shiver down his spine. Now that didn’t feel like playing anymore.

Sebastian moved his fingers against his nose, wincing at the pain he still felt. Nothing was broken, and Mrs. Martin had confirmed it, but the sensation was there, irking him to no end. The skin had been sliced a bit, and Kai’s mother had taken to bandage it, which had made him protest at first. After a look in the mirror, something convinced him that it was for the better. Along with the few scratches on his face, that bandage made him look less like the weakling Kai was and a bit more like someone who would find it easier to demand respect. That, along with the unadulterated yet controlled fury in his eyes.

The plan had to be put in motion, and the soonest, the better. Alone in his bedroom, he could start his training so that he could repel such attacks in the future. As Sebastian well knew, that would take a long time, but that didn’t mean that he would postpone it for one moment more than necessary.

The first thing he had to do was the most difficult. To ensure that his enemies wouldn’t use Milo and the young man’s affection toward him in order to corner him and make him surrender, he had to do something. There was also the matter that those minions that served who knew what evil force could also take it upon themselves to hurt Milo, and that was, indeed, impossible to allow if it cost him everything.

He drew in a sigh and grabbed his phone. Without a doubt, it would be painful, but he was not a man to live his life by halves. With another heartfelt exhale, he began typing quickly to find a

way to break up with someone without hurting their feelings. His lips began moving as he read page after page of teen breakup advice. He would have found it all quite ludicrous if he hadn't been in the unnegotiable position of having to convince Milo that he genuinely wanted them to become perfect strangers.

"What bullocks," he murmured to himself. Where were the lavish gifts? Where was the decree that they would never cross paths again? And where, above all, was his usual conviction that he was doing nothing but the right thing by parting ways with a lover?

He squeezed the phone in his hand hard. If he were in his body, the stupid phone with all its foolish advice would crumble. But he was not him, and the rules of this world demanded that he had to heed inane advice on how to part with someone you were in love with.

Still in love with. He had never loved before, and he was now acutely aware of it, and the burning sensation in the middle of his chest was of the worst kind. Sebastian wanted to believe that such feelings would come to pass, but only the thought of erasing Milo from his mind and heart appeared impossible.

As hurtful as it was, he needed to go ahead and do it. Milo would love another, and there were chances that if Sebastian defeated his enemies, he and Kai would return to their bodies. Maybe Kai would return Milo's affection, and this breakup or whatever it was would appear as just a tiny bump in the road, as they said here, in this world.

So why was his hand trembling, clutched on the phone? It was the just thing to do. Never before, when it had come to protect what and who was worth protecting, had he ever hesitated. This vacillation wasn't him.

"Let's see," he said out loud in an effort to spur himself into action. "Take your time to think why you want to break up," he read, mumbling under his breath.

Oh, that was easy. If he didn't do it, Milo would be in mortal danger, and that was something he couldn't have. Therefore, all the teen angst supposed to accompany his decision wasn't present.

"Consider the other's feelings and possible reactions. Will they cry? Will they get mad?" Sebastian continued to read. He stopped. How would Milo react? He didn't think he would be able to stand seeing Milo cry. Just the thought of those green eyes swimming in tears was enough to make his stomach clench like he had just eaten a dozen lemons. How had he done it so many times before? Had he ever been impressed by tears? Not that his former lovers usually cried when the time to part with them came. He was more used to being threatened and insulted but not to tears.

No, that was clearly not an option. Milo crying would make him come undone, and by that, he would condemn the young man to a horrible fate.

“Be kind and don’t judge the other person, but be honest about your reasons why you want to break up.”

No, that advice was just another piece of waste, Sebastian decided. He couldn’t be honest about the real reasons; Milo would become worried, Mrs. Martin would probably find out, and then the police would be involved. Sebastian wasn’t in the mood to start watching prison series to discover how to survive in that kind of environment and plan a jailbreak, for the simple reasons that it didn’t go along with his plan.

Of course, he would heed the advice telling him that he would do good to tell Milo why he had liked him in the first place. That would take a lot of time, but it would be worth it if it made things easier for Milo.

“Show the other person respect by telling them about the breakup in person.” Sebastian stopped for a moment. “No, let’s cut this off the list.”

For his plan to work flawlessly, he had to stay away from Milo. He couldn’t avoid him since they attended the same classes, but limiting interactions was desirable.

Sebastian closed his eyes for a moment. He now knew why he hadn’t fallen in love before. It complicated things unnecessarily, especially when they demanded the most attention, like right now. The chances were he would not be able to go through with it if he were to look upon Milo with the same eyes he had done so lately.

He spent some more time reading through the advice offered by various websites. The conclusion was one and only: he would break up with Milo via text.

His fingers hurt as he forced them to type. But as soon as he was done with it, he would be able to focus on his training.

I want to talk about something important.

Sent. Sebastian didn’t like blocks of text, so he needed to deliver his message in different texts.

What? Where to hang out tomorrow?

He hadn’t expected a reply, but now he couldn’t back down. Quickly, he checked what he was supposed to say next.

You are very important to me.

It was the truth and the most crucial part of what he was doing right now.

Really? You are, too. I’m just joking. I know I’m important to you.

Milo's message was peppered with all sorts of smiley faces. Sebastian had found them a bit childish, but now they were glaring at him with their happy smiles, and he hated them a little. Now, the big 'but' followed.

But I don't want a boyfriend right now.

What do you want then? Milo's text appeared promptly on the screen. *Are you proposing? Because that would be crazy, but I wouldn't say 'no' if that's the case.*

Proposing? Sebastian stopped for a moment and winced at the pain in his nose. The last thing he needed was to blow his nose right now. He pressed the back of the hand against his forehead and wished those pesky sensations away.

So, I want to break up. Sebastian fired the text quickly.

This time, Milo didn't send a text right away. Since this had turned into some sort of conversation, Sebastian tried to wait patiently. The three dots were pure torture to watch.

You're joking, right?

No, he wasn't, not at all. He just had to stick with the plan, and soon all would be over. But the cookie-cutter example of what he was supposed to say next couldn't convey what he felt in his heart.

I will always cherish every single memory I have of you.

That was it. That was all. Sebastian wiped his face angrily. No wonder he had been fine for all the twenty-two years of his life he had lived so far. Nothing compared to this, and he wasn't supposed to cry over such a thing. When had he ever cried? It had to be Kai's tears, and there was no other explanation.

The phone ringing startled him. He stared at the screen, at Milo's beautiful smiling face, and hesitated. Why was he calling? They had broken up already. The next item on the list said that...

Right, it said that he needed to hear the other person out. He inhaled, exhaled, and answered the phone.

"Are you seriously breaking up with me over text?" Milo's voice was perplexed, above everything else.

"Yes," Sebastian struggled to get out of his mouth. "Indeed, I am."

Milo stopped for a moment. "You've been crying. I can tell. What's going on, Kai?"

"I'm definitely not crying. I want to break up. It is my decision, and now's your turn to talk. I'll listen."

“You’re... Is this some sort of prank? I know you like a good laugh, but come on... this... this is hurtful,” Milo said in a low voice.

Sebastian hated those anxious inflections he could pick up even like that over the phone. “No, it is not, I assure you.”

“Then why? Why do you want to break up? Did I push you too hard? I mean, I thought you wanted it, too, the way you talked and – You know what, it must be my fault, so just tell me what it is. I can fix it. Please, just give me a chance.”

Sebastian closed his eyes and put the phone away so that he didn’t blurt out some incredible truth. “Believe me,” he said in a steady voice, “it is not your fault. You are wonderful and --”

“And what? What didn’t work? I hurt you somehow, didn’t I?” Milo was getting gradually more rattled with each word he was saying.

“You did nothing of the kind.”

“Then please just tell me. How can I make it work if you’re not telling the truth?”

“The truth?” Sebastian echoed. “You wouldn’t believe the truth.”

“Try me,” Milo said aggressively. “I know you’re kind of aloof most of the time, but I never pegged you for a dishonest guy. So shoot it to me straight.”

Sebastian sighed. “People are here to hurt me, and they could do the same thing to you because of our association.”

“What? What people?” Milo sounded even more confused now.

“Assassins,” Sebastian said promptly. “They were sent here to eliminate me.”

Milo stopped for a moment. “Here? Assassins? What the hell, Kai? This joke is just taking it too far, okay, buddy? You’ve never been cruel to me before. Actually, to no one. This doesn’t sound like you. When you talk like this, you don’t sound at all like the Kai I know. Who are you?”

“I told you. I’m Prince Sebastian --”

“That stuff again? You know what?” Milo interrupted him. “I’ll let you sleep over your little prank. But I expect proper apologies tomorrow. The sooner, the better.”

Sebastian stared at the phone, being his turn to feel perplexed over how Milo cut off the conversation. The young man didn’t believe him.

It didn't matter. Now that the breakup ritual was over, he could concentrate on honing his skills. He doubted Kai had any fighting aptitudes, so he had to start somewhere. With steady fingers now, he began browsing.

Chapter Twenty-Three – Decisions Make The Man

He wasn't allowed any sort of weapons at school, which was a disappointment, so Sebastian had to settle for walking there bare-handed, albeit he would be forced to meet his assassins there, as they were part of the same group of students and shared the same classes. Throughout the entire Sunday, his phone had been quiet, which meant that Milo was still waiting for an apology that would never come. Sebastian hated compulsively that he would have to meet the boy again and stare into those green eyes filled with hurt. According to those websites specialized in teen advice, those soul wounds were superficial and would heal fast, so there was a bit of comfort in that, at least. Too bad such comforts wouldn't be bestowed upon him, as well.

Tani walked by his side, and he could tell that his sister was dying to ask him something.

"You are allowed to talk if there's something bothering you," he eventually said.

"Allowed? Pfft," she replied. "Where is Milo? Do you guys really have a fight? Is that how you broke your nose? But I thought you two made up." The sentences shot off her tongue like projectiles.

"I didn't break my nose, and this minor wound happened as I stumbled over a piece of furniture that wasn't where it was supposed to be. As for Milo, it doesn't concern you."

"For real? I'm your sis, remember?" Tani had the same playful manner of speaking as many teenagers, but Sebastian could feel that she was, indeed, bothered, by how she slowed down her pace, forcing him to do the same.

"Milo and I broke up," he said brusquely.

"Say what?" Tani shouted.

Now it was Sebastian's turn to hush her, as the people around turned to stare at them.

"Why?"

"It's complicated, and as a young girl, you wouldn't understand it anyway."

Tani pondered over her following words. "I would," she said quietly. "You can tell me."

Sebastian stopped and looked at her for a few moments. She was just so young; if Milo couldn't understand and believe that he was from another world, how could Tani be more accepting of such a strange thing? He decided to keep silent. The less involved the people around him were, people he had come to care about, including this silly girl, the better. It was his curse and duty to get rid of the assassins without having Tani know about it. The chances were that even if she believed him, she would get scared, and Sebastian had no time nor the inclination to deal with her fears, on top of it all.

“There are things you can only understand when you reach the right age,” he settled for an explanation.

Tani groaned in frustration. “Ugh, you sound just like mom! Then I’ll ask Milo.”

“No, you won’t do such a thing,” Sebastian said sternly.

“Is it that bad? Ah, it must be one of those misunderstandings that appear at the start of any new relationship,” Tani said. “That means you’ll get over it.”

Sebastian failed to understand how Tani was coming up with such statements. No, he would never get over it because he would never put Milo in harm’s way, nor he would ever forget him, now that he was so hopelessly in love with him. He took Tani’s hand firmly and rushed her toward the subway station.

He waited for the other students to rush inside at the sound of the bell so that he could walk into the classroom at the last minute and thus avoid having to talk to Milo. The less contact he had with him, the better, Sebastian decided, especially since his enemies would watch his every move. He had trained in his room throughout the day before, following various advice offered freely on the internet on how one could defend himself. The encouraging part was that he had discovered that he was quite adept at learning the techniques presented, as it appeared that even his current inadequate body could respond to the challenges at hand. Maybe part of who he was inside could be transferred into the actions he would perform when forced to take a stand again against his assailants.

He walked in, right after the teacher, and took advantage of all the commotion in the room to dash to his place.

“What the hell happened to your face?”

That was Milo’s voice, but Sebastian didn’t turn to look at him. “Don’t speak to me. We broke up,” he whispered.

“I thought you were joking.”

“And I clearly told you I wasn’t.”

“Mr. Martin, Mr. Bennett!” the teacher snapped as the students finally fell quiet, and they were the only ones still ignoring her. “Haven’t you had enough time to talk in your spare time?”

“My apologies,” Sebastian said politely.

“Mr. Martin, have you sustained an injury? Do you need to go home? Or to see a doctor?” the teacher asked as she noticed the state of his face.

People in this world tended to fret over minor wounds like they were life-threatening. “No, thank you for your concern,” Sebastian replied. “I am in no mortal danger, and I do not require a healer. My mother tended to my wounds.”

“Still a smartass,” the teacher said with a sigh. It was the same who had sent him to detention that time, so Sebastian needed to tread cautiously around her. As things stood, he was in no need of such a waste of time. “But how did you injure yourself?”

“Maybe he stumbled over his own legs,” Chet suddenly spoke.

Sebastian turned in his seat and took a long hard look at the pig-like face. While he had every reason to delay a second confrontation, he wouldn’t give that boy the satisfaction of cowering in his presence. Chet and his posse laughed, but the rest of the students began whispering between them. Sebastian knew how to recognize worry when he saw it. How many times hadn’t he seen it in his people when monsters were at the gates? He knew no such thing; it was his duty to protect the others, and it was what he did every time, without wasting a moment on dealing with such feelings.

The correct thing to admit to himself was that he hadn’t known worry before. Now, he worried for Milo and what those disgusting boys could do to him. Even if all they wanted were to tarnish his reputation on grounds Sebastian couldn’t comprehend, and in the process, prevent him from playing his favorite sport, he still wouldn’t allow it. Milo and his passion had to be protected at all costs.

“Did these idiots do something to you?” Milo whispered and fidgeted in his place.

“I just fell,” Sebastian said out loud, without looking at Milo. “It could happen to anyone,” he added and met Chet’s eyes with determination. For a moment, the pig-like face lost that stupid smile.

“If you’re all right, let’s just get to what’s far more important. Your education,” the teacher said, and soon only the sound of pens scribbling on paper could be heard.

Sebastian stole a glance at Milo. He looked as beautiful as ever, but it was easy to notice that there were dark circles under his eyes and that his mouth was set in a grim line. Since he was just looking at his notebook, like everyone else, Sebastian stared a little more. The large calloused hands were clenching tightly.

Why were sentiments such a difficult thing to deal with? As always, Sebastian had to admit his mother – the real one – was correct. The most important thing was to be all-powerful and know no fear. Love had no place in his heart, shouldn’t have had one. And that was another lesson from the ice goddess that he had so inconveniently forgotten.

Milo caught him in the hallway as he was rushing out. Ignoring him throughout the day had been an ordeal of the most torturing kind. Milo grabbed him by the arm and pushed him into a corner. “Don’t think that I’ll just let this whole thing slip like it’s nothing. What happened? Did Chet do something to you? Is that why you decided we should broke up?”

What was the point to explain the truth again? Just like Tani, Milo was better knowing as little as possible. Sebastian even had regrets about telling him too much already. “No. Nothing untoward happened. And I decided to break up with you because we’re too young to be in such a relationship.”

“Too young? We’re eighteen --” Milo’s voice raised a notch. Then he added more quietly, “Is it because of the whole sex thing?”

Sebastian began looking around. He didn’t need Chet and his acolytes to be privy to this conversation. Suspiciously enough, they had left him alone the entire day at school. “No. It is because of developing an attachment where there should be none. I have no feelings for you, so there’s no gain in continuing.”

He pushed past Milo and began walking fast. What would it take to make sure they never spoke again? Chet needed to see that he and Milo were perfect strangers so that he would leave him alone.

But again, he was grabbed from behind and forced to stop.

“Kai, what the hell is happening?” Milo said through his teeth.

Sebastian shook off the other’s touch. Other students hurrying about began throwing them curious looks. “I just don’t want to have anything to do with you anymore.”

“You can’t --”

He turned on his heels and bore his eyes into Milo’s. “Yes, I can. I’m doing it right now. You mean nothing to me anymore.”

Milo appeared to stagger slightly under the force of those words. Sebastian had never before once thought anything of being cruel when demanded by the circumstances, but now he could feel his chest squeezing tightly as Milo’s face scrunched up in worry and despair.

“We’re through,” he added through clenched teeth and dug his fingernails into his palms to stop himself from reaching out and pulling Milo into a tight embrace as his heart yearned and pushed him to.

“All right,” Milo said and pursed his lips, his face turning to stone. “I’ll find out what this is all about. Don’t think I’ll take this lying down like a moron.” He walked away without one look back.

What did he mean by that? Sebastian knew that one thing only was certain. He could waste not one precious moment and needed to get back home, lock himself in his room and continue his training. His muscles were sore everywhere, which was a downside, but if he didn't push this body into doing what was needed, what chances did he have?

In the meantime, he needed to discover some ways to project himself as someone people didn't want to mess with. That was just another strange expression he had learned since coming here, and it served to illustrate his current situation because people, obviously, were interested in messing with him.

He was almost out in the street when Tani hurried from behind and caught his hand. "Weren't you going to wait for me? I called you for like a hundred times."

"I doubt that. Tani, what does it take to look badass?"

Badass. Another strange turn of phrase. It made Sebastian think of someone with an abominable condition that involved their behind, but he had seen enough TV shows to understand the meaning. To keep the assassins sent to eliminate him on their toes, he needed to look, well, 'badass'.

"I don't know. Big scary muscles, maybe a moustache," Tani replied.

"A mustache?" Sebastian grimaced. He didn't believe he had the necessary time for developing big scary muscles, and facial hair didn't appeal to him. Plus, Kai didn't seem to be capable of even growing a mustache.

"Ah, I know," Tani said. "A tattoo."

Sebastian flicked through his phone without asking any unnecessary questions. His phone screen filled with pictures of physically impressive men exposing their bodies covered in intricate designs. A tattoo would be just about right, he decided. Since he still had money left from his cosplaying gig, he would put it to good use.

"Wait, are you going to get a tattoo?" Tani asked excitedly as she peeked at what he was browsing. "Mom is so going to kill you."

"Kill me?" Sebastian was rightfully taken aback. "But I'm her only son."

Tani patted him on the back. "Don't worry, I'll convince her that I don't want to live the rest of my life as an only child. See how much I love you?" She blinked a few times and smiled at him. "But only if you take me with you," she added quickly.

"Take you where?"

Tani groaned. "Where you're going to get the tattoo."

He didn't have time to convince his sister to leave him alone. Even though she was Kai's sister, he found it quite natural to call her his sibling, which, in itself, seemed like a dangerous thing to do and think, just as much as indulging in fantasies regarding him and Milo together. "All right. We're going right now."

"Wow, for real?"

"Yes. I still have some money left from the cosplay competition." According to the list of prices displayed, he had enough for having something done. He would have to compromise by the looks of it, but he would get a tattoo, nonetheless.

"Maybe you should break the bank a little if you want to get something cool," Tani advised.

"I don't have time to break a bank," Sebastian replied.

Tani snickered. "That secret stash of yours, don't you want to put it to good use?"

"I'm afraid I forgot where it is."

"Don't worry, I didn't," Tani said and began dragging him.

Knowing Kai's secret money place would have come in handy earlier, but it was a good thing to learn about it even now. And it was good to have such a thoughtful sister, after all.

"You eighteen?" The man at the tattoo parlor threw him a dubious look.

Sebastian produced his identity card and presented it dutifully. The man scratched his head and handed it back. Even part of his face was covered in skin art, and Sebastian had to admit that he couldn't stop staring despite his impeccable upbringing.

"I hope the little girl doesn't want one, too," the man said and offered a toothy grin.

"No, she's just here because she's my sister," he explained.

"Could I get a tattoo, too, though?" Tani asked the tattoo artist.

"No," the man replied at the same time as Sebastian.

Getting a tattoo for himself was one thing, but letting Tani do the same was out of the question. He had a feeling that Mrs. Martin might not keep from killing him if he allowed the little girl to get a tattoo along with him.

"So, what's going to be?" The tattoo artist offered him a seat and some catalogs with amazing pictures. "And where do you want it?"

Sebastian flicked through the pages. "It should be in a visible spot," he said. "As for design, I'm yet to decide."

"Take your time. You're the last client for today, so I can wait."

Tani stared at the pictures with him. "I think you should get one on your arm, like this," she said, lifting the sleeve of her uniform and presenting her arm up to the elbow. "Unless you want it on your face."

"No, that would be a bit extreme. Yes, I'll get one on the forearm, as you suggested," he decided.

"This kitty is pretty," she said as she pointed at a pink cat with flower pins behind her ears.

"I'm not getting a kitty, Tani. Kitties are not badass," he argued.

"They totally are," Tani countered. "In a cute way."

"I don't need cute," Sebastian said sternly. "I need something that symbolizes strength and courage."

"What about this lion?" Tani pointed at one of the pictures.

"Yes, but it is not quite what I want." He turned a few more pages, and then his eyes fell on what looked like the perfect choice. The golden eyes stared at him fearlessly as he had always known them to. "This," he said and showed the picture to Tani.

"Wow, you're getting a dragon? You're going to look like a yakuza," Tani said excitedly.

Sebastian didn't care to search for the term and understand what Tani was talking about, especially since he was now eager to get the thing done. "All right." He stood and cleared his throat to draw the artist's attention who was on his phone, enraptured with one of those silly games that Sebastian had once lost an entire night trying to beat.

The man looked at the design and then at him. "You sure, kid? It's going to hurt."

Sebastian shrugged. "That's no problem, I assure you."

"Do you have the dough?"

Tani pulled at his arm and nodded enthusiastically as he looked at her. Sebastian produced the bills from his pocket and slammed them on the man's table.

So far, all had been nothing but fun and giggles, while he had done nothing but enjoy to the extreme being inside the body of an OP character like Sebastian. On their way back, everyone kept silent, and he didn't dare to interrupt their thoughts by asking silly questions. At the same

time, he couldn't repress the feeling that this time, he wouldn't be able to wing it as he had done with everything so far. War had a serious connotation, and it wasn't a word like all the others. What he needed right now was to be alone with Pepin and ask him everything he knew about the House of Uxilan and how he could carry a war when his knowledge of such things was as good as none. Yes, he had led troops and conquered vast spaces in video games, but there, he could plan his actions while deciding which units to sacrifice, as those were nothing but pixels on the screen. Now, he would have to do the same thing, but with people who were alive and breathing, and would be greatly affected by his decisions.

It must have been something in the ominous smoke rising at the horizon that had sobered him up to the reality of this world he had been thrown in. At first, he had thought nothing but how cool it was to travel to a fantastic place, but what if all this was real? It couldn't be a dream because dreams couldn't last for days and weeks, and they couldn't be this vivid. So, the House of Uxilan and their poison that had almost done Conrad in were very much real.

Now wasn't the time to get cold feet, he decided. He would just extract all the information he needed from Pepin, and Galien would have to help him, too. If they ever wondered why he was such an airhead, he could blame it on that hit to the head again.

Adhe left them on the wall, where she had taken them from. "When you need me, I won't be far. I'll give you one of my scales, and you can use it to call me. Just put it to your lips and whisper my name."

"Thank you. But you have your baby to worry about. I wouldn't bother you," Kai said.

The dragon looked into his eyes. "The House of Uxilan is drunk on power, always has been. They care naught but lay destruction in their paths. As much as I've known you to fight against my kin, Prince Sebastian, I also know that you're the only one that can keep them from taking over Ifigia and turn it into the pestilence they call their home."

"Sebastian," Galien called for him. "You have to call the war council. Now."

That meant that he had no time to prepare. "But I want to change out of these clothes first," he said defensively.

Galien grabbed him by the shoulder hard. "Your Majesty," he said sternly, "now's really not the time to worry about your attire. The people need to learn of it so that they can start preparing. Call the war council, without delay."

Kai remembered only one other time when he had felt so utterly alone as right now, as he was seated at the head of the table, with dozens of eyes on him, belonging to old generals, seasoned warriors, and a few diplomats. Galien and Conrad were seated by his left and right side while

Pepin was tiptoeing about while offering refreshments. So much for getting the servant to inform him of what needed to be done.

In front of him, on the large table, a map of Ifigia lay, and at the east, the House of Uxilan and its lands were represented by charcoal terrain. The feelings of hopelessness and injustice that had overwhelmed him that day when he had said his last goodbye to his dad were with him now, and Kai pressed the palms of his hands against the thick oak surface while trying to get a grip of himself and his surroundings.

Everyone was silent, waiting for him to speak up. How had he done things so easily while playing games? He was good at it, as he well remembered, but this was real. So basing his actions on a child's play seemed ill-advised and likely to have horrible consequences.

Yes, he had no experience whatsoever with actual war, but that wasn't the case with the rest of the men gathered around the table. A lightbulb flickered in his head.

"What do you say we should do?" he asked directly.

His question appeared to take the audience by surprise. The men threw concerned looks at one another and murmured, but none spoke up.

"You've seen many wars, as I can see it in your wrinkles and your scars," Kai began, as he remembered some of the things he had learned from the fantasy books he enjoyed reading. "Before I come up with a strategy, I want to know what you think first."

That appeared to have a more convincing effect. Sebastian surely did things differently, most likely like an authoritarian leader who only gave orders and let others execute his will.

One of the generals finally decided to speak. "We should move troops at the border first. Not a lot, but enough to give the enemy something to do. We must stall for time, while we prepare ourselves here, at the castle, for a full-scale offensive."

Kai frowned. "We would do nothing short of sacrificing those troops. Isn't there any other way?"

"We need time, Your Majesty," the general replied. The old man was surprised and failed to hide it. "Their sacrifice wouldn't be in vain."

"Can't we do something that doesn't involve sending human lives to certain death?" he asked. "Anyone else?"

"Your Majesty destroyed them once," someone else spoke.

Kai looked into a pair of shifty eyes that stared back at him from underneath furrowed eyebrows. He wasn't entirely sure he liked the glint he noticed in the man's stare.

"Councilman Madigar is right," another said.

There were murmurs of agreement rising from all corners of the room.

“Apparently,” Kai said, “I haven’t done a thorough job.”

“This time, you’ll destroy the House of Uxilan, Your Majesty,” Madigar assured him swiftly. “You only need to do the same thing you’ve done the last time. We put all our faith in you.”

If only he’d known what that was, Kai thought. “What do you think?” he turned toward Galien.

His cousin had a dark look on his face, and he didn’t appear to be in the least pleased with where that conversation was going. To his surprise, Galien stood and slammed his hands hard against the table, making all the murmurs die down. “Last time,” he growled, “His Majesty did nothing short of almost sacrificing himself just so that all of you could live.”

Kai felt his ears perking up. Well, he was OP, so he would just go over there, blow some snowflakes with a healthy dose of blizzard over the House of Uxilan, and that would be over. How come he hadn’t thought of it? That was a great idea.

“His Majesty is alive and well, as we can all see,” Madigar said with a thin smile.

“By a whim of fate alone,” Galien insisted.

Now Kai was dying of curiosity, but he couldn’t outright ask. Galien seemed concerned, but why should anyone be concerned about an OP character? He wasn’t even sure that Sebastian could get hurt for real since he was the son of a goddess, after all.

“So, what are you guys saying? Should I go and fight them alone?” he asked out loud.

The entire room fell silent. A few heads began shaking here and there, others looked down, and the atmosphere was getting tense. Kai inspected them carefully, waiting for more input.

“Your Majesty can surely do it,” Madigar said in a sugary voice. “And since, in your kindness, you care about your people and don’t want to sacrifice them in vain, it would be for the best.”

“I certainly object to such an insane plan,” Galien countered. “Sebastian, don’t even think about it. I’m starting to believe that councilman Madigar doesn’t have Ifigia’s best interest at heart by showing so much eagerness to send you in harm’s way.”

Kai didn’t like the councilman, either, but Galien could tell, for sure, that he was OP, and therefore, impossible to defeat, right?

“What’s your alternative?” he asked his cousin.

Galien started picking the figurines on the table and clustered them on several areas on the map. “We should defend these choking points. The enemy won’t be able to push through easily, and

we'd have them where we want, decimating their troops little by little, lowering their power, and maybe defeating them before even reaching here."

Kai could totally see the logic of Galien's plan. It would surely limit their losses, too, but still, there would be some. And he was OP, so as much as he disliked that councilman, he saw why going alone against the threat would be the only way to do the right thing.

"People would still die," he said. "I don't want that."

Galien stopped and looked at him. "It is their duty, too, Sebastian. They must protect Ifigia, their lands, their lives, their families."

"Yes, their families," Kai replied. "I don't intend to leave anyone without a father or a mother."

Sebastian was unlikely to speak in such a manner, so Kai wondered why the entire room wasn't breaking into an uproar over his statements.

"As expected of Prince Sebastian," Madigar said courteously and inclined his head. "He would never endanger anyone but his own person unless absolutely necessary."

Well, it was Kai's turn to be surprised, then.

"And now it is absolutely necessary," Galien insisted.

"Indeed," Conrad added fiercely, although he had kept quiet all the time.

Kai couldn't show any sign of hesitation as the ruler of the realm. He'd learn later from Pepin and Galien about how Sebastian had succeeded against the House of Uxilan. And he would do precisely the same. It couldn't be that hard.

"I decided," he said firmly.

Chapter Twenty-Four – You’ll Be The Hero

Pepin closed the doors quietly behind them, and Kai could easily tell that there was something on the servant’s mind as he had kept silent all the time on their way back from the war council room. As of now, he had to start preparing himself to march against the House of Uxilan, whatever that meant.

“Pepin, are you worried? Do you think the same thing as before might happen?” he asked cautiously, trying to find a way to gather information from the servant without appearing too suspicious and un-Sebastian-like. He had no idea why that even concerned him at this point since there were so many other more important things at stake.

He turned to look at Pepin and froze at the sight of those lovely eyes swimming in tears. “Hey, what’s wrong?” He had no idea what to do. Was he supposed to offer his handkerchief? Galien had done that for him when he had cried over exchanging lollipops with Pepin and making a mess out of it.

Pepin surprised him again by rushing over and hugging him tightly.

“Pepin, you’re suffocating me,” Kai complained. “What happened last time when I went against those jerks that you’re so emotional right now?”

What were the rules of dealing with an emotional boyfriend? He had no idea because he had never had a boyfriend before. But he hadn’t been OP before, either, so he just had to get used to it and do the right thing.

“You almost died,” Pepin said while sobbing. “I thought I really lost you.”

“Come on, for real? I’m OP, I mean I’m so powerful and I can freeze anyone, right? You don’t have to worry so much. Tell me what happened then that you’re so messed up right now.” He was basically using Pepin’s feelings to get information out of him, but it was for a noble cause, and he had no time to spare on regretting his methods.

“They took your magic away,” Pepin said and buried his head into Kai’s chest while violent sobs racked his body. “Don’t you remember?”

Oh, shit. Kai hadn’t expected anything like that, and now he could feel his entire body getting stiff and his feet cold. “How the hell did they do that?”

“They’re dark magic wielders,” Pepin explained while pressing his forehead hard against Kai. “I don’t know how, but they did.”

“Then how did I win against them?” Kai murmured.

“You crushed them with your sword and wits alone. And there was also…”

“What was?” Kai asked impatiently, seeing how Pepin had stopped talking.

“The protection magic your mother cast on you shortly after your birth,” Pepin said and began crying harder.

Well, that wasn't so bad. If he had a protection spell cast on him and Sebastian's incredible martial skills on his side, he could still win even without ice magic. “Then I'll be fine this time around, too,” he said simply. “You don't have to cry your heart out over a simple thing like this.”

“Sebastian, how come you don't understand?” Pepin raised his tear-filled eyes and stared at him. “Even your mother could only do this much. You no longer have her protection. It was gone the moment they tried to kill you. And why do you have me remind you all these things? Do you enjoy seeing me suffer?”

“Maybe I should get her to cast another,” Kai replied, ignoring Pepin's emotional speech, but he no longer felt so sure of himself. “But why did Galien call it a whim of fate when we were in the war council room?” As much as Pepin could start getting suspicious of him, he needed to ask all the right questions and get the correct answers.

“Because your mother didn't think you should ever need it, and it was only because a vulture tried to hurt you in your crib while she still cared for you as a small child that she cast it on you.”

“For real? Why did she think I shouldn't need it? Because of my OP... my ice magic?”

“No.” Pepin shook his head. “The people taking care of you once you were brought here, to the castle, they said... They all say that your mother is cruel. That she believes that should you fail, it will only be your fault for not being as strong as she made you to be.”

“And as soon as she thought that, I was about to become a vulture's breakfast,” Kai said matter-of-factly. No matter what the people around believed about Sebastian, the prince couldn't have had it easy with a mother like that.

So, the chances were that the House of Uxilan would leave him without his ice magic, and he was minus protection spell from mother dearest, anyway. That left him with nothing but the ability to hold a sword, so all in all, he no longer felt as OP as before. Damn, why did Sebastian's enemies have to be even more OP than him?

That wasn't very nice of them.

He took Pepin by the shoulders and made him sit with him on the bed. “Pepin, I will have to do this.” He hoped that the ice goddess wouldn't let her own son be defeated so easily and that she would chip in at the right time. Well, it was a slim hope seeing how cruel she was, indeed, but at least when her son had been about to get devoured by a predatory bird, she had decided to protect him.

That was everything he had, and he needed to put it to good use. It didn't matter that his feet felt like lead, and it appeared that coordinating his limbs was a feat even as he did as little as hold Pepin by the shoulders to provide him with the assurance he needed right now.

"You could always tell them that you changed your mind," Pepin said. He looked at him with eyes full of hope. "Master Galien's plan is much better. He is an excellent strategist, and even you said that on numerous occasions. He held the border of Kelonia without losing almost any people all these years."

There were so many things he didn't know about his cousin, Kai realized. So it could be that Sebastian had left Galien to take care of his duchy and not pushed him away so that he wouldn't steal his lovers, as rumors had it. Or, it could be both, and what did he know, anyway?

"Yes, I know, his plan was sound," Kai admitted. "But I don't want anyone to get hurt."

Pepin turned away from his touch. "Anyone but you? Is that what you're saying, Sebastian? You've always been like this, rushing in the face of danger, like... like I don't even exist!"

"Pepin," Kai said sternly, "don't tell me you're selfish. Don't you care about all these people who could lose their homes, their families, their lives?"

"I do, but do they care about anything else but themselves? They say 'all hail Prince Sebastian' while gossiping behind your back, saying that you're cruel and that your heart is made of ice. Their mean eyes fill with glee each time you part with yet another lover, celebrating behind closed doors and feeling proud that they can have what you cannot."

"Ugh, Pepin, you kinda lost me. And I'm not talking about nobles, but about, you know, the knights and the troops that will have to go to war."

"They've trained all their life for it. Why shouldn't they go to war?" Pepin said in a strained voice. "And everyone thinks the same, everyone! They know they are protected by you. And at the same time, they hate you because you're so strong, superior, above them all. Yes, they all think that, all but me!"

"Now, now, Pepin, don't overreact," Kai tried to reason. "And Galien cares about me, and Conrad, too. Not everyone's bad. If there's even one soul that deserves my protection and OP-ness, then it's enough. And that soul is you," he added.

Pepin turned to look at him again. "If it's for me, don't do it, Sebastian. I want you here, with me, alive and well. I don't care about anything else. Even though --" he choked and sobbed.

Kai sighed. "Do you want me to hide behind these doors, while people are fighting outside? You know that's not who I am." He honestly hoped he sounded as much as Sebastian right now as he could.

Pepin nodded. "I do know. But it is still worth trying to change your mind."

"Sorry, Pepin. I know you wanted to go see the Shimmering Cavern, but that's not going to happen anytime soon."

Pepin looked down, seemingly in defeat. "Then there is only one way. You will take me with you."

Kai snorted. "Yeah, right, no. Getting a dragon's tear was one thing. Fighting against assassins with dark magic and poisoned blades is on a whole different level. It's endgame stuff, and you're only like level four or something even if you're great as a support and all."

"You cannot keep me from coming with you. And now I know --" Pepin stopped again.

What? Kai suddenly became curious. Now and then, Pepin acted strangely. "What do you know?"

"You're not him," Pepin said brusquely. "I've wondered for so long... but now I'm sure."

Holy.

Shit.

Kai stood from the bed cautiously and pretended that he needed to check on the state of his sleeves which were totally fine. "Um, what do you mean?" Maybe, just maybe, there was a chance that he misunderstood everything, and Pepin was talking about completely something else.

Pepin's eyes were clear when he risked a look at him. "I don't know who you are and why you are here, but I know you're not him. So you have to let me come with you because I cannot let you die now that I found you. Sebastian is not the only one who got his future told. And I know I'm to be loved."

"Uh-huh, you don't make any sense, you know? I am Sebastian, no need to talk about me, to me, in third person."

All right, so it looked like he had a huge problem on his hands right now. Kai began walking slowly toward the door. Of all the times Pepin could have said something, he had to choose the moment when he needed to play Prince Sebastian for real and go against a nation of dark magic wielders.

Pepin walked toward him purposefully. "I must protect you. You cannot stop me from taking me with you."

"Actually, I can." He hated to do this, but it wasn't like he had a choice. The last thing he needed was for Pepin to start shouting off the top of his lungs that he wasn't the real prince. Also,

whatever was happening right now, it was no longer child's play, and he couldn't have Pepin hurt in any way. And all that stuff, with Pepin figuring out everything, it had to wait.

"What?" Pepin asked. "What do you intend to do?"

"I think it's quite simple since I'm the prince," he said, trying hard to believe that. He walked to the doors and pulled them open. "Guards!" he called, hoping to sound royal and convincing. Two armed men hurried to him. "Take Pepin and escort him to his room," he said, fighting a crack in his voice that he hadn't known to be there. "Make sure he stays in there until I return from Uxilan."

"Your Majesty, you cannot!" Pepin jumped to his feet.

If Pepin started shouting that he was an imposter right now, he would be royally screwed.

"Oh, yes, I can," Kai said and bit his lips to stop them from their slight trembling. "Guys, take him," he told the guards.

He didn't look Pepin in the eye as he was dragged away by the guards, shouting and kicking. As soon as he was alone, he closed the doors and let himself slide to the floor, his back against them. He buried his head in his hands. How the hell was he supposed to fight those jerks? Was Sebastian OP enough just yielding his sword? And would Pepin tell the guards he wasn't their lord and master? Would they believe him?

For the first time since he had landed in Ifigia, Kai regretted that he wasn't in his own body, living the boring life of a high school student whose only worries were how to get passing grades and whether he could afford or not the next video game release.

He couldn't tell he was surprised when Galien barged into the royal quarters, looking like he had a bone to pick.

"Whatever you want to say, can it wait until I'm back?" Kai asked defensively. If his cousin started yammering that he didn't believe him to be the real Sebastian, he was in it deep.

"You mean, until you're dead?" Galien slammed shut the doors behind him in quite an unfriendly manner.

Kai winced and pretended he was totally fine with that. Gosh, Galien would soon start yelling at him, right? He couldn't stand when people were yelling at him.

"What kind of a decision was that?"

And... he was yelling. Kai groaned and hid his face in his palms. "I've got enough of an earful from Pepin on the same topic. I don't need one from you, too."

“Sebastian, with all due respect, you are out of your mind! You know you barely survived the last time you went against the House of Uxilan!”

Well, it would have served to have known about the whole ice magic blocking and ice goddess’s protection spell before getting into that kind of situation, but it wasn’t prince-like to go back on his word.

“But I did. See, I’m whole and everything, all limbs in their places.” He stretched his arms to make a point.

Galien gave him a stern look. “I cannot let it happen. I simply cannot. I’m coming with you.”

Kai groaned and let his head down in defeat. “Do I have to call the guards on you, too?”

“Call the guards?” Galien’s stricken face was a bit funny. “And who else did you call them on?”

Kai walked toward the door, decided to repeat the number from earlier. But the doors opened before he could reach them, and Conrad walked in.

“Great, this is just great,” he said and threw his arms up. “Go ahead, Conrad, give me your speech.”

“If you are doing this, I’m coming with you.”

All right, so he needed to call more than just a pair of guards to handle these two hunks because they couldn’t be dragged away as easily as Pepin, who was as light as a feather. He brushed by Conrad to go into the hallway.

“Guards,” he said as soon as he saw the two armored men who were back at their station after they had surely locked Pepin in his room. “Round up a few more men because you need to take Sir Galien and Sir Conrad to their quarters, like you did with Pepin.”

“Stay where you are, men,” Galien commanded right from behind.

Much to his surprise, the guards stopped.

“Hey, I’m the prince. Who’s paying your wages?” Kai asked, hoping that his voice would be enough to command the guards and make them obey. Gosh, this whole prince impersonation stuff was slipping through his fingers.

“Your prince,” Galien said pointedly, “has suddenly acquired a death wish. You will do no such thing as to stop us from helping him avoid such a fate.”

“Yes, Master Galien,” the guards shouted together.

“What the hell?” Kai complained. “Guys, how are you not on my side?”

The guards looked down, but then one of them spoke. “You’ve always done that for everyone, Your Majesty. And we heard what decision you took today. Everyone here with a sword at the hip, and even more, to the last stable boy wants to come with you.”

“Hmm,” Kai pondered, “so Pepin was wrong, after all? Ha, I’m so going to rub it in his face. People love me!” The next time he saw Pepin, the servant would expose him for the imposter he was. And then, everyone would hate him.

He didn’t waste too much time munching around his thoughts and turned his attention on the guard. The guy was shifting his weight from one foot to another.

“What? You don’t love me?” Kai asked, in his most princely voice, and narrowed his eyes.

“We love you, Your Majesty,” the guards shouted together.

“Yeah, that sounded a little bit too enthusiastic to be true, but whatevs,” Kai said. “But make sure that Pepin doesn’t escape his room. I want him safe. Now off you go since it looks like I have no authority left and everyone wants to come to the party with me.”

He turned toward Galien and Conrad. “Now let’s see what great plan you two have.”

He had one of his own, but for now, the best course of action was deceit. Sooner or later, he would be exposed, so he needed to rush to the border, defeat the dark magic jerks, and then...

Huh, maybe that was the final quest. After that, exposed or not, he’d probably return to his body, and Sebastian was free to deal with all the mess.

A mess that included a certain very much in love Pepin. Right then, the reality struck him. Pepin no longer loved Sebastian; if his words were true... maybe, just maybe... he was in love with...

Kai shook his head. There was no way Pepin was in love with him. He practically looked like Sebastian; no, he was Sebastian! That was a boatload of confusion, right there!

Galien snapped his fingers in front of him. “Sebastian, where on earth are you? Quit making faces and listen closely.”

“Right, right,” Kai mumbled and ignored the pointed look both his cousin and Conrad threw him.

“I gotta say, kid, you’re tougher than you look,” the tattoo artist said as he covered Sebastian’s arm and back of the hand with a bandage of sorts and gave him the last instructions on how to care for the ink during the following hours, days, and weeks.

The shirt was clinging on his back with sweat, and he felt as if he was returning from war, but all in all, it was a success. His right forearm now sported a red dragon wrapping around it, his head

with open mouth and fangs visible resting on the back of his hand, a warning for anyone who ever wanted to mess with him.

“Thank you,” he said primly.

Tani rushed to him. “We gotta get home fast. Mom texted and asked where we are. I lied and said we’re at the movies. And that we watched like two of them. Oh, boy, I had no idea it would take so long to get a tattoo done.”

Much to his surprise, Tani had been good all the time, without complaining about getting bored. But, in all truth, she had been on her phone a lot, and Sebastian knew what a devourer of time that thing could be.

“That dragon will look so awesome,” Tani declared. “I have such a cool brother,” she said with pride.

Sebastian cleared his throat and pointed her toward the exit.

“Well, did it hurt? Like how much?” Tani asked the moment they were outside.

“Like pretty much,” he said shortly. Kai’s body really needed to develop a better tolerance for pain, and he was very much into teaching it precisely that.

“Okay, now what are we going to tell mom?”

“Hmm? What do you mean?”

“What are you going to tell her? About your tattoo?”

“I’ll tell her I thought of getting a tattoo and that I got one,” he said naturally.

Tani grinned. “That is so badass.”

He grinned, too. Yes, that was badass, and that was what he wanted.

“What happened to your hand? Why is it bandaged?” Mrs. Martin caught them just as they walked in. Sebastian could swear the woman had a special sense in detecting any injury sustained by her son. Not that a tattoo was an injury, but it had definitely hurt a lot.

“Did you have a run-in with street thugs again? Let me see,” she insisted, a bit of panic evident in her voice.

Sebastian cleared his throat. “There’s no need to fret, mother. I only got a tattoo.”

Mrs. Martin stared at him nonplussed for a couple of moments. “You got a what?”

Her voice was suddenly extremely loud.

“A tattoo,” he said slowly. “It is spelled --”

“Watch it, young man,” Mrs. Martin warned him. “Do not play the smartass with me now.” Tani was about to sneak past her when Mrs. Martin caught her and forced her to stand side by side with Sebastian. “And you, young lady, where have you been this late?”

“She was with me,” Sebastian said calmly.

Mrs. Martin made a strange sound and then threw her arms in the air. “Who are you and what have you done to my children? What is this tattoo business all about?”

Sebastian frowned. Did she want him to describe the workings of a tattoo parlor? He didn’t think he was the best person for that.

“Is it at least something small like a flower or --” Mrs. Martin pushed his sleeve up and gasped in horror. “Does it cover all your arm?”

Sebastian thought it was the right moment to step up. “It is a dragon. It wraps around the arm up till here.”

“And it looks badass, mom,” Tani chimed in, remembering, finally, that she was supposed to be an ally in all this.

“Yes,” he confirmed. “Badass.”

“Kai, what is happening with you lately?” Mrs. Martin asked. “Aren’t you supposed to be past your rebellious phase by now?”

He had no idea what she was talking about. “It is only a tattoo necessary to make me look badass so that people don’t mess with me.” In all truth, he hadn’t intended to share so much, but he felt the need to put her mind at ease.

“Are people messing with you?”

And, of course, she was worried.

“No,” he deviated the topic, “but in this world, young men must be prepared in the event that something like that happens.”

Mrs. Martin gasped and covered her mouth. “What do you mean?”

To his surprise, Tani intervened. “Mom, you know how easily Kai gets bullied.”

Mrs. Martin put her hands on her hips. “No, I don’t. Are you being bullied, Kai?”

He was getting a bit weary of this conversation. There was training to be done, and he had no intention to waste any more time. “Mother,” he said sternly while resting his hands on Mrs. Martin’s shoulders, “your son will not be bullied anymore.” Whatever the meaning of that word was, it had to have something in common with what was happening to him right then, including assassins sent to threaten him and whatnot. “Now, I have a new boxing routine I need to master and very little time. If you’ll excuse me.”

He ignored Mrs. Martin’s dumbfounded look and marched toward his bedroom. As he closed the door, he heard her telling Tani, “Your brother is just turning into a delinquent, isn’t he?”

He leaned the phone against a stack of books and began undressing. Delinquent or not, he would excel against his opponents, and no one would stop him.

Chapter Twenty-Five – Your Deepest Wish

He would disappear under the cover of night. About getting to Uxilan, it couldn't be that difficult, right? Following the smell of ash that was now everywhere was a piece of cake. What wasn't a piece of cake and could turn badly was going against those dark magic jerks all by himself. Pepin was right, of course, to consider that he needed help, but then, the chances of someone else getting hurt grew exponentially and that he couldn't live with. Not when he was an OP prince with ice magic – which he couldn't use – and the protection of a goddess – which, again, was no longer there.

But, but, but, he continued to reason to himself while scratching his head and trying to figure out how to saddle his horse, he was still a master swordsman, and, according to Pepin, Sebastian had managed just fine when he had fought those bastards. All he, Kai, needed to do was let nature do its thing, and Sebastian's body react appropriately each time dark magic got anywhere close to him.

It sounded like a sound plan, only that Kai really didn't like the way it sounded when he was telling it to himself for the umpteenth time. Not that he remembered ever being incredibly courageous, but the moment he had heard about other people getting in trouble over a possible invasion from the House of Uxilan, who, again, were notorious jerks, he had thought himself suddenly brave.

Not that it was hard to do that while in the body of an OP character like Sebastian. But his reaction had come from somewhere deeper, surprising and not surprising him at the same time. Back then, when his dad had asked him to be brave, he hadn't done it, not because Kai hadn't wanted to make him proud, but because he hadn't been able to. Tani and his mom had no idea, but during those days, when they were all at the hospital, he had lied about being ill only so that he didn't spend, like them, all his waking hours there.

He hadn't been brave. His dad had only asked him that, and he hadn't done it, feeling like such a huge coward but incapable of pushing back the tears and the anger at the world for not being fair.

Now he was given a second chance to prove that he wasn't just a kid who hurried to hide only to stay away from pain. And second chances, not that he was some philosopher or anything, couldn't often come in people's lives.

Plus, he encouraged himself, he had nothing to worry about since he had the gift of getting to use the body and abilities of a super-duper character like Sebastian.

“How is this even supposed to work?” he mumbled as he stared dubiously at the leather straps that had to go over the horse's belly but somehow didn't behave the way they should have.

“Why aren't you in bed?”

Kai squealed in a very non-Sebastian fashion at the sound of that voice. Conrad was standing in the door and watching him with judgmental eyes. Seriously, he needed to defeat the House of Uxilan and return home because people here were all starting to get a little on his nerves. “Why? Is that an invitation?” he shot back and then bit his tongue when Conrad’s golden eyes flashed with something he didn’t care to dissect at all right now.

“We’re marching against the enemy tomorrow,” Conrad said in a voice that brooked no contradiction. “You should be resting.”

“Not really, no,” Kai said quickly. “I never sleep before a test, I mean a quest.”

“This is not a quest,” Conrad replied tersely. “It is a matter of life and death, and I get the feeling that you’re thinking of going alone despite your cousin’s and my advice.”

Damn, why did he have to be so transparent about his plans? And why the hell didn’t Sebastian know how to saddle a horse? It wasn’t rocket science. Well, probably he had people to do that for him –

“You’re not going alone,” Conrad interrupted his train of thought.

“Are you sure you can stop me? I can always use my magic on you.”

Conrad crossed his arms and covered the stable entrance with his entire body. “You are free to try it. Will you?”

“You’re incredibly calm for someone who should know how much that thing hurts,” Kai warned, but he knew that he wouldn’t be able to cause Conrad any pain, not consciously. Sending Pepin to his room was one thing, but hurting Conrad was too much. “All right, all right, I’ll go to bed. Happy now?”

“No. I’ll sleep with you to make sure that you don’t try to sneak out again.”

“Um, I’m sure Pepin wouldn’t like that at all. I mean, come on, we’re like practically engaged,” Kai blabbered on. “It would be like cheating if I slept with you now.”

“Your Majesty,” Conrad said sternly, “I wasn’t suggesting anything untoward. But seeing your determination for going alone against the House of Uxilan, there is no other choice. Why did you send your servant away? The guards at his door are having a terrible time.”

“Like how?” Kai asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

“Their ears are red like tomatoes. They change shifts every two hours. Apparently, your fiancé,” Conrad said, emphasizing the word, “has the tongue of a harbor harlot.”

“Ugh, who, Pepin? C’mon, the guy’s like the sweetest... I mean, he can be a hardass when he wants, but still. I don’t remember him ever talking smack.”

“Maybe he learned it from you.” And that was Galien, who appeared behind Conrad like there had been a war council called down at the stables.

“I don’t think so,” Kai replied, miffed that he had been discovered so easily.

“I shall also sleep in your room,” Galien announced. “It appears to me that you don’t understand how important you are for Ifigia.”

“No way I’m going to be the meat in your hunk sandwich,” Kai declared.

Galien pushed Conrad away to step inside the stables. Kai had made the mistake of lighting a lamp that was there for the purpose, so he felt as good as naked under Galien’s scrutinizing stare. “Sebastian,” he said in an authoritative voice, “this is not a matter up for debate. Stop playing only the role that your mother gave you. Aren’t you your own person?”

Kai had no idea what Galien was saying but didn’t care to find out. As things looked, he was supposed to find another way to ditch everyone and go to war alone.

“Stop it with the faces,” Galien warned again. “I know you’re thinking of how to sneak out and go fight on your own. Get it through your head. That is not going to happen.”

“Ah, damn it,” Kai expressed his frustration. “We’re all going to fail just because I’m incapable of saddling a horse.”

“No, we’re not going to fail,” Galien contradicted him. “Sir Conrad, would you be so kind to help our esteemed ruler to his bed?”

“My pleasure,” Conrad replied.

Kai groaned as Conrad grabbed him by one arm and Galien by the other, both pulling him away despite his protests. That was how Pepin must have felt when the guards had dragged him away. He struggled a bit against the tight hold, but, quite surprisingly, he didn’t manage to budge much.

Maybe he really needed some sleep, after all.

Sebastian counted through his teeth as he pushed his body up for the one-hundredth time, using nothing but the force of one arm. Strength, agility, endurance were all things he needed to master in the shortest of times. Chet and his posse were a danger still, regardless of how all over the place their methods were, and he would have to exact punishment rather sooner than later if not for another reason than that he had to ensure that Milo was in no way exposed to their foul ways.

Half an hour later, he was in bed. As much as he wanted to continue training all night long, it had soon occurred to him that muscle strains were something happening to regular people, so injuring or overexerting himself was out of the question.

His eyelids grew heavy, but sleep came to him accompanied by the strangest apparitions.

In his dream, he appeared to be himself, and for a moment, his heart jolted at the thought that the curse had been lifted, and he was now back into his own skin. But no, he realized, even as his body was immersed into a deep slumber, it had to be nothing but a dream. Even more, it felt like a memory, although in his state, he couldn't tell if he just imagined it to be so.

He was at the Shimmering Cavern, the ice goddess Reya explaining to him yet again why it was important to choose Pepin as the one in his bed and by his side.

"I am the Protector of Ifigia. But this is not a thing I'm willing to do," his dream version replied to her insistence.

"And why not, Sebastian?"

"Because I grew up with him, and I would never consider him a lover."

Reya threw her arms up. "You do not have to consider him a lover if it's that much of an inconvenience to you. Where is all this stubbornness coming from? You've always suffered from it."

He threw her an oblique look. "Indeed, I wonder," he said wryly. "Did Luna Celeste put some new crazy thought in your mind? That woman is nothing short of a lunatic."

Her gasp of indignation didn't impress him. "She is capable of reading prophecies and telling the future. She saw yours and told me clearly that only love would save you, in the end."

"Love," he pronounced the word, feeling its taste as alien as always. "I fail to see where Pepin fits in all this. I don't love him. I care about him, indeed, but toward him, I can nurture no feelings as the ones Luna Celeste keeps blabbing about."

"You bring lovers to your bed and send them away after less than a month," the ice goddess continued to scold him. "What are you looking for in them? Pepin is your destiny."

What was he looking for in his long string of lovers, indeed? They were a means to an end, a way to pass the time between military campaigns, but he wouldn't be crass to explain to Reya about any of that. "Pepin," he said through his teeth, "is but a brother to me."

"He loves you, and he's a Lelian. Do you have any idea how rare they are, and through what pains I went to secure one for you?" Reya appeared to be losing her composure over his stubbornness, but he had no intention to indulge her. This was about his person, not the fate of Ifigia, and that meant that as little as that mattered, he had a say in it and intended to use his influence to push back all her insistence.

"I do not care. I have no intention to use his ability or whatever that is called."

“Stop being so flippant.”

Sebastian winced as a few shards of ice passed by his cheek. He raised one hand and was surprised at the sensation under his fingertips. One of them had cut through the most superficial layer of skin, bringing out blood. “Why am I here?” he asked.

Reya turned on his heels and sat on her throne of ice. “Ifigia is in danger. Do you really believe you have time to fool around?”

The sudden change in her voice and the different topic brought forth took him by surprise. “Fool around?” he asked.

She was slowly turning into ice, just like the rest of the cavern. “Yes. Finish here. You’re needed. And that boy is not the one for you, or else Luna Celeste’s words would make no sense.”

“What boy?” Sebastian insisted, annoyed at how she chose to return to her hibernation whenever it fitted her whim.

He couldn’t hear her voice anymore, but the way her lips curled around the words left no room for interpretation. Slight pain in his palms made him realize that he was digging his nails into the skin.

“Could you guys move away a bit? You’re too hot,” Kai complained.

“Any more distance between you and us, and we’d be in danger of falling on the floor,” Galien chided him.

This was nothing like when Pepin and Conrad had crowded him in his royal bed, but he was more uncomfortable than that time. Mainly because both Galien and Conrad preferred to sleep naked by the looks of it. As much as it pained him, he had opted for a nightgown and felt like a giant doll succumbing under a sea of frills and lace. Pepin would have loved it, most probably, but Kai could swear that he had seen nothing as sophisticated and complicated as that in his entire life.

“You must sleep, Your Majesty,” Conrad warned him. “Or perhaps, you would like me to help you exert yourself a little so that you can finally do so?”

“No, no, absolutely not. I know what you’re thinking, but come on, Galien is here, and I don’t want him to watch or anything.”

“You could send him away,” Conrad said airily.

“Like I would allow such a thing,” Galien shot back.

“Hey, don’t fight. And I thought you two were into each other. I mean, liking each other.”

“That is impossible,” Conrad replied in a haughty tone.

“Why?” Kai asked. “Galien is handsome and has a round ass, doesn’t he? And aren’t you into asses, anyway?”

He was blabbering, but he didn’t feel like sleeping, and getting rid of these two seemed impossible.

“It takes more than a perfect behind,” Conrad said through his teeth, “to convince me to like someone the way you suggest, Your Majesty. And Sir Galien’s rotten manners, with all due respect, cannot be overlooked.”

Galien snorted. “Are you sure you’re one to talk, Sir Conrad? I think we’re much alike, after all. Which means, without a shadow of a doubt, that there is no risk in our getting together and enjoying ourselves and each other. We are both very much aware of our respective rotten manners, so, in the end, no one would get hurt. Am I right?”

“Totally,” Kai replied. “Oops, you were actually asking Conrad. My bad. Ah, by the way, Conrad,” he decided to change the topic since he wasn’t sure if those two didn’t want to start either fighting or something else over his very much alive body, all dressed in frills and lace.

“Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Isn’t this like the perfect opportunity for you to turn against me? I mean, there’s a war incoming, and you could just side with the enemy or whatever.”

Conrad stared at him for so long that he felt compelled to turn his head and stare back. “Uxilan is a scourge upon this world,” Conrad said through his teeth. “I would never side with them.”

“So, it’s like the smaller of two evils or something like that?” Kai asked, curious about Conrad’s motivations like he’d never been before. Not that he could complain about having such an ally by his side.

“No,” Conrad contradicted him. “My own pride and nothing else forced me in the path of your wrath. I wanted to go against Uxilan by myself. You stopped me when you marched against Estfalia. It must have saved most of my people, and this is the first and last time I admit to such a thing. Please, I beg you, have mercy of my pride.”

“Ugh, shoot, that’s heavy stuff,” Kai commented. “But why did you want to go against those assholes, I mean jerks, I mean dark magic wielders? Do you have anti-magic or something?”

Conrad set his jaw hard. "They are a threat to the entire world. Sooner or later, their pestilence would have spread and conquered my country, as well. Your protection has kept them at bay for a while, I believe."

"Hmm, that kind of makes sense. So, we're allies, right?"

"Yes. And I will always be in your service. And your bed, when you want me."

"I'm getting married to Pepin, though," Kai said quickly. "I mean, he's kind of jealous."

"I distinctly remember him suggesting another type of arrangement," Conrad said.

"Ah, well, that doesn't really work for me. It would be too much trouble just moving from one side of the bed to another and all that. And Pepin is just saying. He actually told me that he'd cut me off breakfast for all eternity if I did naughty things with you."

He was getting a bit sweaty, and not only because of the frills. The characters in this BL world were just so shameless, talking about things like that, and he was forced to be just as shameless, just to keep up.

"Plus, Galien totally wants you. Don't you, Galien?"

His cousin snorted. "What do I have to do to make things more obvious?"

"Frankly, I believe you jest, Sir Galien," Conrad intervened. "You are still not entirely convinced that I want nothing but the good of Ifigia, too. I even drank that truth potion, and you questioned me quite leisurely. What more do I have to do for you to be convinced of my goodwill?"

"Hmm, you appear to be quite keen on getting Sebastian to bed you, although that's not necessary, now that he has Pepin. You know Pepin is a Lelian, and that's something you couldn't offer even if you wanted."

A Lelian? What was that? Kai was dying to know. Pepin had said something about having been picked by the ice goddess herself, but it wasn't like he could ask about it. The last thing they all needed was for anyone to figure out that he wasn't the prince when they were just about to wage war against such a powerful enemy.

"I am most loyal to the protector of Ifigia who also saved my people from a dire fate by defeating me," Conrad said promptly. "There's nothing else to it, and you should stop with your insinuations, Sir Galien. They don't become you."

"And what would you know about that, hmm?" Galien purred. "I'd say you wouldn't mind a ruling place by Sebastian's side."

"I am not looking to advance and secure such a position," Conrad said, pouring acid in every word.

“Guys, guys, really?” Kai tried to intervene.

“I am the duke of Kelonia, after all,” Galien said, completely ignoring him. “If only your ambitions weren’t so high,” he added, and Kai wondered if he had ever heard cousin dearest talking in such a bitter voice.

Conrad said nothing, but that didn’t mean that he was denying Galien’s accusations. Damn, so all this time, Conrad had just wanted to get ahead? But Sebastian was famous for discarding his lovers like smartphones whenever someone new and shiny appeared. Which meant... what exactly did it mean? Kai had no idea.

“At first, yes,” Conrad suddenly said. “But my loyalty is no longer for sale. I give it freely.”

“Then why do you insist on pushing yourself on Sebastian when he’s finally choosing Pepin?” Galien asked.

Kai didn’t dare to breathe. This was better than any reality show.

“Because I don’t have much else to give,” Conrad replied quietly. “Even if it’s little, even if His Majesty --”

“Wow, wow, wow,” Kai finally intervened. “I appreciate the hell out of you, Conrad. And it’s good to have you as my ally. Seriously, you don’t have to... you know. But Galien, maybe you should stop being so, I don’t know, pushy?”

“Pushy?” Galien exclaimed. “Anyone else would be happy to have caught my eye.”

Oh, damn. He was in the company of two very proud men. And he sucked at playing matchmaker, so that was it.

“And you,” Galien added pointedly, “had no trouble touching my body everywhere after you drank the wine of golden truths.”

“It was nothing but a moment of weakness,” Conrad shot back. “One of which you took immediately advantage of.”

“Ha! You know nothing of how I take advantage of someone at my mercy. I assure you, Sir Conrad, I was nothing but on my best behavior.”

Kai sighed. “Too bad I don’t have popcorn. But I’m sure this will work out if you two drop the ‘Sir’ thing when talking to each other and just admit it.”

“Admit what?”

Argh, did he really need to get into the thick of it? “You, Galien, should admit that you’re not actually a rake and want Conrad for real and not just for a quickie or something. And you, Conrad, should just go ahead and say that you like Galien and his round ass.”

Both characters huffed like he had just proposed them something unthinkable. Well, at least at that ruckus had managed to tire him, and now his eyes were closing. Also, he hadn’t had the time to worry about what came tomorrow.

Sebastian had still no idea what he was doing there, witnessing one of Milo’s games when he had so little time on his hands. But, apparently, it was a group activity, one to do with the class and the school, and when he had tried to sneak away, Beatrice and her gang of misfits had dragged him along.

To say that he was uncomfortable was too little to describe what he was going through. It was nothing but pure torture to watch the boy he liked so much, so close, and yet so far away. Like was an inadequate word, but Sebastian preferred to use this strange world’s language as whatever he truly felt was infinitely more dangerous for the state of his mind and soul. The dream couldn’t have been happenstance, he thought and touched his cheek where a shadow of pain still lingered. Reya had been clear on his having to let go of Milo and end the impossible situation he was in. She didn’t have to use her ice goddess’s abilities to reach for him in his sleep. He wanted nothing more but to return to his rightful place. What she had said, about Ifigia being in danger, troubled him.

What made things appear a little less bleak was that Kai’s body was adjusting to the new training routine as if it were made for it.

“Have you been working out?” Beatrice felt his arm and threw him a strange look.

“Yes,” he replied, unable to stop the gloom making his eyebrows knit into a frown.

“Your boyfriend is so handsome,” she said with a chuckle and pointed at Milo. “And he’s one of our best players, you know?”

There was no need for anyone to remind him of how exceptional Milo was. Yet, when one of his mates sent a ball in his direction, Milo missed it and had to run after it. The crowd went from cheering to booing, and Sebastian began experiencing an unsettling feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Milo hung his head low, chin in his chest, eyes down. The opposing team had the upper hand, it seemed.

“Milo looks a bit off today, isn’t it?” Beatrice asked. “What’s it all about?”

“How should I know?” Sebastian replied brusquely.

“Well, you two are together, right? Who else should I ask?”

Sebastian pursed his lips. “We’re not together anymore. We broke up.”

“What?” Even over the noise around them, Beatrice’s voice was annoyingly loud. “Why?”

“We aren’t meant to be,” Sebastian said thickly.

On the court, Milo was failing to send the ball through the hoop for the third time.

“I suppose that explains it,” Beatrice said.

“What?” He was getting increasingly aggravated with her.

“That he’s a mess today,” she replied promptly. “And what’s with the tattoo?” She pointed at his arm.

“It is a measure I had to take against my enemies.”

“Fuck, your life sounds so damned complicated. Are you sure about you and Milo, though? I’m sure he didn’t agree to your breaking up by how messed up he is.”

It was true, but why was Beatrice so preoccupied with it? Sebastian wasn’t used to people getting into each other’s business like that and found it incredibly irritating.

“Our team will lose today,” Beatrice added. “I really hope you had a good reason to break up with Milo.”

“Don’t blame me,” Sebastian said.

But it was the truth. He was to blame for Milo’s poor performance on the court. So, in a way, he had done nothing to protect the boy’s love for basketball.

“He’ll get over it,” he murmured.

Beatrice surprised him by hooking an arm over his shoulders. “I think you’re full of it, Kai. Unless Milo cheated on you or something --”

“He did nothing of the sort. He’s perfect in every way,” he blurted out.

It was painful to watch their team getting beaten into a pulp. The coach called Milo and yelled something at him, but upon his return to the game, nothing changed.

And Sebastian couldn’t help feeling anything but guilt as he watched and watched.

Chapter Twenty-Six – Who Are You?

“Maybe you should go talk to Milo, see how he’s dealing with all this breakup thing,” Beatrice suggested to him after the game.

It had been a horrible affair in the end, and by how Milo walked alone from the court, it appeared that his teammates were not pleased with him.

But what could he do? The alternative was much, much worse. He would never put Milo in harm’s way if he could help it, and he would always do everything in his power to help it. At least he was protected from the pig-like face boy and his posse.

Beatrice patted him on the back, and seeing how he made no gesture or said nothing to keep her, she left with her friends, not without reminding him one more time that he should try to mend things between him and his boyfriend.

His boyfriend. Yes, it appeared that Milo had been that for a short while, and it had been a happy time for Sebastian, if not the happiest, as short-lived as it had been. Could it be that was what Luna Celeste kept blabbing about? Love, with its times of elation and happiness, but also despair and gloom? He was living through the second part now, and he would have much liked to do without.

He left the building where the match had taken place and was deeply lost in thought when he heard someone running toward him. Tani was rushing to him, her breath coming in short, her eyes full of worry. Was it about how he hadn’t wanted to take her to see the match? It was for the best since the game had proven just an occasion for their school team to be humiliated due to Milo’s subpar performance. Sebastian had wanted to protect him with all his soul when he heard the people around commenting on that, but he knew he was to blame, so nothing could be done.

“What is it?” he asked her.

Tani grabbed him by the arms and leaned against him, unable to breathe or talk.

Sebastian felt the now familiar alertness creeping in. She was almost crying, so it couldn’t be just about the basketball game. “Kai, some ugly boys took Milo,” she eventually managed.

His entire body tensed. “What ugly boys? Where?”

Tani continued to breathe hard and let go of one of his arms only to point in the direction of what looked like an old workshop. “I peeked inside, and they were starting to push him around and call him names.”

Sebastian ground his teeth hard. “Does one of these ugly boys look like an unwashed pig?” he asked.

Tani nodded. "They all look like pigs. I don't know if they're unwashed or otherwise."

Sebastian began walking purposefully, with Tani on his tail. "Kai, you should call a teacher or something," she pleaded as she ran behind him.

And put more innocents in harm's way? That wasn't something he was willing to do and had never done in his life. He scouted with his eyes and saw a thick wooden pillar leaning to one side, stuck in the ground. It must have been part of an old fence in another time, and it had to do.

He grabbed it with both hands to make it come undone as anger grew inside him. Curses formed on his tongue as he struggled with the damned thing.

"Kai, what are you doing?" Tani asked, more and more concerned.

"I'm settling the score," Sebastian said through his teeth as the pillar began to move. "This," he grunted, "strange world," he added as the thing finally came off, "needs a kicking!"

Suitably armed now, he rushed toward the building where his would-be assassins were most probably harming Milo in ways he didn't want to think of. With a loud cry, he pushed open the doors that rattled on their hinges by driving his shoulder against them.

Milo was on a chair at the end of the room, with his hands tied behind him by his position. Around him, Chet and his posse were shouting, hitting him from time to time. Sebastian took in his surroundings as dark flames licked along his veins.

As soon as he barged in, Milo's attackers stopped and turned toward him.

"You scoundrels," he said in a deep, rumbling voice he recognized from a different time.

"If it isn't lover boy," Chet said with a sneer. "What's up, homo? We were just talking about you. Your boyfriend is a pussy, just like you."

Sebastian jumped on the long line of tables and broke into a sprint. A new power surged through him, but no, it wasn't new, he registered faintly, as he swung the wooden pillar and smacked Chet right in the face.

For a moment, a deadly silence followed. But then, Chet's acolytes rushed to grab him while shouting obscenities. Sebastian moved with ease, the routines learned from online instructors coming to him like second nature. He evaded their maneuvers with ease, using his improvised weapon to hit them efficiently and where it hurt the most. It wasn't his way of doing things to go against an opponent that was so poorly equipped, but the moment they had dared to lay a finger on Milo, these young delinquents had sealed their fate.

He was breathing hard when all of them were down on the floor, squirming and crying. But when he turned his attention on Milo, his heart sank. Chet was holding one arm around Milo's

neck while blood was pouring from his nose. Milo was struggling to kick him away, but his face was getting redder.

“Step away from him,” Sebastian hissed.

“No fucking way,” Chet blabbered, and the wild look in his eyes said that he was scared. “You’ll let us leave first.”

No moments could be spared. He cried out, and this time, when he launched his attack, he didn’t hold back and put his full strength behind it. Chet remained standing after the hit, but only for a moment, and then he crumpled to the floor. Milo began coughing and wheezing. Around him, Sebastian felt a breath of cold, one that he had known to be with him throughout his life.

He hurried to untie Milo when Tani rushed in. “There are teachers and people coming, Kai! Let’s get out of here!”

He didn’t understand why she was so keen on them running. He had defeated his enemies, so he would stand his ground. But when he turned toward Tani, he noticed how she took a few steps back. There was uncertainty in her moves, but she was too far away for him to read her eyes.

“Go, Kai,” Milo said in a raspy whisper. “You’ll be in trouble if you don’t. If they dare to tell on you, I’ll say otherwise. There’s a back door.” He pointed with his chin behind him.

Their eyes met briefly, and Milo blinked fast like something was preventing him from seeing well. Sebastian just nodded and rushed out. He hated to leave Milo like that, but he would get the proper care.

The only place to go directly was home. He had thrown away the wooden pillar and tried to dust his clothes to the best of his abilities, and yet, people on the subway had kept throwing strange looks in his direction. There was a slight tremble in his arms, the energy he had felt coursing through him still not yet consumed entirely. Tani hadn’t come after him, and he could only assume that she was safe with those people.

He needed to change his clothes, and later, to call Milo and see if he was all right. Now that he had done this, the assassins were sure to come after him and him only. Milo needed protection, and other people were now involved, people from this world who wouldn’t allow Chet to beat up boys like Milo.

The door closed behind him once inside Kai’s bedroom, but not because he had done that, so the sound took him by surprise. He turned on his heels to find himself face to face with Tani, who had a strange improvised hat on her head and held a stick with a star at its tip. “You’re not my brother,” she said while her hand trembled on the stick. “Who are you?”

Sebastian stood there baffled for a moment. “Can you see me? The real me?” He pointed at himself. Where was a mirror when he needed one? Was he transforming into his real self?

“All I see,” Tani said, “is my brother’s body but there’s someone else inside him!” She swung the stick in her hand wildly.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. Was that a tinfoil hat? He walked toward Tani, making her squeal. With a sure move, he grabbed her tinfoil hat, made it into a ball, and threw it on the bed. “I’m not an alien,” he said. Yes, he had seen those horrendous movies, and he seriously doubted tinfoil hats were any good at offering protection against creatures from another world.

She cried out in despair and raised her arm, dropping her stick. Sebastian groaned. Dealing with little girls scared of aliens wasn’t something he had any idea how to address. He seized her wrists, trying to be gentle but firm. She stopped her shouting and stared into his eyes, looking scared.

“I’m not your brother, it’s true,” he said in a measured voice, “but I have no intention to hurt you. I’m not a bad man.”

Tani blinked a few times, but it was a good sign that she wasn’t shouting anymore. “Who are you then?”

It was strange to hold her arms up like that, so Sebastian let them down slowly and then took a step back. “Are you sure you’re capable of listening to the truth? I tried telling it to Milo, but he wouldn’t believe a word I said.”

Tani nodded, but she was so pale that Sebastian worried she might faint. So he took her hand and guided her toward the bed, and made her sit. He grabbed a chair and sat at a fair distance from her to ensure that he didn’t scare her any more than he had already done.

“My name is Sebastian, and I am the Protector of Ifigia. I am a prince in my world.”

“Ifigia? Is this in Europe?” Tani asked.

“No,” Sebastian said firmly. “It is not anywhere on this planet, and according to everything I’ve read since coming here, it is not anywhere in this universe.”

Tani inhaled and exhaled, then repeated the procedure. Sebastian allowed her, seeing how shaken she was. But the color was turning to her cheeks, and her eyes were now shining with curiosity. “Are you like from a fantastic land?”

“It would be a good definition according to the rules of your world,” Sebastian agreed.

“Do you have dragons there?”

“Yes, there are dragons,” Sebastian confirmed.

“And beautiful princesses?”

“I think so, although I would not be the right person to judge their physical appearance.”

“Do you mean that you’re into boys in that world, too?” Tani’s eyes were as big as saucers.

Sebastian sighed. It was so like Tani to ask useless questions. But he needed to be patient with her and establish what made her see behind the body he was inhabiting by chance or curse. “Yes, I prefer men,” he said shortly. He found the conversation inappropriate given the young age of Kai’s sister, but he had no choice but to offer answers as clear as he could.

“You’re from a BL novel, lol!” she exclaimed.

“I assure you my world is not fiction.”

“But if you’re here, where is my brother?”

Sebastian let out another long and heartfelt sigh. “I can only assume that he is currently inside my real body, ruling Ifigia in my stead.” He didn’t have the heart to tell Tani that he believed Kai was ill-equipped for such a task.

“I bet he’s making a mess out of it,” Tani said.

He couldn’t help a smile. “It is a possibility.”

“Wait, wait, wait,” she continued. All the fear from before was gone from her face. “So, he’s now surrounded by bishies who want to sleep with him?”

Bishies. Oh, right, he remembered the term. It meant beautiful boys. “At the moment, I believe he would only have to fend off the advances of my royal concubine, Conrad --”

Tani made a sound like she was choking. “You have a royal concubine?”

Sebastian frowned again. This conversation was surely going places that were making him feel uncomfortable. “The thing is,” he said quickly, “I have no idea what happened that your brother and I switched places in such an incredible fashion. I suspect a curse, but I have no proof. I was also suspecting that Chet and those other boys were assassins sent to kill me, but I think they’re just delinquents and nothing else. How is Milo?” he asked, suddenly alarmed. Under the surprise that Tani had discovered the truth about his identity, he had forgotten about the boy.

“The teachers took him to the infirmary. And those jerks were taken by a security guard, and an ambulance was on the way when I left. I think they’re in deep trouble. They might get expelled. And Milo didn’t say anything, and the others didn’t dare to rat you out. No one would believe them anyway. My brother is incapable of hurting a fly, and you cracked that jerk’s nose open.”

Sebastian waved, wanting to get to the heart of the matter, now that he had the confirmation that Milo was all right. “Tani, I must ask you. How could you tell I’m not your brother?”

Something of the fear from before returned to her eyes. Then, she grinned. “When I rushed inside to tell you to get away, something awesome and scary happened. When you kicked that guy in the face, there were blue sparks everywhere. Are you Electric Man?”

“No,” Sebastian said patiently, “I am Prince Sebastian of Ifigia.”

“Right, right. So, Seb – can I call you Seb?” She didn’t wait for him to reply. “Those blue sparks turned into small flames, and they were, I don’t know, like part of you,” she said with admiration. “And when you turned to look at me, your eyes were blue and like burning. They’re normal now, though.”

The familiar cold breath and his eyes burning. Of course, how could he not realize it? “That must have been my ice magic,” he said slowly.

“Ice magic?” Tani shouted, and her eyes grew wide. “You have ice magic?”

“Yes, my mother, the ice goddess Reya, created me from it, and it’s an important part of me.”

Tani linked her hands together and swung her body. “That is so cool,” she said in a reverent voice. “Omigod, so Kai is now using ice magic in your place?”

“He could be, but the fact that my magic manifested now is quite strange,” Sebastian said.

“Hmm, maybe it’s not so strange,” Tani said. “I mean, there has to be a reason. Milo was in danger, you went there to save him, and because of the power of love, you summoned your ice magic to this world. There,” she said with satisfaction.

Sebastian wasn’t exactly pleased with the expression on her face, but he had no other explanation, so hers could be the correct one.

“Omigod,” she exclaimed again, “Milo has a prince as his boyfriend! So much wow!”

“He doesn’t believe it,” Sebastian said sternly. “And it is for the better. I don’t see what good would do.”

“I see,” Tani replied. “And you know, there’s something more. Your voice. You don’t sound like Kai anymore.”

Sebastian cleared his throat and began listing all numbers up to ten. Indeed, that was almost his real voice. “Yes, you are correct,” he said, more and more flabbergasted by the transformation. It was a sound reason to become alarmed. “I must return to my world,” he added hastily. “Ifigia is in danger, and I cannot be transferred for good into this world, or all will be lost.”

He couldn't say precisely why his line of reasoning was taking him down that path, but it felt like the most believable explanation.

"Oh, no, what are we going to do?" Tani asked and slapped both her cheeks.

"We? It is my duty --"

"Seriously? Kai is my brother, and I bet he has no idea how to deal with fantastic worlds in danger and all that, unless they're part of a video game. Actually, maybe his experience as a gamer could help him," she said as if she was talking to himself.

"I must return to my world," Sebastian insisted.

Tani stood brusquely. "And Kai needs to get back home, or mom will be really pissed. Let's check my stash of fantasy novels. There must be something in there about this."

Sebastian didn't argue and followed her out of the room.

Tani stopped for a moment and turned toward him. "Was that why you were so happy with flushing the toilet?"

"Yes," Sebastian replied in a cool voice. It was somewhat assuring to hear himself again.

Tani grinned. "So damned funny. I thought my brother was finally losing it."

He surely didn't find it funny, so he pushed her toward her room. "We have something important to do."

It felt like they had been riding for hours. Kai couldn't stop yawning, and a couple of times, he had almost fallen from the saddle. Good thing Galien was there, keeping him awake and straightening him back so that he didn't make a total fool of himself by falling off the horse.

"You should have slept properly last night," Galien scolded him, "instead of trying to sneak away. And what's with you? You usually spend your nights tiring your lovers, and your days training and fighting. How come you're so sleepy now? I hope it's not some sort of curse --"

"I don't think so," Kai interrupted him. How could he explain to Sebastian's cousin that he usually hated waking up so early in the morning, mainly because he spent his nights playing video games? "I mean, that would be a pretty lame curse, don't you think?"

Galien huffed. "You somehow believe that this war is still something you should take head on, don't you? That is why you pretend to be sleepy and bored while we're marching on the enemy. And why is your voice so high? You don't sound like yourself."

What the hell did he mean by that? His voice was completely normal. He didn't like that Galien didn't believe him to be sleepy for real but wasn't it weird that he felt all that while inside Sebastian's body? Whatever, maybe Sebastian got sleepy sometimes, but people didn't know because the Protector of Ifigia couldn't have any weaknesses, and he kept it well hidden.

"What's our strategy, after all?"

"Don't you mean your strategy?" Galien asked. "You wanted to head here and confront them directly. We're only following."

Kai couldn't suppress a groan. "See how you all made things more complicated than necessary? If it were just me, I could have just sneaked in and... well, destroy the enemy and that, all in a day's work."

"Not that I don't find your confidence in your abilities refreshing, but you really make me think that you are taking things too lightly. Is it a ploy so that I weaken my resolve in sticking by your side?"

"No, nothing like that. It's just that I'm all powerful, and you guys, not dissing you or anything, but you have no special powers. How about leaving the OP character do all the work?"

"I won't dwell on your strange manner of speaking you picked up from those barbarians and ask in detail what on earth you mean by dissing and OP. However, I insist that you don't leave my sight while we're engaging."

"Do you want me to stay glued to you? That will be tough since we need to fight and everything."

"I will make sure you stay in my sight, and you don't have to worry about it. Conrad will keep his eyes on you, too. I mean it, Sebastian, no tricks. If you fall, this world will end."

Like he needed more ominous words to remind him what was at stake. "Yeah, yeah, I get you," he said and waved. Why the hell was he so sleepy, though?

They set camp at a fair distance from what counted as the border between Ifigia and Uxilan, and Kai wished he had a pair of binoculars so that he could inspect the movement of the enemy troops like in movies. Unfortunately, as OP as Sebastian was, he didn't have any skills in seeing far and wide, more than any other average human being. It would have been helpful to have Adhe's wings right now. He searched his pockets for the dragon scale, but he didn't find it. Could it be that he had misplaced it somehow? Maybe he had left it in another coat. Anyhow, he wouldn't bother Adhe, who had a baby to care for.

"We're just going to wait?" he asked Galien.

“It is preferable that we confront them on our ground where their dark magic is not as strong,” Galien replied.

“And how long will that take?”

“As long as needed.”

Galien was pretty annoying. He could just dash in there, throw some magic around, destroy them, and be back by dinner time. Pepin had talked about how those jerks had taken Sebastian’s magic away, but it had gone back, right?

So, before they could even do anything, Kai was going to enter their realm, blasting ice left and right and finishing them off before they knew what hit them. Of course, if he were just to wait there for hours and hours, they would be alerted and had the time to prepare their anti-magic offensive. He pursed his lips in frustration; he so much needed to use the element of surprise to make sure that he defeated those assholes in one fell sweep.

That meant that he needed to shake Galien off and try his own strategy. And after he made sure that the dark magic wielders were defeated, the rest of the troops could sweep in and deal with the rest if anything remained. After all, they had come all that way, and Kai didn’t want them to feel disappointed.

But what could he do to make sure Galien didn’t notice his getting away? As he racked his brain for solutions, his eyes fell on Conrad, who stood not far, speaking with some knights.

How hadn’t he thought of that yet? The perfect opportunity presented itself. “I need to spend some time alone with Conrad,” he said in a perfect straight voice.

“What for?” Galien asked.

“You know.” Kai wiggled his eyebrows.

Galien stared at him in disbelief and then narrowed his eyes. “I thought you were adamant about not cheating on Pepin, as you said.”

Kai bit his bottom lip. Right, he was making Galien jealous, but it was all for a good cause. And afterward, when the Uxilan jerks had been defeated, he would apologize and tell the truth. But what if he changed back to his own body, and Sebastian was back? Probably, the actual prince would have no issue laying his claim on the royal concubine once more, so maybe, just maybe, he was making Galien hurt now so that he would hurt less later.

“You are making strange faces again,” Galien brought his train of thought to a halt by talking.

“Right. Well, I’m suddenly in the mood, what can I say?” The weird things he came to say, all because of this ridiculous BL plot. Why did a BL plot have anything like dark magic wielders in

it, though? It was annoying. No, what the hell, now he preferred BL plots to fighting fantasy creatures and enemies? He was losing it, clearly.

He set his chin high and stared at Galien, challenging him and also worrying that if his cousin suddenly said that he disagreed with that, he wouldn't be able to tell him 'no'.

But Galien moved out of the way, his eyes never leaving Kai. "As you wish, Your Majesty. Do not let me keep you."

Kai moved fast before Galien changed his mind and grabbed Conrad, dragging him away from the knights.

"I want you or something," he said the moment he noticed Conrad's questioning eyes.

"Now?" Conrad asked and blinked. "This is hardly the time or place --"

"Hey, I'm the prince, right? And you kept on bugging me about it. Don't you want it?"

"Of course."

It was evident that Conrad had no idea what to think.

"We need a quiet place," Kai said quickly.

He had observed how their camp was bordered on the left by hills that stretched toward the border with Uxilan. If he managed to reach over them, he would move without being detected before anyone got alerted of his absence.

Conrad gestured for him to follow. Kai waited for him to enter the last tent that appeared to be as far away from prying eyes as it could be. And then, Conrad began to undress, holding his eyes just as guarded as before.

"Yes, yes, nice, like this," Kai said quickly but averting his eyes so that he didn't stare too much at Conrad's junk.

"Aren't you going to undress?" Conrad questioned.

"Yeah, soon. But I want to play with you, first." Gawd, the cringe. "So," Kai continued, "close your eyes and lay there."

"Wouldn't be easier if I first lay down and then closed my eyes?"

"Yeah, whatever. No, not like that, on your belly."

"Your Majesty," Conrad breathed out but obeyed. "Do you intend to use me in that fashion? I thought you didn't care for being the man on top."

“Well, people change,” Kai replied.

He straddled Conrad fast and then pulled the belt from his pants to fasten his hands to the back. Now he needed something else. Under him, poor Conrad was breathing fast. Probably no one had ever had the Prince of Estfalia in that position.

He took his handkerchief and turned it into a blindfold, placing it over Conrad’s eyes.

“Your Majesty,” Conrad said, more alarmed this time.

“Don’t worry. I promise you. You won’t feel a thing.”

For real.

“Allow me to doubt that. I’ve seen Your Majesty, and you lack nothing in that respect.”

“Trust me. Now stay like this, while I go grab something to, you know, use on you.”

He didn’t wait for more of Conrad’s protests and went outside. A look around convinced him that the soldiers gathered there were too busy with stuff of their own, so he sneaked behind the tent and smiled when he saw the horses.

Like taking candy from a baby, only that Kai intended nothing like that. What he much intended was to grab those dark magic jerks and teach them a lesson.

Chapter Twenty-Seven – As Strange As Love

Kai put the stirrups into the horse's sides while begging him in a whisper not to neigh or do anything that would give him away while he still managed to put as much distance between him and the camp behind.

"Good horsey," he said and patted the animal's head as the horse appeared to understand that language pretty well.

He had to be a horse trained for battle, and while he was nothing like Sebastian's Thunder, he appeared to be sturdy enough to hold a rider and all that heavy armor on him.

Soon, Kai had managed to guide the horse to take him over the crown of the hills, so even if they noticed his absence at the camp, it would take them a while to realize what had happened and start looking for him.

At least, he didn't need anyone else to show him the way to Uxilan as ash and a foul smell rose in the distance. "You and me, horsey, we're going to make history for Ifigia today," Kai said, full of importance, even if he only had a horse as an audience.

"Did you get hit by a truck?" Tani asked as she leafed through her manga volumes and books spread on the bed.

"A truck? No," Sebastian replied. "There are no trucks in my world."

"Hmm." Tani narrowed her eyes and continued to search for that elusive information they needed for him and Kai to switch places back as they were and see about their lives as before. "Do you remember dying or something like that?"

"Nothing of the kind. I was in bed with my concubine, just waking up from --"

A night of passion, he wanted to say but stopped in time. Tani looked at him expectedly, but seeing how he remained silent, she turned her attention toward the materials in front of her.

"Then it looks like I must have been right the first time," Tani concluded. "It has to do with love."

"But how?" Sebastian asked. "At the time I switched bodies with your brother, I had no idea who Milo was."

Tani grinned and threw him an all-knowing look. "So you admit that you're in love with Milo."

Why did this little girl have to be so bothersome whenever she felt like it? But was there a point in denying it, after all? "Yes," he replied coolly.

Tani slapped her hands together. “Then that means that it has everything to do with Milo. You need to confess to him.”

“I already did,” Sebastian pointed out. “But, of course, he believes that it was his friend Kai who did so.”

Tani scratched her head. “Hmm, so we must make him see that you’re not Kai.”

“As I told you, he doesn’t believe me. That path is closed. The explanation must be somewhere else. Is this everything your books say?”

For a couple of moments, Tani remained lost in thought. “Did you happen to make a wish when the switch happened?”

Sebastian frowned. Tani’s question triggered a particular memory, but it was one with the shape of a ghost that didn’t speak for itself. “I don’t remember such a thing.”

“When exactly did it happen?” Tani asked again.

“The day you came to take me to your home and I was behind the school with Milo,” he replied promptly.

“Right, right, that was when you first started to act strange,” Tani agreed.

“I wasn’t acting strange. I was just being myself,” Sebastian countered, a bit miffed.

“That’s true,” Tani admitted. “Gosh, looking back, it was so funny. Well, what else do you remember? What did Milo say or do?”

Sebastian opened his mouth and hesitated. Suddenly, those moments felt private, as that had been the time when he had first set his eyes on that beautiful boy who would make him believe that a thing as strange as love could exist.

“He was saying something about a date,” he eventually said.

“Ah, so that must be,” Tani concluded. “You secretly wished to go on a date.”

“That would be silly,” Sebastian retorted. “At the time, I had no idea what a date meant. I believed it to be a quest of sorts.”

Tani sighed and caught her cheeks in her palms, puffing them out. “I can’t stop thinking that all this switcheroo has something to do with feels.”

“Well, for the sake of the argument, let’s pretend that it is true. What wish could your brother have had at the same time? Because I didn’t just happen to transfer to this world on my own,” Sebastian said.

“If I know anything about my brother, it must have been something stupid like wanting to be an isekai hero. And,” Tani became more animated, gesturing, “because he expressed his wish at the same time with you, bang, you two switched.”

“That sounds like a rickety explanation,” Sebastian expressed his doubt. “And I don’t remember making any strange wish.” The feeling from before that something was slipping through his fingers came back, but he shrugged it off. What was the point of dwelling on something he didn’t remember? It couldn’t have been significant. And Tani was swimming in the dark with all her theories.

Kai decided to dismount and let the horse go free when he reached what appeared to be a border between the land dominated by the House of Uxilan and Ifigia. The black land stretched as far as his eyes could see, and that foul stench was more pungent. The horse had snorted and even sneezed a few times, so it was time to let him go. Kai patted his back and urged him to go back, and the horse didn’t hesitate, breaking into a gallop right away.

What was that thing that he had once read about horses sensing danger? Well, it wasn’t like Kai was blind. The danger lay right ahead, waiting for him to step up and solve the ultimate quest. With a long sigh, Kai turned and looked behind at the rolling hills of Ifigia and the blue sky above, the same color as a pair of eyes that had seen through him like he was nothing but a piece of glass.

“I guess this is goodbye, Pepin,” he said and cleared his throat. Now that he thought about it, Galien was on to something about his voice. It sounded... well, not weird, but he was pretty sure that Sebastian’s voice was usually deeper and lower. Maybe he had caught a cold. He coughed a few times for good measure, and then he placed his hand on the pommel of his sword. “Conrad, Galien, I’m going to miss you guys, too, even if you’re both a pain in the butt.” He hadn’t intended that last pun, but that was that.

Goodbyes now said and done, it was time for him to win against those jerks and return home.

Sebastian ran his hands through his hair and placed them behind the back of his neck, stretching to work some kinks in his muscles. “Assuming that what you’re saying is true, Tani,” he began, “what should I do next?”

Tani pursed her lips and moved them around while appearing to be munching on her thoughts. “I think,” she started, “that we need to make Milo see who you really are.”

“How do I do such a thing? You believe me but only because you saw a part of the real me with your own eyes. And is it a good idea? No, I don’t think so,” he decided. He had disturbed the course of Milo’s life too much already.

“It is the only idea,” Tani insisted. “I mean, c’mon, you’re an ice prince with royal concubines and yet you need to come here to fall in love with Milo. If that’s not fate, I don’t know what it is,” she added, speaking in a tone that sounded like she was merely reciting things she had read somewhere else.

As little as he could trust in the girl’s abilities to solve a thing as complicated as the strange curse cast upon him, she was currently his only ally. It meant that he needed to rely to some extent on her knowledge.

“Wait, are you in love with your royal concubine, too?” Tani asked.

Sebastian shook his head. “I am never in love.”

Tani grinned, and her eyebrows shot up. “Just as I thought! You were so cursed to find love, Seb!”

“Stop calling me Seb. It’s a little grating.”

“Nope,” she said and stuck her tongue at him.

Sebastian frowned slightly. “People in this world are incredibly disrespectful.”

“Sorry about that,” Tani offered. “But in a way, you’re like my brother.”

“How could I be like your brother? By what I’ve managed to learn about him, he appears to be a klutz and an airhead. What could I possibly have in common with him?”

Tani nodded thoughtfully. “You’re both good guys,” she said promptly. “And it’s just as easy for me to annoy him as it is to annoy you. So there’s that.”

Sebastian shook his head. Then he remembered the dream and Reya again, along with her warning. “I must find a way to go back home and save Ifigia.”

“Ah, by the way, how do you know that? Do you feel it?” Tani asked.

“No, but my mother appeared in a dream and told me so.” He hesitated for a moment before continuing. “She was quite adamant that I must give up on Milo.”

“Oh, no, your mom doesn’t agree with your chosen,” Tani said and slapped her cheeks while her mouth turned into an ‘o’.

“I tend to believe that her warning was well-grounded. What I must do is to forget about Milo so that I can return.”

Tani shook her head and frowned. “Your mom is kind of a jerk, no offense.”

“A jerk?” Sebastian couldn’t suppress a smile. “I suppose so. But what can I do to forget Milo? Are there any methods to remove one’s memories in this world?”

“Not approved by safety and regulations boards, at least,” Tani replied. “Forget about that. No way that’s what you must do. You’re here for love, and you’re not going to leave without it.”

“You are much convinced by the many romantic notions that you must have plied your mind with by reading all these materials.” Sebastian gestured at the spread books on the bed. “But Milo and I can never be. We belong to different worlds.”

Tani waved like that was just a tiny detail. “And yet, here you are. And well, Kai is over there, getting freaked by bishies being all over him.”

That, indeed, begged an important question. “Tani, do you believe your brother could have had romantic feelings for Milo?”

“Who, Kai?” Tani seemed to consider it for a moment, but then she snickered. “No way. They’re like best bros.”

“But Milo confessed that day without knowing, of course, that he wasn’t confessing to his best bro,” Sebastian explained, taking after Tani’s manner of speaking with a lot less difficulty than when he had landed here for the first time.

“Yeah, there’s that,” Tani admitted. “Gawd, Kai must have been so freaked, lol.”

There was no reason to ‘lol’ about that, Sebastian thought but didn’t contradict Tani since they had much more pressing matters to bother with.

“Hello! Anybody home?” Kai called out as he walked through a foggy marsh, blade at the ready. So far, the dark magic jerks had been conspicuously quiet, and all that silence was unnerving.

Just as he was about to call out again, a net made from black vines fell over him, and he found himself propelled up in the air, apparently having just stepped into a trap. He tried to straighten up, but as much as he struggled, he only managed to end up in the same position that allowed him little room for maneuvering.

“Hey, this is not funny! Is this how you guys fight? So not cool,” Kai shouted and tried to swing his sword to cut through the vines but with no success.

His own loud yawn took him by surprise. Why was he so sleepy? And in a situation like that? Dark magic wielders specialized in sleeping potions – that sounded so lame. Even he could come up with something better if he thought for like five minutes. His eyelids were so heavy, and his chin met his chest as his head fell forward.

Kai blinked hard and pushed himself up. He was lying on a large stone slab in a room lit by tall windows that stretched to the ceiling. He moved his arms and was happy to see that they were free of any restraints. An exhale of relief followed when he touched the hilt of his sword.

“So, the mighty Prince Protector of Ifigia decided to walk into our home by himself.”

He turned at the sound of that hollow voice only to notice a hooded figure, much like the one that had tried to assassinate him that time at the palace. “Ah, you’re one of those suspicious guys,” he said.

The hooded figure slid across the floor, and Kai examined him with growing curiosity. When was the fight supposed to happen? Maybe he could take this dude by surprise and go for a sudden attack.

“We are not the kind to waste time on pleasantries, Your Majesty,” the figure said.

“Who are these ‘we’ you’re talking about? All I see is one lame ninja wannabe,” Kai pointed out.

It was strange how calm he felt. Maybe it was because he was OP and knew that he could take on those bastards without much effort.

“Are these words of yours part of an incantation?” the figure asked. “They are so strange. But never mind, you are here, we believe, to settle the score. As for who we are,” he continued and then flicked one wrist, “meet us now.”

From all corners of the room, similarly suspicious hooded figures emerged at the same time. Now was a good moment to start feeling a tiny little bit scared, yet he still wasn’t. Kai put one hand up and warned them, “Take one extra step, and I’ll make a nice ice cave out of you. And then I’ll turn it into a tourist attraction and sell tickets.”

“We don’t think so,” the figure thought. “Your magic or strange incantations won’t help you here.”

Kai raised his arm higher and focused. That was supposed to work, right? By now, his eyes were supposed to be as cold as ice, and soon, ice tendrils would shoot from his fingers –

“What the hell?” he murmured and stared at his hand that looked completely normal. “Hey, did you jerks already took away my ice magic? ‘Cause that’s so no cool.”

“We didn’t, but we will,” the figure warned and threw something like a swirl of black smoke toward him.

Kai remained unmoved for a moment, but the black smoke avoided him and bounced off the walls. He scrunched up his nose. “You know, you should switch to vaping. It’s healthier and doesn’t stink as bad.”

“Don’t let him speak his incantation!” the figure ordered, and black smoke hurried toward him from all sides as the dark magic wielders began shooting it at him.

Kai watched as, just as before, whatever that was, slid by him without touching a hair on his head, instead, reflecting off the walls and finding its prey in the same guys that were shooting it from their hands. “Ha,” he laughed, “you have no power here! I so wanted to say this at the right moment!” He jumped from the stone slab and grabbed his sword. Swinging it to and fro, he walked purposefully toward the head of the suspicious hooded dudes. “Not so overpowered now, are you?” he taunted.

The smoke was getting thicker, and it made him cough and stop for a moment. The dark figures around him began to fall to the ground, coughing hard and convulsing as if a sudden strange disease attacked them. To think that these dudes would be so sensitive to their own magic.

Kai took out his handkerchief, admired the neat embroidery for a moment, and then tied it quickly over the lower part of his face. However, by the time he did that, the smoke was too thick for him to see left and right, let alone forward. He began to swing his sword again. “Come at me, bro!” he yelled. “This is like the lamest fight ever!”

He heard a door opening to his right and dashed in that direction. Soon, he was out on a long corridor, and the hooded dude was running away. “No way, I’m not finished with you!” he shouted and broke into a sprint.

Barely at the first corner, and he was out of breath. Damn it; he shouldn’t have indulged so much in Pepin’s mini omelets. He was obviously no longer in shape. As he stopped to get his breathing back, he touched his midsection surreptitiously and tried to grab the fat, but his abs were still rock hard. “Hmm,” he said to himself. “Come on, Sebastian’s body, just a little more, and we’re done with these assholes.”

He pushed himself forward but no longer ran. At the end of the corridor, there was a single door. The head of dark magic jerks must have gone inside, so he hurried along.

Behind the door, however, no room existed, but merely a narrow platform and Kai stopped in time from dashing to the empty space that opened in front of him. From there, he could see the entire desolation that was the territory of the House of Uxilan.

No time to admire the view. He looked right, then left, and finally saw the hooded figure who waited for him, his dagger drawn.

“That looks a little small,” he taunted and began walking slowly toward his enemy.

“You destroyed my brothers with your incantation,” the figure hissed.

“Hmm, not really. They poisoned themselves, the way I see it. So no, as much as I want the bragging rights, I barely did anything.”

“How did you cloak your ice magic against our attack?” the figure asked.

“Have no idea. But what I do have an idea about is that I need to find out if there’s anyone else left besides you.”

“No, no one,” the figure said in what sounded like a pretty unconvincing voice.

“Whatever,” Kai said with a shrug and lunged forward.

Phew, he barely managed to keep on two feet. Seriously, Sebastian’s body had the weirdest timing for getting so clumsy all of a sudden. He pressed himself to the wall and risked a look down.

“Okay, bad idea,” he decided and stared ahead.

A swish through the air, and he dodged the assassin’s dagger just in time. That was no longer funny. He clasped his hand on the sword and tried to swing it but only succeeded in losing his balance for a moment. Why the hell was he so inept at maneuvering a blade?

He set his feet hard on the platform and turned toward his enemy. Maybe if he aimed for a simple technique, he would get rid of the last ninja and then head home. He held the sword, pointing it at the hooded figure who was waiting for him to make a move. It was now or never. He dashed forward, making sure not to look down, and it felt like his sword went through something.

“Gotcha!” he said victoriously.

Yet, at the same time, a sting blossomed inside his chest along with a pain like he had never known in his life. Kai looked down and stared at the dagger buried to the hilt inside his body. “Oh, shit,” he murmured and fell.

Now was a good moment to transfer back to his real world, he thought, as his body moved through the air. Any moment now... Maybe if he closed his eyes?

Suddenly, his body felt weightless. Ah, that had to be it. Could he open his eyes now? He risked it, and above him saw a pair of amazing blues eyes. "Pepin?" he asked hoarsely. "Why are we moving like this?"

He tried to look around, but Pepin placed a hand on his shoulder and cradled him in his arms. "Don't strain yourself. I called Adhe."

"We're dragon riding," Kai whispered. "But wait, weren't you locked inside your room? How --"

"Conrad let me out before you left. And I stole your dragon scale," Pepin explained.

"Nice job." Kai gave him a thumbs up. "Hey," he asked when something warm and wet fell on his cheek, "are you crying?"

They were as caught as they could be in the close examination of the books and manga volumes in Tani's possession when the doorbell interrupted them.

"Who could be?" Tani wondered and rose from the bed. "Mom has a key. I'll go and look."

"Don't just answer the door. Ask who it is," Sebastian told her. He had learned that there were many dangers in this world, such as door-to-door salesmen who could annoy you to death and make you buy a new toothbrush even though you didn't need one.

Tani traipsed out the door, and Sebastian listened to her going and then to her voice as she asked who was behind it.

"It's Milo," Tani said loudly. "Should I let him in?"

Sebastian groaned. Tani really needed to work more on her manners. How could she ask that while Milo was on the other side? "Of course you should," he yelled back at her.

He needed to find out something to tell the boy. Not the truth, obviously. His eyes fell on the mirror, and he froze. His eyes were burning blue again. "Don't let Milo come in!"

"Too late," Milo said from behind.

Sebastian did the only thing he could to avoid a disaster. He closed his eyes.

Chapter Twenty-Eight – When You Become

“So, you beat up those jerks to save me and now you don’t even want to look at me?” Milo asked as he turned Sebastian by grabbing him by the shoulder.

“No, I don’t want to look at you,” Sebastian replied stubbornly. He truly hoped Tani would be merciful and wise enough to let Milo go without learning the truth. Something told him that Milo wouldn’t take it lightly to having been fooled into believing that, all this time, he had been together with his friend, Kai. And it was enough that the boy was upset with him for other reasons, such as breaking up with him without too many explanations.

Milo sighed. Even with his eyes closed, Sebastian could feel the other’s presence, his solid heat, the appealing scent of his skin, and the warmth and kindness of his touch. It was pure torture if he had ever known one.

“Fine. Then I’ll just say what I came here to say,” Milo started.

“Wait,” Sebastian interrupted. “Are you feeling all right? That boy Chet --”

“Why don’t you open your eyes to check for yourself?” Milo challenged him. “You cared enough to put on that display of a Kung-Fu fighter. Why don’t you care just as much now?”

Sebastian closed his fists. “I cannot.”

“Maybe we could just tell him --” Tani started.

“Tani, quiet,” Sebastian ordered.

Through some miracle, the girl said nothing more.

“Something is seriously off about you,” Milo said. “And your sister. I can’t recall her ever shutting up because you told her to. Tani, what’s going on?”

“Tani, don’t tell him anything,” Sebastian insisted.

Closed eyes notwithstanding, he could tell Kai’s sister was dying to let it all out in the open. But a gut instinct told him that it would be a terrible idea to drag Milo further into this mess. It was enough that a thirteen-year-old now knew that traveling between different worlds was possible, an astonishing discovery that no one else was aware of in this dimension.

“You two are truly acting like siblings,” Milo let out in frustration. “I could always tickle you, you know?”

“What? Tickle me?” Sebastian asked, quite baffled by the idea.

He barely had time to react when Milo quickly attacked his flanks, triggering an unbearable sensation. The giggle that escaped his mouth was unforgivable. So, guided by his honed instincts, he grabbed Milo by the wrists and wrestled him down to the floor.

“Guys, this is getting really awkward and X-rated,” Tani scolded them. “Don’t you care there’s a little girl in the room?”

“Little girl my ass,” Milo snorted as he tried to fight back Sebastian’s counterattack. “Just looking at all those mangas spread on your bed right now is making me blush,” he emphasized the last words. “Hey, when did you get so strong, Kai? And a Kung-Fu fighter?”

“He is not --”

“Tani, shut it!” Sebastian yelled.

“Oh, hell, we’re going to get nowhere like this,” Tani mumbled.

Kai couldn’t keep his eyes open as much as he wanted. The pain in his chest seemed to fade, too, so that had to be Sebastian’s body healing itself. It was so good to be OP. Sebastian really had everything, a hunk’s physique, uber martial skills, ice magic, and an awesome guy like Pepin to love him. Yeah, he would miss being an awesome prince from another world.

“Hey, Pepin,” he called, slurring the words, “where are you taking me?”

Pepin held him close. “We’re going to the Shimmering Cavern. I must save you.”

“Save me? Ah, don’t lie. You just want to go there really bad,” Kai teased and snickered. At least he attempted to do that because the sound coming from his throat was a wheeze. He could hear Pepin sniffle. “Hey, don’t cry,” he said softly. “Sebastian cannot die. I mean, this body.”

“Please, tell me your name,” Pepin said with pained determination. “Your real name. You owe me this much.”

“Yeah, okay,” Kai agreed. It wasn’t like Pepin hadn’t already guessed that he wasn’t Sebastian. “Well, my name is Kai and I’m from a place called Terra.” That aspect seemed essential to mention, and it sounded fancier than just saying Earth. “I’m actually an awkward teenager who likes to play video games all night long.” Speaking was difficult, but Pepin deserved the truth. “And I look nothing like Sebastian. I’m skinny and the only fights I ever get in are when I’m in front of a computer, and I’m armed with a mouse. Disappointed yet?”

Pepin cradled him in his arms. Kai would have comforted him, but he felt so weak and sleepy.

“How could I be disappointed when I love you? And I don’t understand half of what you’re saying. Especially about using a mouse as a weapon.”

“Well, you don’t actually know the real me,” Kai pointed out. A bout of cough shook him. “Did those assholes give me the flu?”

“You like to joke so much,” Pepin said with tenderness. “Just stay with me a while longer. Kai,” he whispered his name.

Kai smiled, although even something like that required a great deal of effort on his part. “I like how you say my name,” he confessed.

He woke up shivering. For a few moments, he looked around confused. Was he going to fight the dark magic assholes again? But no, he wasn’t in the same place as before. Around him, crystal-like formations gave a gentle glow. “The Shimmering Cavern?” he asked tentatively.

Pepin appeared above him. “Yes. Please, stay awake this time, Kai.”

“All right. For you,” he added with something he wanted to sound as teasing.

Pepin grabbed his arm and pulled him into a sitting position. “I prepared everything. But you’ll have to walk with me over there,” he pointed at an altar, “and say the words I’m going to tell you.”

“Ah, the ritual. It’s how I’ll get home, right?”

Pepin helped him by putting an arm under him. “It will save you,” he said with determination.

Kai didn’t argue. It was too tiring to do anything. Pepin had to drag him to the crystal altar. He didn’t protest when Pepin took one of his hands and placed it around a tiny shard that felt as cold as ice. The shard was placed inside a small fountain that looked like the prettiest thing he had ever seen in his life. Pepin wrapped his hand around his, bringing some warmth.

“Kai, listen to me, even if you don’t believe it, please say the words I’m going to tell you, all right?”

“Anything for you. Have I told you you’re the prettiest guy I’ve ever seen?”

“Yes,” Pepin said impatiently. “Now, please, Kai, say... say that you love me. Even if you have to lie.”

Kai laughed. “Pepin, don’t be so silly. I don’t have to lie. I love you anyway.” It had to be the flu because he didn’t feel like lying about that.

Pepin’s eyes grew wide and then filled with fondness. “And I love you,” he said gently and pressed their hands together over the shard.

Kai shivered at first as the coldness of the shard appeared to intensify, but Pepin held his hand wrapped around his, and soon the shiver he felt was replaced by something else, a feeling of intense happiness and gratefulness. “Pepin, you must have the most amazing magic,” he whispered.

He didn’t know if he was falling or not. But his eyes were closing again.

“Just for how long are you two going to love-wrestle each other on the floor in my room?” Tani complained.

“Until Kai admits that it was a mistake to break up with me. And what were you afraid of, anyway? I saw how you kicked Chet’s ass like he was nothing,” Milo said. “Damn, you’re really strong! How come I didn’t notice? What kind of workouts you do?”

“Whatever is free on the Internet,” Sebastian replied promptly.

He increased the pressure, wanting to overpower Milo and finish this foolish fight. The boy was putting up quite a struggle, though, and his athletic prowess showed.

Tani groaned. “You know what? I’m just going to tell you even if Seb doesn’t want to.”

“Tani!” Sebastian shouted again.

“Who is Seb? Do you have another boyfriend, Kai?” Milo asked, his voice wounded.

It was so hard to do all those things without looking at him once. Sebastian also needed to make Tani shut up, so he pushed Milo back and jumped to his feet.

“He’s Prince Seb--” Tani started when Sebastian caught her and covered her mouth, making the rest of her words turn into unintelligible mumbles.

Her eyes grew wide as she looked at him, and then Sebastian realized that he had opened his in the meantime. Tani caught his wrist and her muffled protests intensified.

“He’s what? A prince? Did you rope your sister in your little make-believe, too?” Milo got to his feet by the sounds he made.

Sebastian shook his head to make Tani understand that she needed to stay quiet, but she was nodding just as frantically to convince him otherwise.

“You two are a pair,” Milo said as he got near. “What’s this whole story about a prince? Are you guys roleplaying? Like right now? It really shows that you’re brother and sister.”

Sebastian closed his eyes again. He could feel Milo's breath on his face. That was too close for comfort, and he still needed to hold Tani. He could do many things now, even in Kai's body, but he only had two hands.

He let out a distressed sound as Milo shamelessly tried to push one of his eyelids up.

"I'll make you look me in the eyes and tell me you don't love me--" Milo began. "Damn, what the hell?"

Sebastian opened both his eyes to look at the other. Milo was a couple of feet away and staring at him in disbelief. Only briefly because he soon sighed in relief. "Cool contacts. For a moment, I thought your eyes turned truly blue."

Tani found that moment to be perfect for releasing her mouth. "He's Prince Sebastian of Ifigia, and he has badass ice magic!" she shouted in one go without one break for breathing.

Milo crossed his arms and began laughing softly. "Cool story, sis. But seriously, where did you get the money from, Kai? Because I can almost swear your eyes now look completely different. It's like they're burning blue. I've never seen anything like it. Those contacts must have cost a fortune. Now, letting aside your crazy ideas for cosplay, look at me and tell me you don't love me anymore and still want to break up with me. Because nobody ever did such a crazy and awesome thing for me as you did earlier today, and I don't buy it that you no longer want to have anything to do with me."

Sebastian sighed. "Didn't I tell you, Tani? No one in their right mind would believe such a thing."

Tani pursed her lips and frowned. "O.M.G., Milo, do you really have to be the aloof guy in this story?"

"Story? Do you two have an opening in your little play? All right, I'll consider it if you want me to join you."

Tani groaned and threw her hands down, making fists. "Doesn't he annoy you beyond belief, Seb? How can you be in love with such a complete airhead?"

"I don't know how. The only thing I know is that I am," Sebastian replied.

Milo let his jaw drop but exaggeratedly enough to convince those around him that he was faking it. Then he cupped one ear and turned it toward him. "You are what? Let me hear that again."

"I am," Sebastian said, putting all his weight behind each word, "in love with you, Milo Bennett."

Summer hadn't always been his favorite, especially during childhood. Camping in the woods and going to fish with his dad, just the two of them, had felt a little boring, but now he wished that those times were back.

Kai was pretty sure he was in a dream. The sun was pleasant on his face. But there was also the sensation of wet feet, and then he realized that he was up to his knees in water.

"Just look at this, Kai." He turned his head to see his dad reeling in a fish that had to have at most two inches in length. "Isn't he a little beauty? Come on, give him a little kiss."

Kai made a disgusted face. "Ew, that's gross. Are we going to eat that?"

His dad laughed and placed the fish back into the water. "No, we're only fishing for sport."

Kai surreptitiously looked at his own hands. Definitely, he was no longer a kid, not the same age he had been when going on these trips with his dad. Only rarely he dreamed of his late father, and not just once, he had woken up afraid that he was forgetting his face.

That was a chance to take a good look at his parent's face once more. "Dad?" he asked tentatively.

He let out a sigh of relief when he saw the same fine lines around the corners of his eyes, the big bright smile, and the wiggling eyebrows that told him that his old man, as his dad liked to call himself, was up to no good.

"Come here," his dad urged him.

Kai groaned but moved anyway. He grabbed the handle and listened as his dad explained how to make the line travel farther. For his sake, he tried a few times, but it looked like he was just as a complete klutz as ever. At least once, he almost got his dad's fishing hat when swinging his arm back.

"No, like this," his dad explained patiently.

"I have no idea how you don't get bored explaining everything to me like this. I'll never do it right," Kai said.

"You will. It will just take a few more tries," his dad encouraged him. "And that's what dads are for, to never give up on their kids."

"Then I'm afraid I didn't get that personality trait from you. Anything I do, I end up giving up," Kai admitted.

He was in a dream, so it was all right to say it, especially in front of his dad.

His dad laughed his low gentle laugh and ruffled his hair. “You’re young now. But you’ll see how much the world changes when you, too, become a dad yourself.”

Kai tried another time, and the line stretched in a perfect arc only to land at a good distance. “I did it!” he shouted victoriously. “Dad, did you see--”

When he turned, his father was no longer there.

How many times was he going to wake up today without knowing where he was? Kai touched his head and then rubbed his eyes. Ah, right, they were at the Shimmering Cavern, and apparently, he liked to fall asleep on hard surfaces. So, still not home, and his dream was quickly fading. There were noises around him, and then he noticed Galien and Conrad hurrying toward him. “I know, I know,” he said, putting one hand up, “I shouldn’t have gone against the dark magic assholes by myself, blah-blah-blah. Hey, wait, how come you two are here?”

Galien stopped a few feet away from him and crossed his arms. “Pepin sent Adhe to get us.”

“Ah, cool. By the way, I think I killed all those jerks,” Kai said. “I mean, I think because the last one was pretty suspicious when I asked him about whether he was the last one or not. Yeah, he looked like he was hiding something. Not that he showed much since he was wrapped up like a mummy.”

“You must be feeling pretty good if you’re talking smack, the language of barbarians, so freely.”

“I guess.” Kai touched his chest, where that dagger had gone through, and only felt the blood dry on the fabric.

“Allow me to inspect you more closely, Your Majesty,” Conrad said.

“He’s all right for now,” Pepin intervened.

Kai turned his head to watch the beautiful servant walking toward them. He was clutching something in his hand, pressed against his chest, and at a closer look, Kai realized that it was the shard they had both touched earlier during the ritual. Pepin now wore it around his neck on a leather piece of string.

“What happened to your eyes?” Conrad asked as he got closer, ignoring Pepin. “And your hair?”

“What do you mean?” Galien came near, too. Conrad caught Kai’s chin despite his protests and turned his head. Galien suddenly pulled Conrad back with all his strength, making the other stumble and fall on his ass, and drew his sword, pointing it directly at Kai’s neck. “What are you, demon?” he shouted.

Kai had no chance to intervene because Pepin pulled him into his arms and hid him quickly behind his back. “You cannot touch him,” the servant hissed at the two. “You are here to pledge your loyalty to the new ruler of Ifigia.”

“That,” Galien hissed back, “is not Sebastian! What are doing, Pepin, siding with our enemy like this? He must be with the House of Uxilan! His eyes are dark! And his hair! Look at it, changing its color!”

“He’s not with the House of Uxilan,” Pepin said with determination. “You cannot kill him.”

“Just watch me. Out of the way, Pepin!”

“You cannot kill him, I said,” Pepin’s voice grew louder, “because I’m having his child!”

“What?!” Conrad and Kai both exclaimed at the same time.

Galien stopped his tirade, remained silent for a few moments, and then let out a long and weary exhale. At the same time, he lowered his sword. “Ah, well, Pepin, now that’s quite the surprise. And who might your chosen be, then?” It looked like that simple declaration was enough for him to change his mind.

Kai was too busy to process the new realization. When? How? Why? “My mom is so going to kill me when she finds out I got a boy pregnant,” he groaned and buried his face into his palms.

“I’m not pregnant,” Pepin said slowly, like he thought Kai was a bit slow in the head.

Given the situation, he surely felt like he only had half a brain.

Pepin showed him the shard. “Here lies the next protector of Ifigia. He is your son and mine.”

Kai scratched his head. “There’s a baby? In there?”

Pepin closed his hand over the shard. “I must protect him until the ice goddess decides to give him life.”

“Forgive my interruption, Pepin,” Galien said, “but how do you think Reya will react once she learns that you gave yourself to a stranger instead of Sebastian?”

Conrad jumped into the conversation. “How can Pepin have a child in this manner?”

Galien turned toward him. “Well, Conrad, the reason why his mother and I, as well, have insisted that Sebastian would finally bring Pepin to his bed and by his side, was this. Pepin is a Lelian, and they’re the only ones capable of such an incredible feat not reserved to us, mere mortals.”

Conrad narrowed his eyes. “So that was why you were so bent on dragging me away from Sebastian? To secure an heir and a future ruler for Ifigia?”

“At first,” Galien said courteously. “But let’s not dwell on how much I want you right now. We have the more pressing matter of finding out who this barbarian talking smack is. And why Pepin gave up on building a future with Sebastian for him.”

“He’s not a barbarian,” Pepin said impatiently. “He’s from a place called Terra where people use mice as weapons.”

Kai put one hand on Pepin’s shoulder. “Let me try to explain before my head explodes. Really, Pepin, you got us pregnant? Without letting me know first?”

“It was the only way I could save you. Now you have the protection of the Shimmering Cavern. I fooled you, yes, but I don’t regret it,” Pepin admitted. “And I’m not pregnant like when women are with child,” he cared to insist. He was even prettier when he got all determined like this.

“Okay,” Kai said. “Not like I was expecting you to say sorry or anything. And I don’t want you to say sorry. Ah, what am I saying? Are we really going to be dads, you and I?”

“Hey, Terran,” Galien called, “are you going to tell us how you got here and managed to pass as Sebastian?”

“Well, you see,” Kai said and scratched his head, “one day I was minding my own business, and despite not being hit by a truck or anything, I woke up in Sebastian’s body, next to Conrad who wanted to get freaky with me. And it happened a couple of weeks ago or something? Could have been longer.”

“Was that when you began to reject my advances?” Conrad questioned. “Where is the real Sebastian?”

“I suppose,” Kai continued, “that he is about to fail the finals in my place. And he’s probably having shock after shock because of all the technology and stuff in my world that is surely freaking him out.”

Galien exchanged stunned looks with Conrad. Surely, they couldn’t understand what he was trying to tell them.

“Sebastian and I must have switched bodies,” Kai explained. “But I should have said it first. My name is Kai Martin, I’m eighteen years old, and I’m just a totally normal, average high school student.”

“A high school,” Galien said slowly. “Are you a scholar?”

Kai sighed. Well, this was going to take a while. “Not really. Actually, I won’t be too pissed about Sebastian failing my finals since that might have happened anyway.”

“A most powerful curse must have been cast on the prince,” Conrad said. “And this boy appears to be innocent of any involvement with it.”

“Normally, I would disagree with you, Sir Conrad,” Galien replied, “but this story is so astonishing that I can only imagine that this boy was used merely as a tool of convenience.”

“Hey, don’t call me ‘this boy’ like I’m ten or something,” Kai protested. “But it’s true that I have no idea that I would land here, and in my world, such a thing happens only in mangas and anime series.”

“What are anime series?” Galien asked, his eyes filled with curiosity.

“Cool stuff that I should be able to show to you just so that you can understand how cool it is,” Kai said promptly.

Galien pinched the bridge of his nose. “What a dumbfounding situation,” he mumbled under his breath.

Kai was about to pitch in with some explanations of his own when he felt his body trembling. Hey, what were they saying? That his eyes and hair were getting dark?

Could it mean... that he was turning into himself?

“Kai, what is wrong?” he heard Pepin calling for him.

“This dude is not my brother,” Tani insisted, pointing at Sebastian and swinging her arm wildly. “I’m telling you, I shit you not, he’s this awesome prince from a fantasy land!”

“Tani, don’t say ‘shit’,” Sebastian chided her. “And it is impossible for Milo to accept such a thing. You’re still a child and that’s why you do.”

Milo came closer to him again. “Kai,” he began, but then he stopped. “What--”

Tani squealed in delight. “Your hair is growing, Seb!”

He stared in disbelief as the hair on his head began to lengthen. He caught a strand between his fingers and watched it turn into the familiar platinum color he knew so well.

“How is this happening?” Milo whispered. “Kai!” he shouted in alarm.

Sebastian registered faintly how both Milo and Tani hurried to him to catch him as he was falling.

Chapter Twenty-Nine – The Deceit

This felt like that time when he had landed in this fantasy land, but worse, much worse, because his entire body hurt, and he was crying out in pain. Kai squeezed his eyes shut as he couldn't keep them open, the light around him, so gentle before, now aggressive and all-powerful. Somewhere close, Pepin was shouting for him, and there were all kinds of noises, unbearable to his ears.

All of a sudden, the pain intensified, and he found himself being pulled forward like a magnet. If he were to describe the sensation, it appeared as if he was getting out of his skin, which was a terrible thing even to envision. All the horror mangas he had ever read rushed to mind; clearly, soon, he would be a walking skeleton with all the skin and flesh ripped from his bones.

If that were some kind of necromancy, the only solace would be that, as a skeleton, he had a chance to have a very long life, provided that he stood out of the way of more powerful undead creatures.

Before he could concoct a new strategy for living his life as a skeleton in a fantasy land, the pain was gone, and he was rolling down the floor. For caution's sake, he continued to keep his eyes closed when he finally stopped. Eternity wasn't going anywhere while he remained like that for a couple more moments, lying on his back.

“Seb!” Someone called out loud in a high-pitched voice.

Kai opened one eye. “Tani?” he asked as he recognized the voice right away. Was he back home already?

His sister appeared above him right away. “Seb, where the hell are we?” She grabbed him by the front of his shirt and shook him.

“Get away,” he said as he tried to swat his sister with his hands. “And who are you calling Seb, you little--”

Oh, that kind of made sense... Kai blinked hard and looked above. Hell, they were still at the Shimmering Cavern as the crystal ceiling told him right away. He grabbed his head, surprised to find his short curly hair instead of long strands of silk.

“I'm back!” he yelled. “I'm back into my own body!”

“Where are we, Kai? What is this place?” An anxious voice asked, also from above.

Kai's jaw fell when he saw Milo. “What are you doing here?”

“Seriously? That’s what you’re asking me?” Milo, who was usually uber chill, looked downright panicked. He was swinging his body like he couldn’t decide if he wanted to stay put or break into a run.

“Are you really my brother?” Tani shook him some more.

“Who else? Ah, right, so Sebastian was in my body while I was here... Where is Sebastian?”

He pushed himself on his ass, and together with him, Milo and Tani turned toward the rest of the people in the room.

“Ha,” he barely managed as he noticed Sebastian standing tall in the middle of the cavern, his back to him, his hands turned into fists by his side.

Sebastian still felt his body trembling from the effort that must have been his transitioning back to his true self. Why were they at the Shimmering Cavern? Breathing low and steady, he took in the scene around him quickly. Behind him, Tani and Milo were making a ruckus, as they had to be scared by being pulled along with him into his world. They were already tending to Kai, as it seemed. Why the three young people were here was a problem that would have to wait.

The Shimmering Cavern. The place he had avoided like the plague for so long. His mother or whoever was behind this strange situation had a taste for irony. It had to mean that he had been dragged there for the ritual. Only his mother’s patience reaching its end could explain what was happening right now. Galien and Conrad were there, probably as witnesses. And of course, Pepin, who stared at him wide-eyed while clutching something in his hand.

Sebastian’s eyes set on the object protected by his servant like he had to hold on to it for dear life. “Pepin,” he hissed, “what is the meaning of this?”

To his surprise, Pepin set his chin high. Not that the servant didn’t have the habit of becoming defiant on occasion, but there was something new in his eyes.

Pepin closed his hand over the item even harder. “I’m having Kai’s child!”

“What?!” That was Tani. “Mom is so going to kill you when she finds that you got a boy pregnant, Kai. And it’s really that kind of BL novel?”

“Shut up, butthead,” Kai told his sister. “Pepin’s not pregnant. He just holds on to a thing.”

“What kind of thing?” Milo shouted. “What is going on? Oh, god, I must be hallucinating!”

“A thing that’s like a baby,” Kai explained. “Well, it’s more complicated than that --”

“Quiet!” Sebastian thundered.

Galien and Conrad seemed just as flabbergasted by the whole scene, and their eyes were jumping between him and the group behind him. “Sebastian, is this truly you?” Galien asked.

He hadn’t seen his cousin in more than three years, if he recalled correctly. Seeing how Galien had always insisted that he should listen to his mother more, it wasn’t like there was a time too soon for them to meet again.

“Yes. Would you like me to blast you where you stand to prove it to you?” he asked in an icy tone.

Galien scoffed but right away schooled his face into a neutral expression. “No need for that, Your Majesty,” he said and took a short, barely polite bow. After their last fight, three years ago, Sebastian had demanded his cousin, in a manner that brooked no contradiction, to be addressed according to his station. That day, he had lost a friend, but Galien had been at fault, too, always siding with Reya for the sake of Ifigia, as if Sebastian wasn’t doing so much already.

He grabbed Pepin by the arm. What could have been in his servant’s mind to do a reckless thing like that? “You should have thought twice before acting so foolishly,” he said through his teeth.

“Hey, that’s not how you treat a... pregnant dude,” Kai protested, after a short hesitation to find his words.

These people, these foolish young people, had no idea what would soon descend upon their heads. Sebastian let go of Pepin and turned toward Kai, the boy who had clearly made a big mess of everything, just as expected. It was so strange to look at that face that he had seen in the mirror over the last weeks. And the dark eyes were wide as they stared at him.

Sebastian threw a look around and grabbed his sword. In a few steps, he was towering above the boy. He pointed the sword at him. “I should cut right through you for what you’ve done,” he said through his teeth, the anger boiling inside him making him tremble. This boy had taken a difficult situation and turned it impossible!

“Wow, wow, wow,” someone intervened.

Sebastian was surprised to find himself pushed back. His gaze met a pair of green eyes that stared at him with undisguised fury.

“Hey pal, who the hell do you think you are to threaten Kai like this?” Milo asked, and without any consideration for his safety, he continued to push Sebastian back with both palms pressed against his chest.

“Milo, stay out of this,” Sebastian warned.

“How the hell do you know my name?” Milo asked, shielding Kai with his body by placing himself firmly between him and Sebastian.

“Because he’s been your boyfriend for the last weeks, duh,” Tani intervened.

“Tani, quiet,” Sebastian ordered.

“Yeah, like I’d stay quiet now,” the girl riposted. “And why are we here? Weren’t you and Kai supposed to switch back? I mean, I don’t think that’s how it was supposed to work!”

Milo was blinking and staring at him, clearly not understanding an iota. From time to time, he turned toward Tani, but then his eyes traveled back at Sebastian like he couldn’t afford to have him disappear from his sight.

Sebastian pursed his lips hard. He needed to rein in his anger and couldn’t continue to look at Milo like that.

“Milo and I didn’t even want to travel to some isekai land,” Tani continued. “Not that this cave isn’t very pretty, but I have homework to do, and mom is so going to kill me and Kai when she sees that we’re not home when she returns from work tonight. Kai, this is all your fault,” she added, this time turning on her brother.

“How is it my fault?” Kai protested. “I didn’t ask for this!”

“Yeah, sure, because you’ve never thought,” Tani said and continued in a weird voice, “oh, how cool it would be to get trapped in an isekai anime and become the hero, and get all the girls.”

“The girls?”

Sebastian turned, somewhat disconcerted, toward Galien, Conrad, and Pepin, who seemed to be in particular dumbfounded by that last phrase in Tani’s speech, above all else.

“Pepin, I swear, that’s not true,” Kai began. “About the girls, I mean. My sister’s a moron.”

Galien, to make things worse, began chuckling. “As much as this situation appears to be complicated beyond belief, I have to admit that it is just as incredibly entertaining.”

“Pepin?” Tani got to her feet and looked to one side to see the servant as Sebastian was trying to block the view. “OMG, Kai, is that my brother-in-law? That bishie? I totally forgive you. Hi, Pepin,” she waved happily, “I’ll be your sister from today on.”

Sebastian stopped Tani before she could reach Pepin and pushed his servant back, as he also seemed keen on meeting his new sister. “All of you, have you lost your mind?”

They couldn’t tell, not as he could, but the air inside the cavern was getting colder. He had no choice but to play this to the best of his abilities. He threw one last look at Milo. The boy was staring at him, his mouth slightly open, and he appeared to be the most confused that he must have ever been in his entire life.

He turned his back on the trio and proceeded to push Pepin back. The servant was holding onto his precious charge for dear life, and Sebastian hoped that he would be able to fool Reya, at least until he would figure out everything.

Conrad was looking at him like he was seeing him for the first time in his life. Sebastian set his chin hard. He held Pepin by the arm and gestured at Conrad. "You will stay," he said. "But you," he looked at Galien, "are free to leave."

The air was getting frigid. There was no more time to waste, and the others' safety was paramount. So pleasantries of any sort were out of the question.

Soon, she would be here. Soon, she would see Milo. And that was something he couldn't allow.

"I'd rather stay, dear cousin," Galien said.

Sebastian bore his eyes into his cousin's. "If you ever thought of me as a friend, you'll do as I say," he let his voice drop low.

A spark of recognition flared in Galien's eyes. But before he could say anything, Sebastian opened his palm and moved his arm around, making a wall of ice rise between him and the rest, except for Pepin, whose arm he was still holding, and Conrad.

"What the hell? What just happened now? I'm dreaming. I must be dreaming. I'm in the hospital, and they put me on some serious shit," Milo continued to mumble. "I must be delirious." He caught tufts of hair in his fists and acted like he wanted to remove all of it from his head.

"Oh, shoot, stop being such an unbeliever," Tani scolded him. She hurried to him and shook him. "Get it together, man. I should slap you, but I can't really reach you. Consider yourself slapped and come to your senses."

Kai shook off the shock of having just witnessed Sebastian using his magic to block them from him, Conrad, and Pepin. What were his plans? What was Sebastian going to do to Pepin? He had fooled around these few weeks, but Pepin was now in serious trouble because of what they had done.

And there was also the baby! Or whatever that shard was! He hurried to the wall of ice that stretched as high as the ceiling and began hammering it with his hands. "Hey, hey," he yelled at the top of his lungs.

He was surprised when someone caught his arm, and he saw Galien. "Kai Martin from Terra, I believe you and your friends are in danger," he said in a low whisper.

"What?" Kai mumbled.

Galien put on a smile and gestured with his chin for him to keep quiet. “So, pretty boy,” he said loudly, “and handsome boy,” he added, as he pointed at Milo, “you’re with me.”

“And me?” Tani asked, jumping up and down, afraid as she had to be that she was ignored for being too short.

“And adorable little girl,” Galien said in the same courteous voice. “You are all invited to my palace. As it appears, the ruler of the realm has quite pressing matters at the moment.”

“You call that pressing matters, Galien?” Kai whispered as he followed. “He practically kidnapped Pepin.”

“He also has Conrad, and you don’t see me losing my temper over it,” Galien whispered back as he pushed Milo out of the cave.

Although he was no longer shouting, Milo was still in shock, and his voice was reduced to mumblings.

“Did you hear that, moron of a brother of mine?” Tani said and grinned as she grabbed his arm. “I’m adorable.”

Tani’s eyes were shining too much. Kai could tell that his sister was, at least a tiny bit, scared by the whole situation. So he wrapped one arm around her shoulders and pulled her close. “Of course you are adorable. You’re an adorable butthead,” he teased her to put her mind at ease.

“Oh god,” Milo shouted again. He pressed himself against the wall at the mouth of the cavern. “Is that a dragon? Okay, okay, so it’s just a very vivid dream.”

Kai knew that Milo couldn’t just admit the truth because it was too impossible to believe for someone as grounded in reality as his friend was. While Kai was always dreaming wide-eyed about traveling to fantasy worlds, Milo was all about basketball, getting into college, and all kinds of real stuff. It was totally normal for him to lose his shit. But, at the same time, Kai couldn’t just sit there, doing nothing.

“Can you take care of Tani for me, Galien?” he asked.

“Of course,” Galien replied and took Tani’s hand like it was something he did every day.

Kai grabbed Milo by the shoulders and shook him. “Milo, my dude, look at me.”

No wonder there, it took Milo a bit to finally do as told.

“It’s freakish like hell, and you have no idea what I’ve gone through the last couple of weeks. But right now, we need to get on that dragon, who’s actually a lady dragon, and get out of here,” Kai said quickly.

Shit, now he was no longer Sebastian. Maybe Adhe wouldn't be so keen on having passengers from another world on her back. Could they get to Galien's duchy some other way?

Before he could ask, Galien gestured for them to get moving, so Kai took Milo's hand and dragged him along. He stopped when he was close to Adhe's head. "Adhe," he started, "it's a bit hard to explain, but I'm not actually Sebastian. Please don't throw us off your back, pretty please, okay?"

"I know you, young traveler," the dragon said and looked at him with her beautiful eyes. "Your name and appearance don't matter. You're still the one who saved my egg."

"Saved what?" Milo asked. "Forget it. I'll wake up eventually."

At least, Milo was getting resigned with the idea that he was sleeping and they were in a dream. Whatever kept him from wanting to jump from the back of a dragon while they were up in the air, Kai was okay with it.

Tani had obviously taken a liking to Galien and squealed in delight as she was being lifted and placed carefully on the dragon's back. Kai hurried to climb behind her and hold her tightly. "No sudden moves, Tani. I don't want to go searching for you all over Ifigia."

"Sure," Tani said brightly.

Galien helped Milo behind Kai and took the last place.

"What was the thing about a boyfriend you said earlier, young lady?" Galien asked.

"Ah, Milo got together with Sebastian," Tani chirped happily, obviously pleased with being treated so politely. "You know, like kissing and stuff. Surely, other stuff, too."

Kai stole a look at his best friend, but Milo's eyes were closed, and he looked a little pale. He clearly paid Tani no mind.

"Ah, I see," Galien replied. "So, Sebastian found his chosen, after all. Go figure. That said, I must beg the two of you, Kai and Tani, that you don't speak a word to Sebastian of how I'm holding his boyfriend right now. If he didn't look like he were about to fall, I wouldn't hold this handsome young man so tightly in my arms."

That was quite considerate, coming from Galien. Kai murmured an agreement, and Tani expressed hers loudly. He held his sister as Adhe soared into the air. His heart grew small in his chest, as small as the mouth of the cavern that shrank quickly behind them and was soon out of view.

Sebastian was aware of how hard his fingers were digging into the servant's arm. It was a silent warning on which many things depended.

"Let me go," Pepin hissed and struggled to get free.

"Your Majesty," Conrad intervened. "I must plead with you, as well." He walked toward him cautiously, holding eye contact. "Let your servant go."

Conrad was just as handsome as Sebastian remembered him from that night, but those golden eyes no longer had the same effect on him. The familiar jolt of desire didn't come, and Sebastian knew that another pair of eyes, green in color, was the only one to make him feel anything at all.

"Know your place, concubine," he said in a stern voice. "And not a word of any of this," he added, hoping that none of his two current companions would be so foolish to undermine him and his decisions at a moment like this.

Conrad frowned, and his lips set in a grim line, but just as he was about to speak again, the room shook, and a roaring sound awakened from the depths of the cave.

Sebastian was the only one not surprised to see Reya emerging on her throne of ice. Pepin paled, and Conrad almost took a step back but then reconsidered. The ice goddess liked frost above all. Tiny icicles now covered the crystal formations and every breath they took fogged the air around them.

His mother looked as impeccable as ever, in her long gown adorned by pearly snowflakes. It was only the presence of her most beautiful tiara on her head, a delicate combination of silver threads as thin as hair and the largest diamonds in all Ifigia, that gave away that she must have gotten ready for this special occasion.

He kept silent as Reya stood and walked over to him, rising ice shards in her wake.

"I see that you finally came to your senses, Sebastian. I feel slighted that you decided not to invite me as a witness to your communion with the Lelian. I had to hurry here as soon as I felt your energy rising inside the Shimmering Cavern."

The Lelian. That was the only thing his mother saw in Pepin, his utility, and part of the reason why Sebastian had always felt the need to oppose her wishes. His lovers found satisfaction and joy in his arms, but he never used them more than fleetingly. To condemn Pepin to a life reduced to nothing but being a tool for Reya's ambitions for Ifigia was wrong.

"Yes, mother," he said coolly.

Pepin was no longer rigid in his grip, a sign that he was at least starting to understand that no one went against Reya and her wishes. Sebastian feared that it was only a matter of time until the ice goddess would realize that she had been fooled into believing that her son had sealed his union

with Pepin. For now, it was the only way to go to protect Milo from the wrath of such a powerful being.

Milo, with his beautiful green eyes, filled with anger and suspicion. Sebastian chased away that recent memory. Of course, he would look at him like that. After today, everybody would consider him the enemy, and while others didn't matter as much, the mere thought of Milo hating him was enough to make him feel like a hole was opening inside his chest.

But that was the fate that awaited him. Reya would never forget and forgive such disobedience. Once she learned the truth, she would imprison Pepin, destroy the shard, and make sure that Milo, Kai, and Tani would be sent into oblivion. Even Galien, as much as he wasn't at fault for anything, would surely fall from her favor. At best, he would be sent into exile, to the territories to the east, constantly at war.

So, although there was another's hand he wished to link fingers with right now, he let his hand slide along Pepin's arm. The servant understood this much because he let their hands wrap around one another. Hopefully, Conrad wouldn't start talking about things that weren't his to talk about.

Much to his relief, Conrad was silent.

"But why did you consider it a good idea to bring him here?" Reya pointed at Conrad without hiding the disdain in her voice.

"I did what you wanted me to, mother. Being allowed to keep a concubine should at least be my reward," Sebastian said slowly, reining in with difficulty the temptation of shouting in his mother's face and letting her know a truth or two.

Reya pursed her lips for a moment but decided to ignore his pointed comment. "As you wish. Lelian," she addressed Pepin, "bring it to me."

Pepin was slightly hesitant, his hand still clutched on the shard, so Sebastian had to push him forward. They all watched with unease as Reya took the shard from Pepin's hand and blew her breath of ice over it.

Sebastian frowned. Hadn't his mother always said that she had made him for herself, by herself? But was that even possible? She must have had a Lelian of her own, but who was that person if that were the truth? It was for the first time in his life that he witnessed something like this, and only now the thought occurred to him.

Reya could choose to lie to him if that fitted her designs. But now, Sebastian was confident that she must have used a Lelian to create him and kept it a secret. For what reason? The ice goddess was a creature of the proudest kind. It could be that she simply desired to be seen as the only one capable of such an incredible feat, of creating life by herself.

Reya returned the shard to Pepin, who took it with reverence and hid it under his shirt. The servant pressed his palm over it to keep it warm and took a deep bow.

Reya no longer paid him any mind and walked to Sebastian. She caressed his cheek, her touch as cold as ever but never uncomfortable. "I'm proud of you, Sebastian. You secured an heir for Ifigia. Your son, his sons, and his sons' sons will rule over Ifigia for all eternity."

Of course, for Ifigia. Everything was for their kingdom, their lives, their hopes, their dreams, and above all, their love.

Sebastian no longer wished that burden. He wished he would still be trapped in that strange world with smartphones, cringe reality shows, and flying carriages.

And Milo. The only one he would ever love.

Chapter Thirty – Unexpected Guests

Kai barely noticed as they flew above the large fields of green and rolling hills. They were heading for Kelonia, and he had never been there, but he couldn't bring himself to feel the slightest enthusiasm. His mind was a mess. Galien had said something about them being in danger, Pepin was kind of pregnant or something, and on top of everything, Milo and Tani were there, with him, trapped in a fantasy world, at least one of them scared shitless.

Somehow, that didn't feel like such a joyride anymore.

"Galien," he began as soon as Adhe left them at the entrance of a magnificent estate that appeared to stretch as far as eyes could see. "Do you think those people who had been gathered to fight the dark magic jerks will know to go back on their own?"

Galien nodded. "Sebastian is in charge now. He knows what to do. But is this the first thing you're worried about?"

Kai looked down. Milo and Tani were following them inside, through the large wrought iron gates, his best friend mumbling under his breath and trying to convince himself that he was still dreaming, his sister murmuring short exclamations of admiration at the incredible beauty around them.

"They marched to war because they wanted to follow me. I suppose I'm responsible. And it feels easier than to think about those other things."

"Do you mean, Pepin having your heir?"

Kai snickered, although that was totally inappropriate given the severity of the situation. "Heir, right. I mean, it's not like that baby will be royalty. Obviously, because I'm not. I'm sure he'll grow up thinking that his dad is a total deadbeat." Hmm, suddenly, that didn't sound so funny anymore. "Oh, no, I'm going to be a dad," he said and slapped his cheeks. "I totally need to pull my act together. I mean, I need to find work and start saving. Do you know how expensive college is? I guess he could take a student loan, but those can be hard to pay back--"

"Easy," Galien stopped his descent into madness. "I don't really understand what you're talking about, but there are things we need to focus on right now, such as saving our lovers from that woman's wrath. And you." He threw a quick look back. "As well as Sebastian's chosen and your sister."

"Sebastian's chosen? Do you mean Milo?" That seemed like such a strange thought. But seeing how Milo had been just on the point of confessing at the beginning of all this body swap mess, maybe it wasn't so hard to imagine that. Sebastian must have seduced Milo so hard. The thought was funny, but again, he needed to stop laughing. At this point, he feared that it was more like a nervous reaction.

“Milo,” Galien repeated after him. He said the name as he wanted to make sense of it and the person behind it. “He is very handsome,” he added after looking over his shoulder again. “He appears to have much difficulty in understanding what is happening, unlike you. You truly had us all fooled. Is he dim-witted, the poor thing?”

Kai bit his lips. “No, actually he has much better grades than me. It’s just that he doesn’t believe that things like body swapping and traveling to other worlds are possible. Unlike me,” he added quickly.

“Oh,” Galien replied, somewhat baffled by that explanation. “Doesn’t your world have magic?”

“Nope. Actually, if you started claiming that you could go to some fantasy worlds for real, you would be sent to the loony bin.”

“Loony bin,” Galien repeated slowly. “What kind of bin is that?”

“You know, the place where they send people thought to be crazy,” Kai explained.

“Are you crazy? In your world? Do you come from a loony bin?”

The path taking them to the palace was quite long. It appeared that Galien wasn’t troubled about taking the stroll, but Kai didn’t feel very apt to walk so much after all that body-swapping back thing. “I’ll explain it later,” he decided. “It’s a lot to take in, trust me.”

“Astonishing,” Galien agreed. “Now allow me to play the obliging host.”

An elderly butler followed by a squad of four maids marched toward them in a hurry. “Master Galien, Your Grace!” The man stopped abruptly and took a bow. The maids followed his example.

“Mort, I know I have guests with me, but they’re not the usual kind, so let’s stop pretending.”

The butler straightened up, and his stern face split into a large smile. He had to be the perfect professional because he turned all his attention to Galien after a brief look at the unexpected guests. “Master, where have you been for so long?” He hurried to Galien and began feeling his arms as if to check if he was whole. “And we heard about the war against Uxilan! What happened?”

The maids hurried toward them, and Kai found himself grabbed by a sturdy-looking girl with rosy cheeks. “I know just the perfect room for you,” she said, clearly convinced of what she had to do.

Milo was taken in hand by another maid, while Tani had the privilege of having two maids fussing over her.

“I will let you get accustomed to your rooms for a bit,” Galien said, “and get some rest, but we will have dinner soon. Then we’ll talk about we’ll do next.”

Kai totally agreed with that plan. He was wasted and hungry, and he bet that Tani and Milo had to feel the same after all the excitement.

He couldn’t say he was surprised to hear a knock on the door and then have Tani burst through it without waiting for a reply. Her pigtails were gone, and, instead, her hair had been braided into a fancy arrangement. She wore a beautiful blue dress worthy of a little princess, with tiny pearls woven into the fabric and so long that it swept the floor. The oversized sleeves were bunched around the shoulders but then glued to her forearms. On top of everything, she had bracelets and rings on both hands that looked incredibly expensive.

“You must be having the time of your life,” he commented but smiled at seeing his sister so happy in her outfit.

“The maids here are completely nuts,” Tani said and sat on his bed, “I mean, in a good way.”

“Have you seen Milo?” Kai asked. His sister was taking things in stride, and if there were one thing they had in common as siblings, that was their firm belief in all the fantastic things in anime series and mangas. Of course, before all of this, it was just an imaginary belief. Now they had been both proven right. Milo, however, was a totally different type of person.

“No, but I heard the maids saying that Galien and his butler took care of him personally to help him rest.”

“If that old man was in the room with them, then I have nothing to worry about,” Kai said while rubbing one ear. “Seeing how Galien is--” He stopped in time. His sister didn’t have to know what a flirt the guy was, and anyway, Galien had boundaries when he cared. This time, he cared.

“Who is this Galien dude?” Tani looked around. “I mean, I got it that he’s Sebastian’s cousin, but man, the size of this palace, it’s just freaking amazing!”

Kai waved with importance. “Sebastian’s place is even bigger than this. And I ruled there like for two weeks. Minstrels came and sang songs about me,” he added. Well, he wouldn’t say what exactly they sang about, but he wanted to impress Tani nonetheless.

“Cool,” Tani whispered. “You’ll have to talk to Milo and explain everything, though, because he seriously thinks that he got naughty with you all this time.”

“Well, that’s complicated.” Kai pushed himself up and threw his sister a pointed look. “How naughty are we talking about?”

“Hello, you can’t ask me that, I’m thirteen--”

“Almost fourteen, and I saw your secret BL stash.”

Tani sighed. “Well, things got pretty heavy. Milo’s seriously in love.”

Kai groaned and plopped down on the bed. He threw one hand over his eyes, and then he noticed the tattoo. Caught as he had been in everything, he hadn’t paid any attention to his own body, which he was supposed to have been missing all this time. He hadn’t, but his body didn’t need to know that.

“What the hell...” He pulled his sleeve up. “I got a tattoo?!” He stared at Tani in disbelief.

“Sebastian wanted to be badass because he saw how completely useless you could be.”

“Damn.” Kai pushed his hand farther so that he could see the ink properly. “I mean, I guess it looks kind of badass. What other crazy things he did while in my body?”

Tani threw him a sided look. “Can you still smell properly?”

Kai touched his nose right away. There was something about it slightly different. Like it wasn’t so straight anymore. “What the hell did he do?”

“Got into fights, stuff like that,” Tani replied with a shrug.

“Fights? With whom?”

“One guy called Chet and some other dudes.”

“Oh, I’m so dead. It’s official, I’m never going home. I’ll stay here, hidden in Galien’s palace. I bet he can afford a freeloader.”

Tani snickered. “You have nothing to worry about. Sebastian totally beat the crap out of Chet and those dudes. Seriously, they were crying for their mommas when he was done with them.”

Kai straightened up again and stared at Tani with squinted suspicious eyes. “For real? But how? He was in my body, and I can’t fight for shit.”

Tani shrugged again. “Dunno. But once he started working out and watching karate videos or something on the Internet, he got good. Like really fast. He smacked Chet with a pole right in the face. You should have seen that,” his sister added and laughed. “For real, Kai, you don’t have to worry about those bullies anymore. I think they’ll piss themselves if you ever do as little as breathe in their direction.”

“Hmm.” That wasn’t that bad. Kai felt his forearms a little, and they definitely felt more toned.

“By the way, did you do something weird to Sebastian’s body while you were in it?”

Tani's question interrupted his exploration. "I fell off a horse once, but I didn't break his butt or anything," he said defensively.

"How did you deal with his royal concubines?"

"There's only one, and I did nothing," Kai continued to defend himself.

"Ah, that big guy with unruly hair?" Tani asked.

"By the way, how come you know so much?" Kai asked, completely unnerved by his sister's knowledge of Sebastian's affairs. "Did you know he wasn't me, all this time?"

"No, because I just thought you were being totally weird." Tani hid half her face to laugh. "You should have seen him, flushing the toilet and shouting crazy words. He was so in awe of everything. And I got to see who he was for real only today, when he beat up Chet and his stupid friends. I mean, I knew he wasn't you not only because you don't know Kung Fu, but also because he made some awesome things like having blue flames all around him and stuff like that."

"I bet you wished he were your brother for real," Kai said, pretty miffed by Tani's recounting of Sebastian's adventures.

"No, silly," Tani replied. "I know you're a weirdo, but you're my brother. Although I like Sebastian. C'mon, it's not like anyone could keep from liking him. He has crazy magic and he looks so cool."

"And I was about to thank you for still caring for me as your brother. By the way, people around here are not so crazy about Sebastian, and he's considered pretty much a cold bastard," Kai cared to explain.

Tani pursed her lips in thought. "That's weird, because he seems like a good guy."

Kai didn't know if he could agree, but Sebastian had been protecting the realm for a long time, and people of Ifigia could do a better job at being grateful. "Well, he's back now. And for some weird reasons, he took Pepin with him and cut us off."

Tani smiled and nudged him playfully. "Pepin, huh? How that happened?"

Kai grabbed a pillow and pressed it against his face. "I'm not telling you a thing!"

"Come on, you have to! I mean, I'll soon become an aunt! I mean, a very young aunt, but still. I can barely wait to hold that baby. And Pepin is so beautiful. How did you manage to fool him?" Tani asked.

Kai pushed away the pillow from his face, only to see his sister's all-knowing smirk. She didn't know anything. "Well, to be totally frank, he thought I was Sebastian, and he has always been in love with him."

Tani gasped and covered her mouth in shock. "And you took advantage of that? Bad brother." She grabbed the pillow and smacked him in the face with it.

"Stop it, moron!" Kai protested. "Pepin may look like an angel, but he's a little demon, I swear. He figured out that I wasn't Sebastian. So he's in love with me now." For good measure, he stuck his tongue out. "Just so you know." He had no intention to explain to his sister how that had all gone down.

"Well, I guess that's good. Are you going to introduce him to mom? Of course you're going to. But when?"

Kai groaned and pulled Tani by one ear. Usually, he went for the hair, but he was afraid to touch that elaborate updo. If he messed it up, Tani would make sure he wouldn't live to tell the tale. "The answer is not 'when' but 'how', butthead."

They both fell silent. Of course, they were from different worlds. If they returned home, he wouldn't see Pepin ever again. While marching by himself on Uxilan for what he thought to be the final quest, he had thought himself at peace with that, but now, he wasn't so sure. After all, he couldn't leave Pepin to take care of the baby, shard, or whatever, all by himself. It wasn't fair, and not only. Kai simply couldn't.

That had gone better than expected, but Sebastian didn't care about lingering in his mother's presence. Conrad stood by his side as Reya gave Pepin a complete set of instructions regarding the heir he was holding so preciously in the ice and crystal shard.

"Your Majesty," Conrad said quietly, "are you all right?"

The question caught him unawares. Conrad shouldn't dare to speak to him so freely. Yes, he had subdued the fallen prince, and in doing so, many threats had been thrown around, but Sebastian thought that a boundary existed between them – one supposed to keep Conrad from asking such questions.

"Why are you asking?" he said through his teeth.

"You look concerned and paler than usually."

"That is nothing for you to worry about." Conrad moved and placed a hand on his arm. Sebastian shook it off right away. "I don't recall giving you permission to touch me as you wish."

“Then it is a tale telling sign that, indeed, you are back.” There was bitterness in Conrad’s voice.

Sebastian had felt attracted to the prince of Estfalia before. He had felt almost... he shook his head. But right now, he couldn’t bear his touch. Once, because Conrad wasn’t the one he desired, and secondly because that touch carried with it sympathy and pity, two things Sebastian had never needed in his life from others.

“You will give me a complete recount of all the mess Kai Martin made out of this kingdom while I was away.”

“Away,” Conrad repeated the word with slight sarcasm. “Have you been on a leisure trip until now, Your Majesty?”

“Concubine, remember your place,” Sebastian said haughtily. To his ears, he sounded like a complete jerk, as Tani would say. Maybe he was one, after all.

“I do. I wish I didn’t have to,” Conrad replied, his voice low and wistful.

It was evident that Kai Martin had gotten close to Pepin if the servant had been so foolish as to use the Shimmering Cavern and its secret powers. But what about Conrad? He could tell by Conrad’s too loose manners around him that Kai hadn’t treated the fallen prince as anything else but an equal.

Which was completely natural for a teenager from a strange world where royalty didn’t keep royal concubines earned in battle as spoils of war.

“Quiet,” he whispered. “You are tied to me. You belong to me.”

Conrad said nothing else. But he set his chin high, and Sebastian looked at his profile for a moment.

Reya appeared to have finished instructing Pepin on his obligations and turned her attention to him once more. “Keep your concubine if you so wish, Sebastian, but ensure that the Lelian has all the conditions needed for raising your heir.”

“Understood,” he said curtly. “Pepin,” he called.

The servant moved quietly and took his place by his right. Sebastian took his hand, clammy and cold as it was. He seized Conrad’s hand and whispered the words. He hoped that Galien and the rest were far away already. Reya didn’t have to know about the unexpected guests. The less she knew, the better. If he could help it, she would never learn about their presence and short visit.

When he opened his eyes again, they were back at the palace, in the royal quarters. Sebastian felt the front of his shirt. Some dark stains marred the fabric, and there was a small cut. Kai, as

clumsy as he was, must have gotten injured. Nothing fatal, not that Sebastian would die from something as small as that.

For unfathomable reasons, a new breed of anger grew inside him when he thought of the boy. Milo was with him now, and they would be together if Kai wanted. Why would he want such a thing? He appeared to have developed feelings for Pepin, or was that one-sided? His servant had a knack for that, as much as Sebastian had always shown his displeasure with that behavior. At the same time, Pepin was too gullible. Had he become enamored with the idea that he could have Sebastian, even if not in soul but only in body? Somehow, Sebastian didn't think the servant to be capable of such deceit. While he didn't love Pepin, he had to admit that there was hardly a person in the entire Ifigia with higher standards when it came to morals. It was the thing he had always admired in his servant, although never openly.

"Explain," he ordered. He proceeded to unbutton his shirt while he expected his servant to start talking.

"Allow me to help, Your Majesty." Pepin hurried to him in the same solicitous and impeccable manner as always.

Sebastian waved him away. "I'm perfectly capable of undressing myself." Actually, after spending time in Kai's body, he had come to appreciate his privacy more. Having servants fussing over him again would feel irritating, at least for some time.

"Why are you asking him to explain? You're the one who's been away who knows where," Conrad talked.

Sebastian flashed a look at his concubine. Concubine. Even the word felt wrong. He no longer needed Conrad, and yet, he had to reestablish the order of things. That, of course, meant that he would have to resume all his activities as usual, including having Conrad as the one to warm his bed. The thought lacked appeal, no matter how attractive the captive prince was.

But was there anything else to do? If it weren't Conrad, someone else would take his place. Pepin was out of the question. He would never touch the servant in that manner. And the heir to the throne of Ifigia would be an imposter, with Sebastian's complicity.

"Pepin, start talking," he commanded without sparing Conrad another look.

"I'm in love with Kai," the servant replied. "Thank you for sparing our child's life, Your Majesty."

Sebastian took off his shirt, and just as he was about to throw it on the floor for others to pick it up, he reconsidered and placed it on the back of a chair, under the much-dumbfounded looks of his audience.

"Your Majesty," Pepin whispered when he turned toward them.

“What?” Sebastian asked in an irritated voice. “It’s not like I’m about to start folding the laundry every day.”

Pepin blinked once in confusion and then pointed at him, or better said, at a point under his chest. “The wound,” he whispered.

Sebastian looked down at the black mark on his skin, stretching thin tendrils around like an exploding star. “How did Kai manage this?” he asked. It didn’t hurt. It was just something that would disappear at one point.

“He was stabbed by an Uxilan dagger,” Pepin replied, his voice weak.

Sebastian touched the mark. It wasn’t a wound. It didn’t go deeper than the skin, by what he could tell. “It’s nothing,” he said in a neutral voice. “It will probably disappear in a few days.”

Pepin didn’t look convinced, and Conrad appeared worried, too.

“Guys, stop worrying,” he found himself talking in the same commandeering voice but using the wrong words.

Guys? He didn’t talk like that, but after making so many efforts to blend in with the rest of the young people in Kai’s world, it looked like some phrases had rubbed off on him.

“You talk smack, like Kai,” Pepin said, visibly surprised.

Sebastian sighed. “I certainly do not. And you don’t even know what smack is, Pepin.”

Pepin’s eyes filled with something new. “How is Kai’s world, Your Majesty?”

“Well, it is incredibly strange. People have hot water on tap, smartphones that hold all the knowledge of the universe, and true crime television. But they don’t believe in magic, and if you ever talk back to a teacher, no matter how right you are, you are sent straight to detention--”

What was he doing, talking like that? He never mingled with those below his station, not in this manner that sounded almost... friendly?

“Do they use mice as weapons?” Pepin pressed. “But why? And how?”

“Mice?” Sebastian stared at Pepin for a moment. “No, not that I know of.”

“But Kai said something about video games, which I don’t know what they are,” Pepin continued.

“Ah, mice.” Sebastian pressed his finger against his lips, deep in thought. “A mouse is an implement attached to something called a computer that runs simulations of battles, although nothing is real,” he replied promptly. “It is nothing like a real mouse.”

Pepin stared at him in awe, and Sebastian felt a bit good about himself, being capable of explaining such astonishing things to his unknowing servant.

“A strange world, indeed,” Conrad commented. “But what made it possible for Your Majesty to travel to it in such a fashion?”

Sebastian’s good mood began to fade. There must have been dark magic at work, so there was no time to waste on chatting his servant and concubine up about miraculous inventions from a world he would never get back to.

“I am yet to discover what curse caused this to happen,” he said. “And you two should see about your obligations. Dismissed,” he added shortly.

“But, Your Majesty, my duty is to serve you,” Pepin insisted.

“Find other things to do than bother me,” Sebastian replied. “I can tend to myself without help.”

For a moment, he feared that Conrad would remind him of what a concubine’s role was, but the prince moved away and walked out of the room, following Pepin, with nothing but a short farewell.

Sebastian sat on the royal bed and took in his surroundings. The place was familiar, yet still strange after being away for such a short time. He had been on lengthier military campaigns, so why did he feel so out of place now?

Maybe because nothing else had been so life-changing for him, he thought as he lay on his back and stared at the ceiling. Where was Milo now? Was Galien taking good care of him? And Tani, too? He didn’t worry too much about Kai. That boy had managed somehow to rule in his stead without burning Ifigia to the ground. It was a feat worthy of being recognized for what it was.

But Milo... what was he thinking right now?

Chapter Thirty-One – So Like You

“I need to talk to Milo,” Kai said.

“I’m coming with you.” Tani pushed herself off the bed.

“Not this time,” Kai said.

His own voice, the determination in it, was new. Tani must have heard it, too, because she didn’t insist.

“Find Galien and tell him that dinner better be ready, ‘cause I’m starving,” he added in a more playful tone.

Tani smiled at him. His sister understood. She was young, but she was clever, sharp even, just like their mom. In their family, their father had been the dreamer, the one with the head in the clouds, and their mother always the one grounded. Both took after him, especially with their belief in fantastic worlds and whatnot, but Tani was more like their mom. She understood much more than she let on, and this time, Kai was grateful for having such a smart sister.

“Will do,” Tani said. “Kai,” she added after a short pause, “will Milo be okay? He seemed really in shock.”

“He’ll be, once I tell him everything.”

His sister nodded as if she knew that she was leaving the matter in trustworthy hands. As soon as she was out the door, Kai set on exploring the area and finding Milo’s room.

It took him little to discover his friend. A maid walking the hallways with her arms filled with clean sheets quickly pointed him at the right door. Galien’s personnel was incredibly competent; they didn’t blink at what must have looked like a bizarre choice of clothes in their eyes. Or Galien was so much an eccentric that they were used to the weirdest things.

Kai shrugged and let himself in after knocking shortly on Milo’s door. After all, he and Tani were just the same when it came to their manners. But they always cared about the person on the other side of the door, so that was that.

“Hey, man,” he said and rubbed the back of his head as he took in his best friend.

Milo must have gotten the royal treatment by the number of pillows stacked behind his back and the luxurious coverlet. He looked a bit better, and the tea tray left on the bedside table indicated that he had been treated to the best of the abilities of this world, which Kai suspected to surpass whatever counted as natural remedies in the real world.

Real world. Not like this one felt any less real.

“Hey,” Milo called meekly. He held his arms over the coverlet, his fingers intertwined.

“Are you all right? Jeez, I never thought I’d see you like this.” Kai sat on the bed and looked at his friend.

Milo snorted. “So like you to get us dragged into a freaking isekai anime.”

Kai snickered. “Well, glad to see that you’re coming to it. But I don’t think it’s an anime. I mean, everything looks very 3D, right?”

Milo looked around. “Some really good 3D. I mean, it’s really realistic.”

They both began laughing at the same time.

“So,” Milo pinched the bridge of his nose, “all that dragon riding, it was real?”

Kai leaned back and placed his hands behind his head. “Totally.”

“Freakish,” Milo commented. “That fancy looking dude kept telling me everything would be all right. I must have freaked him out really bad.”

“Well, you can’t really blame Galien. You were really freaked,” Kai pointed out.

“Yeah,” Milo admitted and snickered again. “So, all this time,” he began hesitantly, “like for two weeks or so, I’ve actually been with—I mean, you were--”

Kai nodded. “Yeah, I was here, in Sebastian’s body, and he was inside my body, as Tani told me. Hey, did you guys...” he started to ask but swallowed his words quickly.

Milo threw him a very but a very guilty look.

“Are you for real?” Kai shouted. “Did you bone... I mean... oh, shoot!”

Milo looked away just as fast as he did.

“Dude,” Kai whispered.

“Dude,” Milo whispered back.

They fell silent for a while.

“Screw me sideways, this is complicated,” Milo was the first to talk. “So, actually, I... did it with that scary guy with long hair?”

“Uh-uh,” Kai replied and shifted in his place. Was he supposed to feel something different? Clearly, Milo had been on top. There was no doubt about it since Sebastian was such an

incurable bottom. But his butt didn't hurt or anything. *Right, let's leave things as they are for now*, he decided. He didn't need any details on how his best friend had boned his ass.

"Damn." Milo covered his face. "He tried to tell me, you know? He kept on and on how he was a prince and all that."

"And what did you think?" Kai asked, curious of how that must have gone down.

"Just that you were getting into some kind of method training while cosplaying all the time. Really, I was getting a bit annoyed, but on the other hand, you... I mean this dude... I mean..."

Kai put one hand up. "You don't have to tell me. You have no idea how much I had to fight off Conrad who was after my ass all the time."

Milo laughed, much to his annoyance. Yeah, he could laugh. Not like his ass had gotten boned or anything. "But what about that cute dude? Pepin?"

Kai sighed. "Pepin, well, that's complicated. I mean, I got him pregnant or something, although I have no idea how. This world is really weird. Until today, I had no idea such a thing was possible."

"Galien told me that Pepin is in love with you. Did he mean you, you, or you cosplaying as Sebastian?"

Only then it struck Kai. "Oh, damn. After seeing the real me, Pepin must be so disappointed. I mean, I have nothing on that hunk of a prince, and Pepin has been crushing on him since forever."

"Hey, that's not true," Milo protested. "Sure you can compete against him."

Kai threw his friend a suspicious look. "You're not thinking of boning my ass, I hope. Think of boning Sebastian's round ass instead."

"Round ass?" Milo blinked a few times.

"Yeah. They sing songs about that thing in this world," Kai said with importance.

Milo shook his head in disbelief. Then he looked away and rubbed the back of his neck. "So... all that happened... is not real? We were never together."

"No," Kai admitted. "Sorry about that." He didn't know what else to say.

Milo kept his eyes turned from him. "Well, that's a huge bummer," he commented.

Kai was an airhead most of the time, but that didn't mean that he had no idea what crossed Milo's mind right now. The situation was pretty freaking complicated. "You couldn't know," he offered. That sounded lame, but it was all he had.

"I suppose I should have listened to him more and believe him when he kept saying that he was someone else," Milo said slowly, but it was evident that he didn't believe his own words.

No, reality-grounded Milo had no reason to believe such a thing. So, he hadn't, hence the whole mess.

"Pepin is with Sebastian now," Kai said. "And, weird as it may sound, I kinda don't like that."

"So," Milo scratched his head, "if you hadn't been transported to another world, could we have been, you know, boyfriends?"

Kai stood from the bed abruptly. Well, he needed to start being honest. "Actually," he began pacing the room, "you were just confessing, and," he stopped for a moment, "well, I thought something like, 'oh, no, this isn't happening' and then wished that I would be transported to an isekai anime world, and... well, this happened."

Milo remained silent for a few moments. "That's good to know, I suppose. I mean, you clearly preferred getting body swapped with a prince from some random fantasy anime than go on a date with me."

No point in lying, Kai, no point in lying. "Yeah, that kinda sums it up. Ugh, sorry."

Milo blinked a few times and then puffed out his cheeks. He let out the air with a loud noise. "This sucks. But was it because you don't like me, or the idea of getting it on with a dude? I mean, the latter cannot be since the moment you get here, you make some guy become pregnant."

Kai covered his face and groaned. "Milo, you're my bro. And I didn't just get here and start jumping Pepin's bones. Actually, he kinda seduced me. Okay, so not like seduced me, but you know... I have no idea how it happened! But I'm in love with him, and you're just my bro! I mean, best bro! Jeez, like I wasn't having a bunch of problems already." He plopped himself down on the plush carpet and crossed his legs in front of him.

To his surprise, Milo started laughing. The next moment, a pillow was sent straight to his head, hitting him so hard that he lost his balance and ended up sprawled on the floor. That didn't last long. Releasing a war cry, he jumped to his feet, grabbed the pillow, and dashed to the bed to hit Milo in the face with it.

Their little battle was interrupted by a polite yet pretty loud cough. They both turned toward the door to see the butler standing there with a small smile on his face. Kai blew away some feathers that were gently flowing through the air. "Sorry about that," he said, feeling chastised.

“Master Galien is waiting for you downstairs. Dinner is ready.” The butler stopped for a moment. “We like it when the place is so lively and filled with young people,” he added as he retreated.

Kai exchanged a look with Milo after the butler was gone. “People here are way too cool.”

“Yeah, totally,” Milo replied.

“Glad to see you’re no longer shell-shocked, though. That was pretty funny.” Kai snickered, earning a quick, murderous look from Milo. “What made you think it was all real, though? Before I came to your room, I mean. Or do you still think you’re dreaming?” He narrowed his eyes as he looked at his friend.

“Galien, you say the guy’s name is?” Kai nodded. Milo continued, “Dude holds my hand and talks to me like I’m lacking half a brain while his butler is plying me with the tastiest tea I’ve ever had, and so I thought to myself, ‘they must think I’m stupid’, so I calmed down and looked around... and thought, ‘well, it’s a pretty good simulation, but I doubt the government would use someone like me for experiments’. The tea must have helped a little. And the only option left was that I got trapped in the same isekai anime as you. There.”

Kai rolled his eyes. “So, how was it? With Sebastian?” He just couldn’t help it, as the curiosity about everything that had happened while he had been away was gnawing at him.

Milo gave him a suspicious look, and then he smirked. “I thought you wanted to know nothing about the boning thing.”

“No, no, totally no boning! But how did he manage... I mean, did he get kicked out of school or something? I heard from Tani that he kicked Chet’s ass. Everything had to be so new for him.”

“Actually, now our math and French teachers think you’re some kind of genius.”

“For real? Ah, damn.”

“Yeah, Sebastian must be pretty freaking smart.”

“As opposed to me,” Kai said quickly.

“Hey, I didn’t say that.” Milo stood and offered him a hand. “We should go eat, right? And I guess Sebastian is just some kind of a nerd.” That was probably to soothe the low blow from earlier. “I mean, he even set himself to learn karate or Kung Fu or something. And he got you some pretty good grades in the meantime.”

“Why did the swap have to happen now? It would have been nice to return to my finals passed with flying colors.” Yeah, that was a bummer. This body swap thing offered him no advantages whatsoever.

Except falling in love with a beautiful dude like Pepin and having a kid with him, somehow. Kai was still completely confused by that idea. But, whatever, many things were possible in this world, and it wasn't his place to doubt them. The certainty was that he would become a dad, and he hadn't even finished high school.

"Milo, what are you going to do about Sebastian?" Kai was really curious because he had no idea how he would get to Pepin and if they were trapped here forever, or if he would go back, along with his sister and best friend. And leave Pepin here? That didn't feel like an option.

"Are you really interested in my answer, or you're again too caught up in your own head?" Milo asked, interrupting his thoughts.

"Sorry, I just realized that if we go back, I won't be able to see Pepin ever again."

Milo placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. "That's tough, man."

"So, Sebastian," Kai said quickly. If this world had so much magic, there had to be a way to smuggle Pepin on the other side, right? It was the only thing that would make it right. Tani would help him introduce Pepin to their mom, and they would find a way to make things work.

"I don't really know Sebastian," Milo said. "I mean, I thought myself in love with you all this time."

"Ew, dude, no, just no," Kai said and pushed Milo playfully as they walked down the stairs. "You're my bro, and I'm not into incest."

Milo chuckled, so he had to be in a much better mood. Seeing how real he was all the time and kept things, he was probably thinking of a reasonable solution as they spoke.

"I don't really know what to do," Milo said, taking him by surprise. "I mean, it's a shock, right? And he looks so scary and impressive. Do you think he'll want his revenge?"

"Revenge? What for?"

"You know, I kind of teased him and stuff," Milo replied. "But the sex was great."

Kai covered his ears instantly. "I don't want to hear about that, la-la-la..."

To his relief, the butler was waiting for them at the foot of the stairs, ready to guide them to the dining room.

Sebastian could feel a headache coming as he looked over the registry of weddings. His head never hurt, never, but just seeing what kind of unions Kai had made while he had been away was

enough to make such a thing happen. Apparently, the servants no longer felt the need to stop their chattering and laughing when he passed by them, and even the knights were overly familiar.

Everywhere he went, his kingdom seemed different. Not necessarily in a bad way, he had to admit it, but not like he remembered it. Kai had appeared to have had a good time ruling in his stead, and his most astonishing feat had been defeating the House of Uxilan, which Sebastian had believed to be obliterated.

Still, Conrad had told him that Kai wasn't convinced that all of that house of dark magic wielders was gone. The thought came with its fair share of unease. Sebastian had never felt fear in his life, but the year before, when he had gone against them, he had been dumbfounded by the mere idea that they could take away his magic so quickly.

He had been at death's door, and he hadn't feared it. The most he had experienced at the time had been a sense of disappointment and regret. But Reya could always make another protector for Ifigia. If it were so easy for her to create life from ice, why not find a replacement for him once he was gone?

His disappointment and regret had been related to the trials and tribulations that expected the kingdom and its people once he was gone. Surely, not even Reya could conjure a ruler that could offer protection to the realm in a matter of hours or mere days.

At the time, he had been foolish to believe that he could take on the House of Uxilan without help. Pepin had told him about the feat of bravery conducted by Kai in his stead, and Sebastian had been surprised to hear that that awkward, lanky teenager who seemed to be at best a good for nothing in his world had had the guts to face the forces of Uxilan alone.

In that respect, indeed, they were alike. Tani hadn't been off the mark completely when telling him that she saw them as similar.

Sebastian touched the mark left on his skin by the latest confrontation with Uxilan. Kai had been stabbed, and he would have fallen to his death hadn't it been for Pepin and his desire to nurture and raise an heir to the kingdom.

Regardless of the things Kai Martin had done to his kingdom in his absence, Sebastian couldn't hate him. He didn't even despise him, which was something that came so easy to him whenever he came in contact with pretty much anyone.

Ifigia would have an heir. Reya would have her satisfaction. Pepin would be busy with taking care of the said heir. Sebastian and Conrad both were sworn to secrecy, even without the words to seal the pact.

But, the problem remained. Galien harbored strangers to the realm in his home, and while Sebastian knew that they were the safest there, it didn't mean that they could remain there

forever. So it was just a matter of time until Reya discovered that some travelers from a different world were in Ifigia, and only she knew how she would react to that.

Sebastian didn't care to learn about it firsthand. What he needed was to discover a path between the worlds and send the strangers back to where they came from. That meant, of course, that Milo would be lost to him forever, but if Reya discovered him and his significance, he would be lost anyway and in a much more painful way.

Absentmindedly, he touched the place where the dagger that should have ended him, or Kai, while in his body, must have stabbed him. A phantom sensation lingered, and it bothered him marginally, like an annoying fly buzzing around. Pepin had done well to take Kai to the Shimmering Cavern, or else, he would have surely perished.

But would it have been Kai the one to die, or he, Sebastian? It was hard to tell. This strange curse had no reason in it, and it continued to irk him that he had no lead on that whatsoever.

A way to find out more existed, but he disliked it. Before, he had despised it because it meant to spend time in the company of that woman who kept his mother's counsel. But, in this case, he needed her help, so it was only natural that he would seek her advice.

Sooner was better than later, he decided and pulled the tunic over his body. Except for explanations on what had happened during his absence, Pepin's services hadn't been required. While his servant had appeared affected by his decision, Sebastian could tell that Pepin wasn't as chagrined as he used to be when his offerings were rejected. Believably or not, Pepin had to be in love with that high school student on the point of flunking his exams.

Kai had ruled in his stead. It was a fact, no matter how astonishing. Which meant, of course, that Kai Martin was more than met the eye. Sebastian couldn't be entirely mad for the body swap for the simple reason that it had offered him the opportunity to get to know Milo and fall in love with him. Yes, if it were a silver lining to the events of last week, it was that he had gotten to experience that elusive incredible feeling of wanting to delve completely into another person's soul and be united with him forever.

Of course, such dreams were difficult to entertain, if not impossible. Sebastian threw a cursory look around his room. It definitely looked a lot less tidy than when Pepin took care of everything, but Sebastian now valued his space to the point that he wanted to put a sign on his door that said 'Be Aware Of Trolls' just to keep everyone away. He smiled as he imagined the shock on everyone's faces at the sight of such a sign placed on the doors to the royal quarters.

He frowned right away. There was absolutely no time to engage in such wide-eyed fantasies. Clearly, traveling to other worlds and getting to experience the trials and tribulations of a teenager's life was bound to make him think in such a silly manner. There were important things at stake, and he needed to throw some light where there was nothing but shadow now.

Her door was slightly ajar, and he had expected it. Sebastian pushed it open and set foot into Luna Celeste's quarters. There was no turning back, and if she were here, it could only mean that she had something to tell him. And he had to ask about the incredible possibility of traveling between worlds, all the while keeping what he knew of strangers from a different land being here, in their midst.

She emerged from the shadows of her library as always and eyed him carefully. "I see that you are back, Your Majesty," she said flatly.

"Yes," Sebastian replied politely and then frowned. What could she mean? She couldn't know about him and Kai going through the astonishing switching of their bodies. She had to mean that he was back from the war against Uxilan, which Kai had solved in a swift manner with no equal in all history of Ifigia.

"May I offer you something to sweeten your sour mood?"

It was truly unnerving how easily she could read him.

"I'm not here for your confectionery." If it were proof of Luna Celeste's magical abilities, her sweet confections had to be it. Sebastian, who didn't usually care much for such things, could do little to resist their appeal.

"Nonetheless. While you're telling me why you are here, indulge for a bit."

Sebastian pursed his lips but added nothing as Luna Celeste hovered her hand over a small plate and then handed it to him over the table. He looked at the heart-shaped chocolate cake with a disapproving look. "Is everything a joke with you?" he asked sourly.

"You are in love, Sebastian," she said with affection. "I thought it to be appropriate."

"I did what my mother wanted. And you. My union with Pepin is now complete, and Ifigia has its heir."

"Hmm," Luna Celeste murmured under her breath, and her eyes turned to narrow slits as she observed him. "Eat," she ordered.

He wasn't here to get into another argument with this impossible woman, so he took the teaspoon and dug into the cake. The cream inside flowed, making his mouth water even before he had a chance to take a bite.

Yes, it had to be magic because he felt like smiling once he finished the chocolate heart.

"Where is Milo?" Luna Celeste suddenly asked him.

Sebastian froze and stared at her. Over her hands gracefully held under her chin, Luna was looking back at him with an all-knowing look.

“What are you talking about?” he asked, hoping his voice was calm and measured.

“About your chosen,” Luna said promptly. “He must be still here if you’re looking for my counsel.”

He could lie. Yes, he could insist that he had no idea what she meant. But how did she know about Milo? His mind was struggling in the confines of his skull frantically, like a trapped animal.

“Don’t even think about lying,” Luna said sternly as she held him under her steely gaze.

Chapter Thirty-Two – Gone Rogue

“Well,” Luna insisted, seeing how he remained silent, his teaspoon resting in a delicate balance on the edge of the plate. “It looks like you do not wish to share Milo’s whereabouts, so I will start with a confession of mine.”

Sebastian’s head shot up, and he stared in disbelief at the charming lady. A charming lady with charms, she called herself, and at times, Sebastian thought that there was something about her, playful and mischievous, that he couldn’t quite pinpoint. If that were the case and her true self was this quirky side, his mother would never confer with Luna Celeste. That made as good a reason as any for her to hide that part that seemed so inclined to games and whatnot.

He waited patiently. To show that he was in no hurry to divulge anything that would put Milo in harm’s way, he leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, all the while eyeing Luna carefully. Something in her beautiful round face always brought appeasement. Still, Sebastian usually fought that sensation, as he found it unsettling to lose control over his own will in such a flighty manner.

“You’re so like your mother, stubborn to a fault, but your heart, just like hers, is still in the right place.”

He scoffed at that. Of course, Luna would think nothing else of Reya, and that was why they were thick as thieves. All the more reason for him to keep his guard up and not allow her to see inside his heart, not for a moment if he could help it. Reya wanted the good of Ifigia, and in that, there was simply no room for affection toward a son who existed only so that he could serve the said good.

“I wished for you to find love,” she said.

“And I did, didn’t I?” Sebastian replied curtly. “Pepin--”

Luna raised her hand and cut through the air. “Enough, Sebastian. Don’t take me for a fool. The last time you visited me, I wished for you to find love and put my wish in the charm I gave you.”

Sebastian stared at the empty plate in front of him and frowned. The mark on his skin where the Uxilan dagger had stabbed his body while Kai was still in it itched, and he had to use all his willpower not to touch his chest. Was this woman so wicked as to curse him?

“You,” he hissed. “You made it so that I was cursed to travel to that strange world!”

She served him an amused smile as her eyes lit up with interest. “Sincerely, I thought you were having emerging feelings for your new concubine and hoped to nudge you in the right direction. If that had failed, it would have confirmed that Pepin should still be the one for you.”

Sebastian frowned. "You're playing with things that don't concern you," he said thickly. "Do you have any idea what you've done?"

To his dismay, Luna placed her chin in her right palm and looked at him with loving eyes. What was she playing at now?

"I do. I finally helped you realize your deepest wish, Sebastian."

He grunted as he pressed himself back into his chair more. "And what would that wish be if you don't mind my asking?"

"To love and be loved back," Luna replied matter-of-factly like he should have known that already.

He looked away and worked his jaw. "That is preposterous," he denied. "What would love," he spat the word like it was poison in his mouth, "bring me? I have everything."

Luna sighed, seemingly from the bottom of her twisted heart. If she wanted to fool him into thinking that she was on his side, she had to do better than that.

"I kept telling your mother," she started, "that she should allow you to feel happy. And she kept telling me that you were perfectly fine."

"I certainly was," Sebastian shot back.

Luna shook her head. "No, my dear boy, you weren't fine at all. You weren't living, not completely."

"And how is this," Sebastian replied and grabbed his chest, "any living? This... this pain--"

"It's living," Luna contradicted him and nodded all knowingly. "It cannot have been too long since you were forced to part ways with your chosen. Don't you remember the joy, too?"

He stopped the flow of words he wanted to hurl at her. Of course, he did remember the joy, but it was because he remembered that, pain existed, too, and their mingled effect was just too much to bear. "That is not important." All that sighing coming from Luna was starting to get on his nerves. "Why do you pretend to be so concerned? And Milo is not anywhere in the palace or near it."

"That much I gather." She continued to examine him with keen eyes. "What is this talk about a strange world?"

So Luna didn't know she had sent him into a world so different from theirs that he had no idea where to start. But then, how had her charm worked? Did she have no control over her own crafty magic?

“You should know,” he gave a vague reply.

“I don’t. But when I saw Milo--”

Sebastian tensed. “Where and when did you see him?” he asked through his clenched teeth.

Luna rested her lily-white hand over her mirror to the souls of humans, as she called that implement. “Here.”

He frowned. “How?”

“Your replacement walked into my quarters, in search of answers.”

Sebastian could feel his jaw hurting. Just how much damage had that bumbling idiot done? “And you found it not in the least strange that he wasn’t me?” he asked.

“Ah, I was almost fooled for a moment. But unlike you, he gobbled down the cake I gave him without pretending that it’s not the most delicious thing he ever had. I was intrigued, of course, especially since I sensed that he was developing feelings toward Pepin. Imagine my surprise.”

Sebastian chose to look sternly at her. “I have my doubts you were that surprised.”

Luna laughed her silver bell laughter that, just like her confectionery, could lull his mind into a pleasant state that he tried to chase away as misleading and ill-intended. She was his mother’s closest confidante, and he should not forget about that if he wanted to keep Milo safe.

“Very well. Not that surprised. But I did see Milo, and his strange attire confirmed to me that he must be somewhere a long way from Ifigia. And where he was when I saw him, you had to be, too.”

“Did you see me?” Sebastian asked. *Did you even look?* Sometimes, such annoying questions came to mind. Whether he returned from war or negotiations with a neighboring kingdom, no one cared about his wellbeing. Except for Pepin, of course, but Sebastian had always had to do his damnest to keep his servant at arm’s length so that he wouldn’t end up making him believe any feelings of a romantic nature would emerge between them.

“No, because, according to my eyes, you were sitting right in front of me. Of course, your replacement confirmed then my suspicions by letting me know that Milo is his friend. Hence, if he were here, you had to be... where exactly have you been, Sebastian?”

Luna was obviously trying to appear calm and collected, but her eyes shone with curiosity. He didn’t say anything.

“Never mind, then. I believe you would talk when you realize that I’m not your enemy, and I’ve never been.”

“That will never happen,” Sebastian said icily.

“Never say never,” Luna replied. “Now, you came here to ask me something. Go ahead.”

Sebastian pursed his lips in thought. Could he trust Luna not to let Reya know of Milo? She knew and had known for a while, without a doubt, and yet Reya had no idea of the handsome boy Sebastian was in love with.

“Yes, you can trust me,” Luna said with a slight note of exasperation in her voice. “Ask me. Just do it.”

“How is it possible to travel between worlds?” Sebastian asked directly.

“Well, since you are actually the one to have embarked on such an astonishing journey, I was hoping you could tell me.”

Sebastian stood abruptly. “You are of no use to me.”

“Sebastian, wait.” Luna stood, as well, and came around the table and close to him. She placed a hand on his forearm. “Milo won’t be safe. Why don’t you let me help you?”

“The only help I need is for you to tell me how to open the gate to that strange world. It looks to me that you have no control over your own charms.”

“You are harsh, just like her.” Luna raised one hand and caressed his cheek. “I am here for you, whenever you need me. Just make sure she doesn’t catch whiff of Milo being in Ifigia.”

“How do you know he’s in our world?” Sebastian asked, only then realizing that he hadn’t asked the most obvious fact.

“I saw what happened at the Shimmering Cavern.”

He didn’t have to ask how.

“And I know that Milo, along with his friends, didn’t stay with you.”

“How come you don’t see him now?” Sebastian asked, using his coldest voice.

“Quite the strange thing,” Luna replied. “I should have been able, but... I wonder what magic is stronger than ice.”

She gave him a sided look, but he held his tongue. Clearly enough, she thought of Galien and his mother’s lineage. Despite his cousin’s denial of having any magic of his own, it didn’t mean that he couldn’t enlist his mother’s help when needed. Where Reya had only frosty feelings at best toward her offspring, Fiana’s love for her son occasionally burned a bit too hot. Galien often joked about never being allowed to emancipate from under her wing till the day he was no more.

“They must be with him, then,” Luna said airily.

Sebastian gave her a stricken look.

“Oh, do not worry. I had my suspicions, but I needed the confirmation I see now in your eyes. They’re in good hands.”

“Not for long, I suppose,” Sebastian said.

“I’ll search for your answer,” Luna replied. “I fear someone must have meddled with my magic.”

“That’s quite unsettling, don’t you think?” Sebastian eyed her carefully.

“Indeed,” she admitted with a thoughtful nod. “Until I find what I’m looking for, make sure to stay away from Milo. Reya mustn’t see him.”

“No need for you to remind me that.” He hesitated for a moment. “Why are you helping me? Against her wishes, even?”

Reya offered him a fond smile. “I love your mother, Sebastian.” For one heartbeat, she remained silent. But then, she looked straight at him and right into his soul. “But I love you more.”

He opened his mouth, wanting to ask what she could mean, but she silenced him by pressing her index finger against her lips.

“Now go and have faith. When the time is right, you’ll see him again.”

Sebastian couldn’t say, hand on heart, that he should have felt soothed by those words, but it was a simple truth. There was something more than charming about the charming lady of Ifigia. She could take anyone’s pain away with just a touch.

“Everything looks so cute. I can’t eat! It’ll just ruing them!” Tani exclaimed as Galien’s personnel came and went in a flurry of activity, placing the most exquisite-looking dishes in front of them.

“I can,” Kai replied and eyed everything while licking his lips. “But you should try Pepin’s mini omelets, for real. He makes the best in the world. I mean, the best I’ve ever tasted,” he added.

Compared to them, Milo was a lot more reserved, and he was sitting straight in his chair without letting out any sign that he was as impressed with his surroundings as Tani. He was no longer muttering under his breath so that at least was a good sign.

“Please, enjoy,” Galien encouraged them. “And I am well aware that nothing can surpass the food made by the one you love.”

Kai snickered. “Has Conrad cooked anything for you?”

“I’m afraid we’re still not there yet,” Galien replied affably. “However, I am much interested in hearing more about your world. And Milo,” he added.

Milo remained still, his fork in the air. Kai stared at his friend and watched him swallow a bit nervously. Even if Milo had come to terms somehow that they were in a fantasy land, it didn’t mean that he felt at ease there. They had been given other clothes, so now they didn’t appear as out of place as before. Milo looked quite dashing, Kai had to admit, in a blue outfit adorned with intricate golden decorations, and the same frilly type of shirt that Galien wore was part of his outfit. Not that his dark green suit was any less interesting, Kai thought, but Milo indeed looked handsome in his.

“Um, well,” Milo said, “What would you like to know... Your Grace?”

Kai snickered. Tani followed, proving once more that they were siblings. Milo gave them an alarmed look. “What? How am I supposed to address someone as high up the ranks as Galien?”

Galien hurried to the rescue. “Feel free to call me by my name. We don’t keep up with formalities here when we’re among friends.”

“Are we friends?” Milo asked.

“If we’re not, we’re sure to become,” Galien assured him gallantly. “My cousin is deeply in love with you, and I will do my best to--”

“But I’m not in love with him,” Milo said abruptly, cutting Galien’s words short.

Kai held his breath, and Tani did the same as they watched the exchange.

Galien’s eyes softened and shadowed. “Well, it’s quite the shame if this is how you feel.”

“All this time,” Milo explained as his fingers flexed around the fork, “I thought I was in love with my best friend. I don’t really know your cousin, with all due respect.”

Milo was right, of course, to some degree. But hadn’t he come to know Sebastian during their time together? Kai wondered.

“But you do,” Tani intervened, making all eyes turn to her. “He does,” she insisted, somewhat defensively as her eyes moved between Kai and Galien briefly. “All this time, Milo, you’ve been with Seb, and come on, you like him, at least.”

Kai observed Galien. He was examining Milo keenly as if he were trying to make sense of something.

Milo played with the fork a little more. “I was with him these last few weeks, but not for one moment, I thought that someone else lived and breathed in Kai’s body. No matter how much he insisted. I was thinking that my best friend, now boyfriend, was just fooling around.”

Tani scoffed. “That still doesn’t change anything. You’re in love with him,” she concluded.

“Tani,” Kai came to Milo’s rescue, seeing how his friend was looking down, unsure of what to say, “let Milo be. He knows better.”

“For now, let’s enjoy our meal,” Galien recommended. “And later, you can all teach me how to talk smack properly.”

“Smack?” Milo asked. “What the hell have you been telling these people, Kai?” He was grinning now, a good sign that the earlier conversation hadn’t rattled him too severely.

“I was just trying to defend myself,” Kai protested. “Of course, I’ve said all kinds of weird things.”

Galien laughed whole-heartedly. “I wouldn’t mind the truth this time. So, your world has no magic? None whatsoever?”

Kai was thankful for Galien’s smooth manners. Milo was surely confused and couldn’t just jump into the new situation and declare his undying love for Sebastian. Things were rarely that simple, in any story that he knew of. But he exchanged a quick look with his sister, and Tani shook her head and then mouthed to him – ‘he loves Seb’ and gestured with her chin toward Milo.

Maybe Tani was right. But that still didn’t mean that things would be easy.

Luna Celeste didn’t have the answers he wanted, which only meant that he would have to look somewhere else. But where? Sebastian pondered, examining the options he had at his disposal. None in the entire Ifigia, at least none that he knew of, could yield such incredible power. Luna had admitted that someone must have meddled with her magic, but her knowledge on the matter was limited.

Still, he wouldn’t sit idly, twiddling his thumbs. First things first, he needed a map and to summon all the eggheads at his court to question them on all the places and people with magic living in his kingdom. If it took him days and nights without one wink of sleep to find a way to send Milo back to safety, he would do it without a moment to waste.

He frowned as he walked into his quarters and found Pepin dusting as usual. These minor intrusions upon his privacy were beginning to unnerve him.

“The place is as clean as it can be. Feel free to tend to other duties. I believe you have quite an important one,” he said without even greeting the servant.

Pepin turned to face him, holding on to his feather duster like the thing could summon protection magic at any moment. “Sebastian,” he said in a hurt voice, “why are you so cold?”

“Cold? Don’t you mean my usual self?” Sebastian snapped.

Pepin didn’t recoil from his moods like he used to. “You’re troubled. You’re worried. And so am I. Kai--”

“Please, do not speak his name. Walls have ears, as you just may well know. If you don’t, then you’re a fool.”

Pepin hurried close to him and touched his arm. His big beautiful eyes were swimming in tears, and that was something Sebastian couldn’t stand. However, Pepin required learning a few crucial truths, or else he’d be prey to confusion and much more suffering for a long time. “Pepin,” he said in a measured voice, “you know you cannot keep him.”

“What?” Pepin took a step back and held on to his shard.

Sebastian sighed in exasperation. “Not the child. Your lover. He must return to his world.”

Pepin nodded. “Yes. If Reya discovers them--”

Sebastian put one hand up. “No need for you to remind me.”

“Your Majesty, are you in love with that handsome young man?” Pepin asked.

Sebastian looked away. Why did everyone feel the need to twist the knife? “Yes,” he admitted in a quiet voice. “All the more reason for me to find a way to send them all back. They’re not safe here.”

Pepin came closer again. “I want to help.”

“What can you do?” Sebastian said and waved dismissively. “All your life, you’ve been trained to be a servant. And you are a qualified one, don’t get me wrong, but--”

“Kai took me on adventures with him. And I helped him get the dragon’s tear when Conrad was ill after being stabbed by an Uxilan dagger meant for you.”

Sebastian stopped, astonished to hear such an incredible story. He scoffed. “It is not like you to embellish the truth or say blatant lies, Pepin.”

“It is true,” Pepin insisted, his hands turned into fists and held close by his sides. “Ask Conrad if you don’t believe me.”

There was something alluring about Pepin when he got stubborn like that. His willfulness could be considered a character flaw, and Sebastian had always been annoyed by it, but right now, he could understand why Kai Martin would fall in love with the servant. Of course, his face was very pretty, but that wasn't it. A fiery fire burned into those eyes the color of a summer sky.

"Very well," Sebastian said coolly. "I suppose your insubordination could at least serve the higher good, given the circumstances. Can you please tell me what you think happened that Kai Martin and I exchanged places in such an incredible manner?" He crossed his arms and waited. Pepin would be a bit upset about being put in place like that, but he had to see his limitations.

"It must have been a really powerful magic," Pepin replied.

"Yes, that much I gather. But who could be behind it?" Sebastian didn't care about sharing with Pepin the details of his discussion with Luna Celeste just yet.

"You ended up falling in love, so it had to be someone who wished you would find happiness," Pepin said thoughtfully. "But if that had been true, then the handsome young man you now love would have been summoned here instead of your being made to travel to Kai's world. Which means that the magic used could also have been employed as a means to eliminate you."

Sebastian was already trying to think of other ways to identify the culprit for the strange exchange without paying much attention to Pepin but stopped at his servant's last words. "Eliminate me?"

"Yes. And leave Ifigia without her lord and protector."

Sebastian stared at Pepin for a while. "That makes sense. Excellent thinking, Pepin."

The servant smiled sheepishly.

Sebastian began pacing the room. "I've been thinking the same thing ever since I opened my eyes in the other world. Whoever made it happen must have wanted me away from Ifigia. And--"

"And the same day you and Kai changed places, an Uxilan assassin appeared in the palace and tries to stab Kai," Pepin said promptly. "That was when Conrad got injured because he put himself between the assassin and Kai."

Sebastian stopped and stared at his servant. "How long have you known that the bumbling idiot you love was in my body?"

"Not for a while, although I was quite confused by how different you seemed. I'm just trying to piece things together here. The change must have happened that day, because Kai woke up here and pushed Conrad away so fast that he made him fall on his ass," Pepin said promptly.

Sebastian chuckled at that image. Kai had his good parts, and somehow the situation just described by Pepin appeared quite hilarious. “What?” he asked Pepin, who was staring at him wide-eyed.

“Your Majesty, I don’t remember when I last heard you laughing.”

“What do you mean?” Sebastian turned away from Pepin, slightly embarrassed of being caught in a moment of weakness. “I can be amused when the situation requires it.”

Pepin didn’t let go and walked closer. “Sebastian, you’re... happy.”

“Happy?” Sebastian blinked rapidly and turned to look at his servant. “I’ve tried to navigate the intricacies of a dangerous world for weeks while being ill-equipped for it, I’ve messed up the life and sentiments of a young man through no fault of his own, and someone tries to destroy Ifigia.”

“Not someone,” Pepin replied. “It has to be Uxilan. They’ve always wanted you gone. As for the rest, I believe you did quite well, Your Majesty. You fell in love with a very handsome young man.”

Sebastian sighed. “I am absent for a fortnight or so, and everyone here talks about nothing but romance and love. I’m afraid we must be practical.”

“We?” Pepin asked, his eyes filled with hope.

Ah, he should have considered his words better. “It is a perilous quest,” Sebastian said coolly.

“I don’t mind,” Pepin said promptly.

“I should go alone.”

“No, you shouldn’t.”

“Since when do you feel so free to contradict me?”

“Since I realized that you’re more than just the son of the ice goddess. Better, even.”

“Better?”

“Yes, better,” Pepin said with conviction. “You’re someone who can feel. I’m happy that you fell in love with someone, Sebastian, even if that someone isn’t me.”

Sebastian took his time to search the servant’s beautiful eyes for any sign of lingering love. A loving look met him, but it was no longer the mindless adoration from before. In Pepin’s eyes, he saw the love of a friend. “How can you be sure, Pepin?” he asked.

“Sure of what?”

“That you don’t... love me anymore. And that you love Kai Martin instead. After all, the one in front of you, in this physical form, has always been me.”

Pepin shook his head gently and smiled. “You may think so. But all my life, I was made to believe that my happiness was you. But Luna told me that I was to be loved too, and when you kept on rejecting my feelings... I started to believe, in spite of everything, that you weren’t that person. When Kai came along, my fate became true.”

Sebastian nodded thoughtfully. “But how can you set us apart? When you look at me, don’t you have any feelings left?”

“No. It’s the one inside that counts, Sebastian,” Pepin said and placed one hand on his chest. “Are you worried that the one you love might not feel the same?”

Yes. Yes, he was. But the answer he gave was different. “He would do himself a lot of good not to. His place is not here, and if I can help it, I will send him back to the world he belongs as soon as possible.”

Pepin’s eyes were floating in sadness now. “You’re right, of course. But you are allowed to wish that he still loves you.”

Sebastian turned his back on his servant and walked over to the big table. “If you care about joining me in this quest, you must prove that you can be more practical than this, Pepin,” he said as he spread open the map of the kingdom.

Chapter Thirty-Three – My Way To You

“Are we just going to sit around here, getting high on delicious food and fluffy pillows, without doing anything?” Milo asked Kai after dinner was over, and they were allowed to roam freely, at Galien’s encouragement, but with the promise not to leave the estate.

It looked like Galien had important matters to attend to, so he was letting his guests to their own devices, and Kai had a feeling that Sebastian’s cousin was searching for ways to solve their situation. That meant that, at one point, they would travel back to their world and leave this fantastical one behind.

And Pepin. And the tiny shard that was supposed to turn into a baby. Kai sighed. What was he supposed to do? So, on the one hand, it was logical that they couldn’t stay here forever. Their parents must have noticed their disappearance by now, and they were probably worried sick. But how could he leave Pepin behind? And forever? The thought alone was enough to open something in the pit of his stomach, something that felt like fear and sadness mingled together. Kai didn’t care for feelings like that; he was used to putting the lid on whenever they emerged. It was much easier to get lost in a world of fantastic creatures and be the hero instead of dealing with things like that. And now he was in such a world, but he still wasn’t safe from such feelings.

“Hey, man, are you listening?” Milo asked and bumped into him to shake him off those unpleasant thoughts. That was one of the reasons they were friends. Milo had a unique sense that let him know when those around him had soul trouble; that was what Kai had noticed over the years.

“I totally am. I need to see Pepin,” Kai replied, “but I don’t think Galien would be too happy to hear about that. He wants us to stay put.”

“And are we going to do that?” Tani asked.

“Of course not,” Kai said. “I mean, I get it that it’s dangerous and all, but Pepin is like pregnant, and maybe Sebastian is hard on him right now--”

“But Seb’s a good guy,” Tani insisted. “I mean, he’s like a warrior for good. You should have seen yourself beating the crap out of those bullies. He was epic,” she added and brought her closed hands under her chin with a dreamy look on her face.

“I bet,” Kai said wryly. “You had the chance to get to know him, not me.”

“Are you jealous?” Milo snickered and nudged him in the ribs again. “That Tani likes Sebastian more than you?”

“If he wants a sister, I’m willing to give up on mine,” Kai said. “Ouch!”

Tani promptly hit him in the shoulder. “Whatever the people around here say about him, I don’t care. He’s cool and reliable.”

“He sure is, in a nutshell,” Kai admitted. “I mean, I do think that the people under his rule should be a little more grateful. The guy’s been fighting for Ifigia all his life, and all they do is write retarded songs about his butt.”

“About his what?” Tani asked.

“Moron says what?” Kai joked.

“What?” Tani asked again.

Kai smacked her upside the head playfully. “Moron.”

Tani drove one punch into his stomach, making him double over.

“We should find a way to the royal palace so that you can see Pepin,” Milo offered promptly, making the siblings stop bickering.

“That’s totally what I have in mind,” Kai said and grabbed Tani’s hands to stop her from attacking him again. “When I met Galien, he was without a horse.”

“How’s that relevant?” Milo asked.

“Right, context,” Kai said. “Well, I was riding around, and he jumped in front of me. And he told me that he had just come from Kelonia – which is here – to Ifigia – which is where Pepin and Sebastian are. And he was on foot. Which means--”

“—that there should be a reasonably short way between here and there,” Milo concluded.

“Exactly,” Kai replied. “Now, I can’t ask Galien directly, or he’ll say something about walking straight into danger, and blah, blah, blah.”

“Yeah, who cares about the blah, blah, blah part?” Tani said matter-of-factly. “No one ever. We should search for a secret passage then.”

Kai threw his sister a pointed look. “What if it’s like a passage full of spider webs and other creepy crawlers?”

Tani pondered for a moment and looked at her pretty clothes. “Did Galien look like he just left some filthy corridor when you met him?”

“No,” Kai admitted.

“Then I should be fine,” Tani drew her conclusion, and by how she set her chin high, she wouldn’t be swayed from her decision.

“Guys, I should tell you,” Kai started. “This world may be like something from an isekai anime, but there are actual dangers in it. I mean, at first I thought I was protected against everything since Sebastian is so OP, but Conrad was about to die when he got stabbed by an assassin, and also those dark magic jerks from Uxilan are pretty scary.”

“We only want to go to Seb’s palace, right? It’s not like the royal palace is the headquarters for those guys,” Tani said promptly.

“No, but they tried to kill Sebastian, and I really suspect that they’ve never given up. I kind of got rid of them, but there might be some left. I don’t know for sure.”

“Who are these guys?” Milo asked. “And you said that Sebastian is OP, so he should be safe, right?”

There was something like anxiety in Milo’s voice as he asked that. Surely, Milo couldn’t see himself in love with the ice prince of Ifigia, but that didn’t mean that there were zero feelings there. Kai decided to keep his mouth shut for once and not make any allusion to the apparent interest his friend took in Sebastian’s wellbeing.

“You’re so totally in love with him,” Tani said excitedly.

This time, Kai grabbed a handful of his sister’s sophisticated hairdo, making her freeze as he had just activated a time stop device. “Tani, zip it.”

“Yeah, yeah, just let go of my hair, you’re ruining it,” she complained.

He stole a quick look at Milo. His friend’s face was turned, and he appeared lost in thought for a moment. Even if Tani did a lousy job of barging in on his feelings like that, just as Kai suspected, something could be there. Only that, unlike his sister, he thought of letting Milo figure out things in his own time. If one trait of character could be considered a flaw, Milo’s stubbornness had to be it. Nonetheless, Kai was grateful for that so-called flaw, as that must have convinced Milo to remain friends with him when he could hang out with all the popular kids and do whatever he wanted.

That didn’t mean that he and Tani wouldn’t conspire later to see what they could do to bring Milo and Sebastian in the same room so that they could figure out if they still liked each other. According to Tani, Sebastian was crazy about Milo, so there were no obstacles in that part of the universe. However, Milo’s legendary stubbornness would get in the way if they insisted when they shouldn’t.

“So,” he said, trying to sound cheerful and not at all worried about everything starting with Pepin and ending with Milo’s feelings for Sebastian, “where do you guys think we should start searching for a secret passage?”

“Maybe it is as simple as following the one person that knows about it,” Milo said quietly and stopped them as he pointed at a shadowy figure slinking around a corner at a fair distance from them.

“Was that Galien?” Tani whispered.

Kai grinned. “He’s going to see Conrad,” he concluded. “Let’s follow him, guys. He’ll take us straight to Ifigia.”

“Maybe you should consider starting with someone the closest to home,” Pepin suggested.

“If you mean Luna Celeste, I just talked to her,” Sebastian said as he examined the map and placed small cues over the places he knew to be inhabited by people with magic knowledge. He would still have to enlist the others’ help. “I will have to consult the council on this.”

“I don’t think you should,” Pepin argued.

Sebastian quirked an eyebrow and examined his servant’s face but saw no signs of rebellion, only concern. “And why is that, Pepin?”

“Because the last time Kai talked to them, councilman Madigar, as well as a few other voices, did nothing short of pushing him into going to confront Uxilan on his own. Which Kai did.”

“Hmm,” Sebastian let out and tapped his right index finger against his lips. “Brave thing to do for a boy like him.”

“He might have found his courage while being in your shoes,” Pepin suggested. “But what kind of boy are you talking about?”

Sebastian waved. He hadn’t known Kai Martin despite spending a reasonable amount of time in his skin. “Of course, he must have been terribly glad that I was OP enough for him to fool around without a care.”

“What’s OP?” Pepin asked eagerly. “Kai also used the word.”

Sebastian cleared his throat. Lecturing Pepin on the things from Kai’s world felt a little too much like fun, but he couldn’t help it. “It means overpowered, and it is a way to describe a character with such abilities that he or she can face enemies of all levels without fear of defeat. One particular such character I learned about while in the other world was the hero of a popular series. All he needed to do was to throw a single punch and win against any foe.”

“A single punch? The people in Kai’s world must be so strong,” Pepin said.

“No, not at all. This character is fictional, and boys like Kai believe him to be the ultimate hero or something like that. Actually, in general, people of Milo’s world rarely train in martial arts, and it is more a matter of choice and a terrible need for flexing by posting small videos of their demonstrations.”

Pepin was staring at him, his jaw slack. “What is that, flexing, Sebastian? What about videos?”

They had no time for such trivial matters. Sebastian shook his head. “Unimportant. We must concentrate our efforts in finding a solution. What were you saying about councilman Madigar?”

Pepin came closer, and his voice dropped to a whisper. “Far from me to spread baseless rumors, but it appears to me that councilman Madigar and his close friends on the council were more than eager to send you to certain death. They couldn’t know it wasn’t you, and Kai survived, but don’t you find their position suspicious? They knew very well that Uxilan was powerful enough to take away your magic. Why send our lord and protector to certain defeat?”

“They didn’t defeat me,” Sebastian pointed out. “And the council, I believe, is quite used to by now with my rushing into any danger if the fate of Ifigia is at stake.”

“A bit too used to that if you’re asking me,” Pepin insisted.

“An accusation of betrayal of such magnitude must have more to base on than your displeasure of the council’s attitude toward me,” Sebastian said.

“You cannot be this blind, Your Majesty, with all due respect. How could an Uxilan assassin sneak inside the palace so easily that day? And why that day in particular? Did they believe your body was weakened somehow? By a curse they placed on you?”

“Your evidence is merely circumstantial, Pepin,” Sebastian said sternly.

“What do you mean?”

Sebastian sighed. “Something I picked from some law shows. While you may be eager to point fingers, we cannot turn a blind eye to the rest of the possibilities.”

“Which are?” Pepin insisted.

Sebastian placed his palms flat on the map. “Luna Celeste admitted to have placed a wish with the last charm she gave me. She also believes that someone meddled with her magic, and she assumes that my sudden exchange of bodies with Kai Martin was caused by that meddling. Now, who could get close enough to Luna Celeste to achieve such an impossible feat?”

“She always appears to those who need her,” Pepin said. “But she’s a charming lady with charms, and her charms deal with happiness and joy. If anyone approached her directly, they must have come with a matter concerning the heart.”

“You approached her, didn’t you?” Sebastian asked.

Pepin stiffened. “Your Majesty, you cannot possibly think--”

Sebastian put a hand up. “I don’t suspect you in the least, Pepin. Circumstantial, see? That is why I cannot jump to conclusions and consider councilman Madigar and his associates, enemies of Ifigia so easily. It would be nothing but rash thinking on my part.”

Pepin sighed, and his shoulders dropped. “Consider it, Sebastian, please. At the last war council, he did nothing short of pushing Kai into doing something that could only be described as rash.”

“And it worked, apparently, only that Kai, despite his clumsiness and cluelessness, somehow managed to succeed in my stead.”

“He fears there are still Uxilan dark magic wielders still alive. And so do I. What kind of wish did Luna Celeste put in your charm?”

Sebastian pondered for a moment. He continued to stare at the map as he talked. “She wished for me to love and be loved back.”

“Oh,” Pepin said.

“Oh indeed,” Sebastian commented dryly. “Quite a meddling woman. And on top of everything, she somehow failed to protect the charm from being tampered with, hence the entire predicament that followed.”

“Do you regret it, Sebastian?” Pepin asked in a quiet voice. “Having fallen in love with Kai’s friend?”

A difficult question. “No,” he replied without hesitation.

“All right, guys, we need to be extra quiet,” Kai suggested as he felt the wall through which Galien had disappeared a couple of minutes ago. “We don’t want Galien to suspect that we’re on to him. How is this magic door supposed to work?”

“It’s not magical,” Milo said and grabbed the small torch on the wall, making it drop like a lever.

Kai straightened up as the wall gave way without a sound to a narrow corridor. “Not very imaginative,” he commented. “I would have used magic.”

“Let’s go,” Tani whispered and threw a long look inside. “It’s pretty dark in there, isn’t it?”

“We’ll take one of these things,” Milo said and pointed at the many torches aligned along the wall.

“And risk being seen? Galien might have to tie a shoelace or something, and he might turn, and he might see us,” Kai said in one breath.

“Are you sure you want to risk having your sister squeal at every creepy crawler climbing her foot?”

“Eww.” Tani scrunched up her nose in disgust. “Hey, wait, there aren’t any creepy crawlers. We so decided.”

Kai made a sign for Tani to climb on his back. “Let’s not risk it. Get on. Better to walk with you like this than have you scream every second.”

He knew his sister well. Even if she might get annoyed at him, she couldn’t ignore the temptation of piggybacking. Tani did mumble something, but she was quick to climb when he bent and gestured for her to hurry.

“I’ll walk in front,” Milo said. “Kai, hold on to me. It looks like these weird long tails on this coat could have a practical purpose.”

The air inside the corridor felt breezy, which only meant that it was connected to an exit that couldn’t be that far off.

“How far is Kelonia from Sebastian’s palace?” Milo questioned in a whisper.

“I don’t know exactly,” Kai replied. “It didn’t come up in conversation and such. I hope we don’t have to walk for hours, though. Tani clearly didn’t lay off the pudding lately.”

That earned him an instant smack over one ear.

“Watch it, butthead,” Kai growled at her. “I bet I can run faster than you in your princess dress. I could leave you here, all alone, in the dark,” he added in a low, hollow voice.

“Don’t you dare,” Tani warned him and wrapped her arms tighter around his neck.

“Okay, okay, you don’t have to strangle me.”

“You two, quiet. Do you want Galien to realize he’s not alone?”

“And what are you three doing here?”

They all jumped back and cried out at Galien’s voice. The duke held a torch and examined them with judgmental eyes. They had been so caught up in their argument that they hadn’t noticed him getting close.

Kai took a better look at Galien and squealed. “Is your hand burning?”

Galien laughed and moved his hand around, leaving trails of molten light that faded after a moment. He wasn't holding a torch, not really, but the tips of his fingers looked like hot steel, and they were the actual source of light. "I also learned a few tricks from my dear mother."

"I knew it," Kai exclaimed. "But why do you say that you have no magic?"

Galien snorted. "And get saddled like Sebastian with everyone's happiness and safety? My mother taught me to hide it save for extreme emergencies. Plus, it's not by far as powerful as what Sebastian yields. By comparison, mine looks like a collection of mere parlor tricks. Now, if you care to enlighten me," he emphasized the last word and chuckled, "what are you doing here, following me?"

"I need to see Pepin," Kai said promptly.

"All right. What about your sister and your friend? Do they also need to see Pepin?"

"Not just Pepin," Tani said. "I mean, come on, I'm here for who knows how little time, and I totally need to see Seb's palace."

"I see. What about you, young man?" Galien turned toward the last member of their group.

"Wherever my friends go, I go," Milo replied.

"Ah," Galien let out with obvious disappointment. "And here I thought you wanted to see a certain someone."

"I have no business with that dude, sorry," Milo said, yet his voice was not that indifferent and held in it the shadow of a doubt that wasn't easy to shake off.

Yeah, there was a bit too much denial in Milo's words to ring true. It wasn't like his best friend to become defensive, and he always met every challenge head-on, but clearly, now wasn't the case. There was conflict inside his heart and mind, and Kai was curious about it but couldn't push Milo to talk. Better to leave things like that to settle on their own; that was what he believed.

"Fate has a strong sense of irony, then," Galien said.

"Why?" Tani asked.

Galien gestured for them to follow. "Because, adorable little girl, Sebastian used to be a heartbreaker, and it appears that it's now his turn to suffer the same ordeal he inflicted upon his past lovers."

"Did he have a lot of lovers?" Milo asked.

Kai grinned but held his face away. Why did Milo have to know such a thing unless he was interested? Tani was squeezing his shoulder, a sign that she, too, was all eyes and ears.

“It depends on what you mean by a lot,” Galien said airily.

“I don’t know, how often did he change lovers? Like once a month or so?” Milo asked.

“Or so,” Galien replied in the same manner.

Milo groaned. “I slept with a manwhore.”

Kai snickered, Tani let out something along the lines of ‘oh, no, he didn’t’, and Galien laughed wholeheartedly. “A manwhore? Are there many such men in your world?”

“I don’t know, but I wouldn’t sleep with one,” Milo said.

“It looks like you did, though,” Galien served it right back at him. “I would ask if it were enjoyable, but there are young ears present so I won’t.”

“You can ask,” Tani said eagerly.

“No, he cannot,” Kai intervened. “Ignore my sister. She’s just too much into BL for her age and own good.”

“BL?” Galien questioned as he walked purposefully in front. It looked like the duke didn’t mind having company on his way to his lover after all.

“Boys Love,” Kai explained. “It’s just a fiction genre, with illustrations and everything,” he tried to offer a short clarification.

Tani groaned. “BL is much more than that,” she complained. “BL is love; BL is life.”

Galien laughed again. “I believe I would enjoy this BL a lot if I ever had the chance. A word of advice, young people. We must make sure that Sebastian doesn’t catch whiff of our being in his palace. He would never forgive me for bringing you along, especially Milo.”

“Why? Doesn’t he love him anymore?” Tani asked.

“It’s because of that he prefers all of you to stay away from danger. I know Sebastian well. As we speak, he is most probably searching for ways to send you back to your world, and that without seeing Milo even once.”

“But why?” Tani insisted.

“Because, my dear guest,” Galien replied as he moved his hand around to illuminate the path ahead, “there is no one nobler than Sebastian in the entire land. He doesn’t want to jeopardize

any of you, but especially Milo, not for a moment, and also must believe by now that his love is doomed, anyway.”

“Why?” Tani moaned, more exasperated this time.

“He sealed his union with Pepin for the good of the realm. And yours. Sebastian is a man of duty, he lives for it.”

“Oh, no,” Tani whispered. “He has just forced himself into a loveless marriage? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Not only,” Galien explained. “Unlike me, he must know Milo very well by now. And I can only assume that he imagines that Milo cannot be in love with him anymore.”

Kai turned his head slightly toward his best friend, expecting him to say something like how he had never been in love with Sebastian anyway, but Milo remained pensive and quiet. Tani squeezed his shoulder again to let him know that she saw all that, as well.

“Now, visitors from another world, I’m glad that I caught you in the act of following me,” Galien started, “because you would have never passed through here without my help.”

“Cool,” Tani whispered as they stopped in front of a door that appeared to have been made from liquid flames.

It was enough for Galien to deep his fingers in the door, and the flames parted, allowing them to go through.

“This is the best trip ever,” Tani concluded as they walked in single file after Galien.

“Wait here,” Galien told them, as soon as they were on the palace ground, after walking in through a side gate that took them to a small secluded garden. “I’ll bring Pepin to you,” he addressed Kai, “but let’s make sure that no one else sees you.”

“Fine by us,” Kai said, speaking for the entire group.

Milo appeared as lost in thought as he had been since the conversation about Sebastian’s feelings with Galien, and he didn’t care to disturb him. Plus, he had more pressing matters to think of, such as seeing Pepin while in his actual body.

Great, he had been so taken with how to find a way to here that he had forgotten to worry about how disappointed Pepin would be once he saw him from up close.

“What if he won’t like me, the real me?” he said out loud, turned toward Milo and Tani.

“Pfft, he totally will,” Tani asked. “You’re a catch. Just tell him your level in World of Nocraft, and he’ll fall head over heels.”

“Stop being mean to your brother,” Milo scolded her. “I don’t think you have any reason to worry. After all, the dude decided you were worthy making a baby with. As weird as that must sound, it has to mean a lot.”

“Yeah, but I’m... me,” Kai said and gestured at his body. “I mean, I’m skinny and cannot throw a punch, and I’m pale like a vampire for not sleeping at night almost at all, and I’m not even particularly funny or fun--”

“Dude, chill,” Milo stopped him. “Why not let Pepin tell him why he likes you?”

“And force him to lie?” Kai complained.

“I never lie,” a well-known voice replied his question from behind.

Kai pivoted on his heels so fast he almost ended plastered, face first, against the flowerbeds, but Milo caught him in time and then pushed him toward Pepin, who hurried to him with the most beautiful smile in the world on his face.

Kai didn’t even think as he took Pepin in his arms and kissed him. Pepin held his face in his hands and looked at him lovingly. “Kai, what are you doing here?” he asked, his voice full of joy.

“Finding my way to you,” Kai replied.

Chapter Thirty-Four – You Don't Belong Here

“Are you all right? How is Sebastian? Is he being mean to you?” Kai’s questions rolled off his tongue like a waterfall.

“No, not at all,” Pepin replied as he continued to stroke Kai’s hair and take in his face like he was seeing him for the first time.

Which wasn’t completely inaccurate since that thing with the switcheroo at the cavern could barely count as them seeing each other properly.

“Are you disappointed?” Kai asked the number one burning question on his mind. “I mean, I’m no longer a hunk.”

“I don’t know what a hunk is,” Pepin replied while he continued to run his fingers through Kai’s hair, “but I’m happy you’re not one anymore.”

“Only because you don’t know the meaning of the word,” Kai prompted but didn’t insist since he was too happy to see Pepin to dwell on what various words of no importance meant.

“I’m so glad to be able to see your true face,” Pepin said and kissed him again, lingering and sweetly. “I was afraid I wouldn’t get the chance.”

“Me too. I mean, I don’t know how much longer we can stick around. Galien thinks that we’re in some kind of danger.”

“Sebastian, as well. His mother won’t take kindly to being made a fool like that if she ever finds out the truth,” Pepin agreed. “Is Master Galien taking good care of you? He seemed in high spirits as he sent me here to see you.”

“He must be high on love, that guy,” Kai said with a short snicker. “He couldn’t wait to see Conrad again, and we just followed him. How do you feel? I mean, being... with child, or whatever you call it here,” he asked after some hesitation.

Pepin offered him a dazzling smile. “I’m happy to hear that you worry, but it’s nothing like what happens when a woman carries a child. My task is spiritual much more than physical. Although,” he said, as he pulled the shard out of his shirt and showed it to Kai, “can you see?”

Kai stared into it and almost took a step back as something moved inside. “Wow. I think I saw... a tiny finger?”

“He’s growing already,” Pepin said.

“Double wow. And how long, until, you know?”

“Not as long as it is expected in human beings.”

Kai understood what Pepin didn't say, that he might not be around long enough to meet this child. He felt so helpless all of a sudden. "Will you be okay? I mean, given the circumstances?"

"I will." Pepin nodded and smiled, but even Kai, as clueless as he was more often than not, could tell that the guy was putting on a brave face for his sake.

"Are you really okay?" Kai mumbled as he rubbed Pepin's shoulders. "I mean, I came here, and like that wasn't weird enough, I messed up your life, too."

"You did nothing of the kind. More so, you helped me find my purpose. And also," Pepin said and shyly looked away, "you made me fall in love with you, like I was promised."

"For the record, I have no idea how I did that," Kai replied.

"It was easy for you, a stranger from a different land," Pepin said dreamily. "You saw me for who I was, not just a servant created for duty, or a Lelian with a purpose for the kingdom. You gave me more than you'll ever know."

"Well, I'd like to know," Kai confessed. "But first, let me introduce you to some people."

He took Pepin's hand. All of a sudden, he felt very shy, like he hadn't known Milo for years and his sister all her life. This was important, as important as it could get, and he needed to be careful not to mess it up.

"This is Milo, my best friend," Kai said first.

"Sebastian's chosen," Pepin added and threw him an unsure look when Milo turned his head to hide his eyes.

There would be time later to untangle that web of messed-up feelings. Or not. Kai had no idea. Maybe moments like that in life must teach you how young and unknowing you are.

"And this is my sister, Tani," he continued as he gestured Pepin forward, holding him by the shoulders.

No wonder there, Tani was bubbling with excitement. She didn't wait for Kai to finish and just rushed into Pepin's arms, hugging him tightly. Then, she looked up and squeezed him a little more. "I have no idea how this brother of mine managed to land someone like you, but I'm glad he did, because now I have the most beautiful bishie as a brother-in-law, and everyone else can go suck it."

Pepin laughed but threw unsure looks at Kai as he probably couldn't understand all the things Tani was babbling about.

Kai dragged his sister away with much difficulty. "Stop putting ideas in Pepin's head. He'll really start to realize that he got the short end of the stick with me."

“I’m not,” Tani protested. “Pepin, I might like to tease my brother, but he’s a good guy and also he cannot keep a secret if his life depended on it. I read somewhere that good people are like that. Plus, he always takes me to school with him, and I know where his secret cash stash is. He might spend all night playing video games and his grades are awful--”

He really needed to stop Tani from talking, so he put a hand over her mouth. “Are you sure you’re helping, butthead?”

Pepin walked closer to them and embraced them both. “I’m glad to meet both you and your sister. You are amazing people and I love you.”

Kai felt his throat getting tighter, and his hand dropped from Tani’s mouth. That was enough for his sister to embrace Pepin again. He really hoped Pepin was okay with having such a clingy sister-in-law.

Only that she wouldn’t ever be that. Pepin was – sort of – married to Sebastian now, although he carried another dude’s baby, and that meant that their time together would be short. Kai took Pepin by the shoulders. “I’m sorry,” he blurted the only thing that came to his mind.

“What for?” Pepin asked, his luminous eyes making his entire face look like something that belonged to a fairytale.

A fairytale that had no place for a teenager soon to become a full-fledged NEET in it. Kai didn’t like the feeling of sadness creeping in, but for the first time after many years, he realized that he couldn’t escape from it. “I’m sorry for coming here and making you fall in love with a good for nothing like me. I’m sorry that I have to go, although I don’t want to. I’m sorry that I won’t ever be here long enough to meet--”

He stopped as the words lodged in his throat, cutting off his speech. His fingers wandered to the shard hanging from Pepin’s neck and caressed it slightly. Pepin placed his hand over his. “Don’t be sorry. I met you, and I now feel love. What more could I ask for?”

Tani’s sudden sobbing caused them to stop. Kai took his sister by the shoulders in an effort to comfort her, and Pepin did the same.

“You could ask for a lot more,” Tani began, without stopping her sniffles and sobs. “And my brother will be an awesome dad, I just know it. And doesn’t this world have magic, anyway? I bet there’s something here that could help you get together somehow. Or maybe Pepin could travel with us back home. He will totally be scouted the moment he sets foot in there. He’ll be an idol in no time. Can you sing, Pepin? It doesn’t matter, you can just be a model.”

Kai didn’t have the strength to stop Tani from talking anymore. It would be so nice to take Pepin with him. But was it possible? Was it safe? That shard was made from magic, and who could tell

what would happen if they traveled to the real world? What if it got disintegrated? There was more at stake than just their feelings for one another.

Pepin caressed Tani's hair. "As much as I would like to entertain such dreams of happiness, my little sister, I cannot. I have a duty here." He pressed his hand over the shard.

Tani looked down. Oh, no, this wasn't a good sign. The next moment, she stomped her foot. "This isn't fair! Where is the happy end?"

This time, Kai covered Tani's mouth to stop her from shouting. "I'm afraid there's not one this time," he whispered.

Or maybe there was, and he hadn't discovered it yet. It had to be like in those anime series when everything seemed lost, only for the hero to appear and save the day, or for some magical girl to come to the rescue and such. "Are there any magical girls in this world?" he asked Pepin.

"Not that I know of. I mean, there are people with magic, but they're not girls. They are mostly older people," the reply came.

"Good enough. As long as there's magic, there must be a way," Kai said with conviction. "We just need to find it. I know! We'll have a brainstorming session! Milo--"

He turned to ask his friend for his opinion on all that, but there was no one standing in the place where Milo should have been.

Kai Martin was wrong about his being overpowered, Sebastian decided as he scribbled down the shortest routes he would need to take to reach the people with magic in the kingdom. It would take days and weeks to pay everyone a visit, which made him feel quite helpless. Usually, he would have sent word for them to come to the palace, but that risked drawing Reya's attention, who would wonder why he needed the advice of magic wielders all of a sudden. No, at this time, he needed her to believe that everything was fine and dandy in the kingdom of Ifigia. Not that people from a strange world were roaming about, one of them being no other but a boy Sebastian happened to be in love with.

He rose to his feet. Maybe a little stroll would help him clear his thoughts and find a better, quicker solution for sending off the little group. He pulled open the doors, still lost in thought, and almost crashed into someone standing there.

His eyes clashed with a green gaze he knew too well.

"What are you doing here?" Sebastian hissed and grabbed Milo to pull him inside his quarters before anyone noticed this stranger happening about the palace.

At least the young man was attired per the Ifigia custom, so he wasn't that suspicious, but it made Sebastian wonder what his guards were doing if they hadn't caught Milo while heading over to his quarters like it was the least unusual thing in the world.

"I was searching for you," Milo replied as soon as Sebastian closed the doors.

"You're in danger. You don't belong here." Sebastian felt the words flying off his tongue. Yes, it was painfully clear. Despite having his hair brushed differently and wearing clothes fit for a young noble living in Ifigia, Milo wasn't part of this world, this place. His place, Sebastian added in his mind, and it took him all his willpower to stop the squeeze on his heart to put a brake on all his rational thinking. If that happened, they were all doomed because Sebastian wanted nothing else but to take this young man in his arms and kiss him until they would both stop breathing altogether.

Milo rubbed the back of his neck with one hand and grimaced. "I suppose that should have been my line all those times you tried to warn me about who you truly were."

Yes, but then none of those other amazing things that happened between the two of them would have taken place. Despite the wrongness of the situation, Sebastian didn't have it in him to regret it. Like a man dying of thirst in the heart of the desert, under a relentless sun, presented with the sudden mirage of crystalline waters, he stared at Milo, unable to tear his eyes away.

It took moments like ages to remember that Milo wasn't safe, and it was madness to give in to his heart's desires. "How did you find this place? You must leave at once." His voice was tight as a string, and he couldn't stop it from vibrating as if plucked by the gentle hand of a musician.

Milo gave him a crooked smile. "Come on, man. Admit it, this is fucked up."

Sebastian felt his cheeks hurting. Under another sky, in a different world, he would have smiled back. "Yes," he said noncommittally. "I admit it, if it makes you feel any better. That doesn't change the fact that you and your friends are in danger. Did that useless cousin of mine bring you here? I'll make sure to have a word with him. Now come."

He reached for Milo, determined to drag the boy out of the palace at all costs and put him out of harm's way. His hand caught nothing but air; Milo was quick on his feet and dodged him. Sebastian tried again, but Milo broke into a sprint, and now the large table on which the map of Ifigia lay was between them.

"Are you really a manwhore?" Milo asked, examining him with keen eyes.

Sebastian frowned. He was in no mood to chase the boy around the table, while a goddess with a famous temper could catch a whiff of a strange presence in the palace at any moment. "Aren't you full of questions?"

"You're the first dude I had sex with. You owe me the truth," Milo said squarely.

“You weren’t so interested in it when I tried to talk to you in all honesty,” Sebastian shot back.

“Why do you change lovers so fast?” Milo continued like he was deaf.

“Why are you asking?”

“I thought I was having sex with a virgin,” Milo replied. “And it’s a bit weird to find out that, you know, I actually did that with an older guy who also had like hundreds of lovers.”

“That’s an exaggeration!” Sebastian controlled his voice with much difficulty. “They weren’t that many,” he added.

“Still, like every month? Isn’t that a bit over the top? Like what didn’t those dudes have for you to dump them like that?”

Maybe they didn’t have green eyes that could cut through or heal the heart. Or a smile so genuine, so wholesome, that nothing compared to it in the whole world. Sebastian remained silent.

“Well? Was I about to get dumped just like them after a month? Wait, you did actually dump me,” Milo said after pretending for a moment that he was pondering over something. “And it didn’t even take you a month to do so.”

Sebastian dug his fingernails into his palms. It cost so much not to jump over the table, grab Milo, and show him that he hadn’t meant a word that time. That he still loved him, with all his heart.

“I suppose I’m fickle like that,” he said in a measured, emotionless voice. What was the point of entertaining sentiments that would never come to fruition?

“Hmm,” Milo’s response came, a bit too forced to be thoughtful. “They keep telling me I’m your chosen.”

“They are mistaken. I have a chosen,” Sebastian said.

“Kai’s boyfriend,” Milo pointed out.

He couldn’t stand still under that pointed gaze.

“It is a difficult situation, one that young men like you cannot easily understand. I’m doing the right thing,” Sebastian insisted.

Milo crossed his arms and gave him a long, well-measured once over. “I’m totally starting to see you. You’re not a very good liar. I mean, you may have a different body now, but just the way you angle your head and look away while talking bullshit, is definitely the same.”

What would you want me to do? His heart pushed him to hurl those words right into this impossible, infuriating young man's face.

"I suppose I owe you an apology, after all," Sebastian began. The coolness of his words would quickly convince Milo to make a run for it while he still could.

"Save your breath," Milo cut his words short. "You're still the guy who popped my cherry. How about assuming responsibility?"

Sebastian could feel his temples throbbing. Of all the reactions he would have expected, did Milo opt for that of a slighted heroine from some random romantic manga? "That is exactly what I'm doing. You're my responsibility, you are now in terrible danger because of me, and now I need to find a way to send you and your friends back to your world."

"That is your duty," Milo said slowly. "But what about me?"

He risked looking at the other this time. It was hard to read the meaning behind those beautiful green eyes when it had been so easy before. "What about you?" Sebastian asked, reining in the need to blurt out all the truth threatening to spill from his heart.

Milo pulled back a little. "I guess I got my answer." His face was a closed book.

"Good. Then quit fooling around. We must find the rest of your lot and get you back to Galien's estate until I find a way for you to travel to your world safely." Without waiting for another jab or smart-ass reply, Sebastian walked stiffly toward the door. "Are you coming?" he asked over his shoulder.

He could tell Milo was moving. At least, he had managed to be convincing enough, after all. A few more steps and Milo would be out the door, out of his life once more. It should have been just one goodbye, one-sided, and forever.

All the more, he was surprised to be taken by the shoulders and forced to turn. Staring into those amazing eyes would be his doom, he thought and closed his eyes. And then, lips soft like petals closed over his and kissed him gently.

He didn't have the time to react, to comprehend what was happening that the doors behind him burst open, and the soft lips left him, allowing nothing but a lingering sensation of regret to remain in their stead.

"There you are!" Kai Martin exclaimed.

"Where else should I be?" Sebastian asked, hoping that no one had been witness to the unfathomable kiss from earlier.

"Sorry, Your Majesty, I wasn't talking to you." Kai took a short, clumsy bow.

“Seb, your palace is awesome!” Tani bounced behind her brother.

Sebastian pinched the bridge of his nose. “What are you all doing here? Galien should have known better and kept you from escaping.”

“We’re not prisoners,” Tani said and hurried by his side. She hung from his arm, looking at him with shiny eyes. It took him a while to realize that she was trying to drag him down to her height. He obliged, and Tani quickly whispered in his ear, “He loves you, right?”

He straightened up right away. “I’ll go search for my cousin. You, children, stay put.”

He forced everyone inside, including Pepin, who should have known better and walked out. With a short hand move, he blocked the locks with ice and hurried down the hall while ignoring the protests threatening to tear down the doors.

His heart leaped with each step. Milo had kissed him. They would never see each other again, but at least he would have that kiss forever.

“What did you two do?” Tani asked Milo once they realized they couldn’t open the doors after Sebastian had so quickly locked them inside.

Kai was just as curious, but bros didn’t ask that kind of question. So, all in all, it was good to have a nosy sister.

“None of your business, pipsqueak,” Milo replied.

That all-knowing smirk on his face had to count for something. Kai pursed his lips and began to think hard, but that wasn’t exactly easy, not with Pepin holding him tightly and breathing over the side of his neck.

Tani huffed in disappointment and rushed to the table. “Look, guys, Seb has a map! Wow, his kingdom looks huge.”

“Tani, don’t go through people’s things. What would mom say?” Usually, he would have just pulled his sister back by the hair, but since Pepin was there, he needed to act more like a grownup.

“Mom would say, ‘no way’,” Tani replied promptly. “She’ll never believe us that we got isekai’d.”

“Yeah. Once we get back home, she’ll totally have our heads over this,” Kai said and nodded. “Wait, do you think that time passes over there just like here?”

“It has to,” Milo said promptly. “During the time you got yourself a boyfriend and got him pregnant, too, I apparently got to fool around with an ice prince from another world. There’s no time stop magic, I suppose.”

“Well, in case we get home by tomorrow, we’ll still have some explanations to do,” Kai thought out loud. “We have to synchronize our watches, guys, and tell the same lies.”

Tani smirked. “You should be the most careful. I’m sure that the moment mom crosses her arms and asks where we’ve been, you’ll start blabbing about Ifigia instantly.”

“I won’t,” Kai protested. He took Pepin by the shoulders and held him tightly. “And I’m not sure I want to go,” he added quietly. “Just that I’m not sure if it’s possible for me to remain here, or for Pepin to come with us. Ah, that reminds me. Milo, we should brainstorm. This world doesn’t have any magical girls, but it does have magic. What should we do?”

“Are you seriously asking me?” Milo scratched one ear, managing to tousle the hair on that side. “I’m still half-way thinking that I’m actually sleeping and this is all a very vivid dream. Seriously.”

“Ugh, I’ll have to think of something alone,” Kai decided.

“You’re not alone,” Pepin said, wrapping his arm tightly around Kai’s waist.

Milo thought he was dreaming, but Kai wasn’t far, either. Somehow, this awesome guy by his side was very much in love with him, as useless as he was. They all gathered around the table to stare at the map. “This is where those Uxilan jerks sit on their ugly ass magic,” he said while pointing out at the dark border between Ifigia and the magic wielders slash assassins.

“And you’ve been there?” Tani asked.

Kai puffed out his chest. “Yeah. And I beat the living crap out of them. Still, I don’t think they’re dead-dead yet. Not all of them, at least.”

“Do you, like, sense their magic?” Tani asked.

Kai stopped for a moment. He tried to recall what that assassin had said during those last moments. “Not really, but the last Uxilan jerk I dealt with sounded pretty suspicious when he said that there was no one else left.”

“But did you kill him?”

“That guy? I think so.”

“I believe that there are others, some even on the council,” Pepin intervened.

“What? For real? Then that means that Sebastian is in danger,” Kai said.

“In danger? Because of his own people?” Milo questioned.

“Yeah,” Kai said, and a sudden sense of premonition overtook him. He touched his chest where the Uxilan dagger had gone through but felt nothing. Of course, that had been Sebastian’s body getting stabbed, not his.

Sebastian grabbed Galien by the lapel of his coat in the most abrupt manner. “I thought I’d find you here,” he said.

Conrad watched the entire scene, seemingly quite amused. Galien grabbed Sebastian’s wrist and smiled while tendrils of fire began to heat up from where he touched. As annoying as that was, Sebastian had to let go. “I want you to go to my quarters, take those young people with you and go away, as far as you can. Do you even imagine the risks?”

Galien held his stare, still smiling. “Were they worth it, though?”

Sebastian was about to put his cousin in place with a well-aimed reply when pain blossomed in the middle of his chest.

“What is it? Sebastian!” Galien sounded quite alarmed.

Sebastian only then realized that he had doubled over from the pain. “It’s nothing. Maybe I should tell Pepin to lay off spicy foods for a while.”

This wasn’t good—the wound given to Kai by an Uxilan dagger pulsed in his chest. Suddenly, the short time he had to find a way to send everyone back where they belonged got shorter. Sebastian straightened up, pretending that the pain was already gone. “Stop deflecting, Galien. Go grab them and head back home. And make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

His cousin examined him with worried eyes. Sebastian pretended not to see the short exchange between him and Conrad. The ice prince of Ifigia had no use for pity and worries.

Chapter Thirty-Five – Behind All The Bad Things In A Story, There's Always A Villain

Sebastian ignored the pointed look Galien pinned him with as he kept saying he was fine. “I believe you have an important task to do. And no, I don’t mean visiting your lover who also happens to be my concubine in his quarters right under my nose. It’s tacky even for someone like you.” Insulting and hurting Galien’s feelings had worked before, and it had to work now. They were all running out of time.

“A concubine you don’t care to bed, and a chosen that belongs to someone else. My-my, how the mighty have fallen,” Galien taunted him, but only with his tongue. His eyes were shadowed by worry.

He had always known there was much more about Galien than what everyone thought they knew. Fiana’s son was thought to be nothing more than a rake interested in succumbing to life’s debaucheries in all shapes possible, but Sebastian was much aware that was nothing but a façade. Just as he had suspected that the fire goddess must have bestowed at least some of her magic on her son, he knew that Galien was a lot more than met the eye.

Even in his annoying attempts to convince Sebastian to marry Pepin for the sake of the kingdom, he still believed that he was doing the right thing, and not for Ifigia, but its prince. Of course, things had changed, astounding adventures had happened, and now their whole world was upside down.

“Someone has to care about doing the right thing,” Sebastian insisted, one hand on the doorknob. The pain inside his chest was throbbing slightly now, not as acute and surprising as before, but still there as a warning.

As much as that signaled that the time he had to send Milo, Kai, and Tani back to their world was getting shorter and shorter, it also gave him something to work with. The wielder of that dark magic that was now trying to carve a tomb inside his chest had to be somewhere near. One thing Sebastian had learned about Uxilan was that they needed to be close for their magic to reach its peak.

Pepin could be right in his assumptions, after all, as circumstantial as they might be. Sebastian had someone to confront and not a moment too soon, which meant that he needed to get rid of Galien and send everyone to safety.

“Conrad,” he said sharply, “please escort Sir Galien to my quarters so that he can take his companions and head back to his palace.”

For a moment of silence, he expected the captured prince to protest against being treated as a mere guard, but nothing of the kind followed.

“That will be my pleasure, Your Majesty,” Conrad replied.

“How can you be so cruel?” Galien pleaded as Conrad grabbed his arm. “Do you even realize what risks I’m taking just to see you?”

Despite the flaring pain in his chest, Sebastian examined the two other men in the room with curiosity. The look in Conrad’s eyes wasn’t the fierce one he had known. When the fallen prince looked at Galien, he appeared slightly amused and just a tad confused. And Galien dropped all pretenses, and his eyes were filled with shameless adoration.

Under any other circumstances, Sebastian would have found himself in his rights to let out at least a low chuckle. Galien was guilty of changing lovers in the same reckless manner as he was – no, that had been before Milo, and it would never repeat – but, on the other hand, Conrad was just as famous for leaving broken hearts behind him, discarded like useless little trinkets.

He closed one hand over his chest. “If it is your pleasure, then please do not dally,” he said and opened the door.

He knew he could count on Galien to do the right thing. Now, it was his turn.

“I cannot believe he locked us in here like this,” Tani said while they took it upon themselves to scout through Sebastian’s things for anything that could be used to free them from the royal quarters. “I know. We should think like we’re in an escape room situation.”

“What’s an escape room?” Pepin asked.

“Some silly entertainment from my world,” Kai said with importance.

Both Tani and Milo snickered. “Silly entertainment? Do you hear him talking? It’s like he’s trying to cosplay Sebastian,” his sister said.

“Hey, I’ve been doing it for weeks now. I know what I’m doing,” Kai warned them. “And really, guys, do you want Pepin to think that I’m really that useless?”

“How are we doing that?” Milo asked. “And I think your boyfriend likes you anyway.”

Kai stole a glance at Pepin, who blushed slightly and then looked at him while biting his bottom lip. Gosh, something was melting like ice cream right in the middle of his chest, only that it wasn’t cold but warm.

“Does boyfriend mean lover?” Pepin questioned, his blush never going away.

“Yes,” Kai said promptly. “And I need to find a way to get us out of here, and then another to take you with us.”

“But didn’t you say--” smart-mouth Tani started.

“Shut up,” Kai cut her words short. “I got here, you two got here, and we have no place in this world. I mean, not normally. And Sebastian got to travel to our world. Who says we cannot take Pepin with us?” He set his chin high and crossed his arms while examining everyone just to see who had the guts to challenge him.

“No one,” Milo replied and put his hands up. “But still, aren’t we getting ahead of ourselves? What do we even know about this traveling to different worlds?”

“We’ll find out,” Kai announced, although he had no idea where to start. “I know. I think we should hide until we find a way, just so that Sebastian doesn’t send us back before we do that.”

“First, we should get out of here,” Tani reminded him. “Why is Seb so strong?” She walked over to the adorned doors and examined the lock. “Ouch!” She withdrew her hand after pressing her fingers against the ice coming off from the other side.

“He just is. Nice to be an ice prince, right?” Kai said with a snort.

“I don’t think it feels very nice for him right now,” Pepin intervened. “He’s very much in love with Milo, and I don’t think there will be anyone else for him for as long as he’s alive.”

They all fell quiet and looked down. “Yeah, that’s a bummer,” Kai agreed, being the first to break the silence. He didn’t dare to ask Milo what he thought about that. It wasn’t fair; Milo hadn’t believed Sebastian for a moment, and it wasn’t the ice prince of Ifigia he was in love with. Actually, he was in love with –

“Are we going to be in some weird love triangle?” he asked out loud.

Milo smacked him playfully over the head to bring him back to reality. “What love triangle? What I see is a classic four-way, and that without counting royal concubines and whatnot.”

“Are there such things as four-ways?” Tani asked all eyes and ears.

“You’re not allowed to ask about these things,” Kai scolded her.

“I’m not allowed to get isekai’d either, but here we are, right?”

There wasn’t much he could say to contradict his sister.

Their little quarrel was cut short by strange sounds coming from the other side of the door. They all stared at it while the ice inside the lock melted and fell into a small pool on the floor.

“It looks like our leisure trip is over,” Galien announced as he opened the doors wide open.

“Where’s Sebastian?” Tani asked, looking around the duke.

“He has important matters to attend and informed me that I should take you back to my palace.”

“Actually, he got ordered,” Conrad intervened from behind Galien.

Kai noticed right away Conrad’s amused smile. The prince of Estfalia must have warmed considerably toward Galien to smile like that. Also, he was there, in the palace, which meant –

“Conrad,” Kai started, “can you keep an eye on Sebastian and what’s going on in the palace? Pepin thinks that there might be Uxilan assassins around. Or at least allies of theirs or something. But, wait, you got stabbed that time…”

“You can count on me,” Conrad replied right away. “Unlike before, now I am under a special kind of protection.”

Kai smirked as he noticed Galien smiling smugly. Ah, so that was why Galien had wanted to see Conrad so much. But couldn’t he protect Sebastian just the same?

“The least I can do. Unfortunately, fire cannot protect ice,” Galien explained as if he could read his thoughts. “But Conrad will be here, and he’ll be our eyes and ears. Don’t you believe I deserve a kiss?” He turned toward Conrad.

Tani surprised everyone by slapping her cheeks with her palms. “A yaoi kiss? For real? Ah, I so wished I had my phone!”

Kai firmly put his hands over her eyes and held her close, which immediately made Tani launch into a fierce struggle. “Stop it, butthead,” he warned.

“Don’t torture the little girl,” Conrad said. “There won’t be any kiss to witness.”

Galien pouted. “You’re no fun. Mark my words, Sir Conrad, you’ll fall for me one day. Children, let us be on our way. I need to show this stubborn man that distance makes the heart grow fonder.”

Conrad laughed and held the door for them. Kai stopped by his side. “Will you take care of Sebastian? Even if you don’t like him very much?”

“I will. It is my duty. Also,” Conrad added, and his voice dropped, “don’t let him know, but I’ll do it for that rake of a duke, as well.”

Kai made a short move to simulate zipping his mouth, locking it, and throwing away the key. They nodded at each other in understanding. Then, Kai hurried up and took his sister by the shoulders.

Pepin stood there, unmoving.

“You’re not coming with us?” Kai asked, knowing that a positive answer was impossible.

Pepin shook his head. “Sebastian is right about making sure that Reya doesn’t suspect anything. But I’ll keep a candle lit every night, hoping that I will see you again,” he said and threw himself in Kai’s arms.

They hugged each other for a long time. Kai sniffled and then looked away. “Something got in my eye,” he lied.

Tani grabbed his arm. “We will find a way to bring Pepin back with us. Mom so needs to meet her son-in-law.”

Galien cleared his throat discreetly. Kai looked at him and realized that he wasn’t doing that to hurry them. A few feet away, Milo appeared to be engaged in some dead-serious conversation with Conrad.

Sebastian walked purposefully toward the council room. He had sent word already for councilman Madigar to meet him there, without letting him know that they were about to have an intimate conversation, away from prying eyes and ears.

“Your Majesty,” the older man jumped from his high chair and bowed to the ground, holding his position there for long moments.

“You can stand,” Sebastian said and closed the doors behind them. “I believe that it’s grating that you’re still willing to keep up with this charade when we both know what you truly are.”

He stood still, expecting denials. If he were wrong in his assumption, suggested as it was by Pepin, then he would know from the councilman’s reactions.

Madigar straightened up and gave Sebastian a shrewd look. “Does Your Majesty recognize me for what I truly am?”

No denials, then. That was a good thing, and it would save everyone precious time. “The one you are right now, yes. You’re not councilman Madigar anymore.”

“Haven’t been for a while,” the older man admitted. “Do you care for my real name?”

“I’d say I don’t, but I expect that you’ll enlighten me, whether I wish for it or not.”

Hollow laughter followed. “Very well, I am Metust, head of the House of Uxilan, and I am here to punish the one that destroyed my kind.”

Sebastian didn’t flinch as Metust discarded the appearance of the old man who once had been known as councilman Madigar, and instead of that shriveled body, a tall man dressed all in black with his face partially covered appeared. He sustained the dark gaze without saying a word.

“Nothing to say? I would have at least expected you to act surprised,” Metust taunted him.

“I’ve never been the one to perform for the sake of an audience, and I’m not about to start now. What do you want?”

Metust laughed, throwing his head back. “What could I want? Revenge.”

“Very well. My life is yours,” Sebastian said calmly.

That made Metust stop mid-laugh. “What do I hear? Your Majesty, I thought you weren’t the type to perform like a trickster at a fair.”

“I have conditions,” Sebastian added.

“Ah, that sounds more like the ruler of Ifigia we all know, although I still find it hard to believe that you would be willing to give up on your life without a fight.”

“I am not lying. Answer my questions, and I’ll surrender without lifting one finger to threaten you.”

“Very well.” Metust crossed his arms over his chest. “Ask away.”

“Were you the one to curse me to travel to a different world?” It was a risk he was willing to take. If the Uxilan didn’t know about it, he would entangle himself in his web of lies.

“Yes,” the simple reply came. “I must say that I was much surprised to discover that at least a part of you remained here despite the curse being as strong as it was.” The dark eyes examined him with curiosity. “The curse was never meant to be parried in such a manner. You were supposed to get trapped in another’s body, not split like this.”

“Maybe you suck at curses,” Sebastian found himself saying.

“Suck at…”

“Never mind,” Sebastian said quickly. Why had those words from a different world had to rub off on him like that? “It appears that your curse didn’t work as you wished. Now, I must ask, what did you want to achieve with it?”

“We’re at the hour of honesty, it appears. But, Your Majesty, it is quite simple. Knowing how we couldn’t defeat you, not with your goddess’s protection by your side, and the magic you were born with, we had to do something to weaken you.”

So they hadn’t known that time that Reya’s protection was no longer with him. Sebastian remained silent and just encouraged Metust to continue with a slight wave of the hand.

“We had to infiltrate the palace, so I killed that old man,” Metust spat, “and this way, I could be close. Then I visited Luna Celeste’s quarters, claiming to be in need of a charm to soothe my soul after losing my sons in battle.”

Sebastian felt his jaw turning into steel. One of the reasons he hadn’t wanted to believe Pepin’s words was because he knew how devoted the old man had been to the kingdom. And this dark magic wielder had taken everything from him.

“She’s a shrewd woman, your lady with charms. For a moment, I thought she saw through my disguise, but I played my part well, and she is, after all, just someone with lesser magic, not on par with what I wield,” Metust proclaimed, puffing out his chest. “I left my curse floating in the air of her quarters, with the mission to sink inside the next charm she gave you.”

Luna must have wished to help an old man’s soul after burying his children and played an unwitting role in that abominable plan. Sebastian decided that she would never learn the whole truth; it might prevent her from opening her door to those in need if she ever came to suspect everyone of being secret wrongdoers. As much as he wasn’t fond of her, her charms brought peace to many and healing of the heart.

“What was the curse supposed to do?” Sebastian asked in a measured voice.

Metust examined him with suspicious eyes. “It was supposed,” he began slowly, “to identify the weakest soul in all possible worlds open for an exchange of such magnitude, and have yours replaced with it. Your magic should have gone with it, and all your power. And in your stead, a shell of you with nothing but a useless soul inside should have appeared.”

Sebastian pondered. Obviously, Metust was unaware that his plan had actually succeeded. Only that the curse must have underestimated Kai Martin and the true power of his soul.

“We waited for the curse to follow its course, and the next day, I waited for you to kill you, while wandering the hallways of your palace.”

That must have been when Conrad got stabbed by an Uxilan dagger, Sebastian drew his own conclusion.

“Not only were you saved by your reckless concubine, but you appeared to have suffered very little changes in magic wielding and power. Although your manner of speech became strange, and you seemed to have no recollection of simple things such as where rooms in your palace were, you were unaffected. And yet,” Metust continued shrewdly, “you know that our mission was to send you to a different world. Were you?”

Sebastian schooled his face into a neutral expression. “Partially. I was aware of being affected by something I couldn’t explain and had visions of strange places, unlike anything in this world. Otherwise, I’ve been here the whole time.”

The ice in his veins had to count for something. He could tell the most blatant lies if need be, as long as they served a noble purpose.

Metust frowned. “The magic we placed in the curse should have worked. What other questions do you have?”

“What did the curse contain?” Sebastian asked promptly.

The head of Uxilan appeared taken aback by the question. As long as the ingredients were obtainable, he would ask Luna Celeste to make it so that she could send Milo, Kai, and Tani back to the real world.

“Your life is not enough to get an answer to such a question,” Metust replied.

“What would it take, then?”

“Ifigia as a whole. Burned to the ground.”

“No.” Sebastian turned on his heels and froze as the pain inside his chest flared again.

“You got stabbed,” Metust accused. “I haven’t heard from my people, which only means that you killed them all, but even now, something keeps you in place, and your pallor becomes more pronounced. You must have been touched, after all,” he added with triumph.

“What did the curse contain?” Sebastian asked through his teeth. “And no, you cannot have Ifigia.”

Just two things he needed to accomplish before the thread of his life ran short. To send Milo and his friends back and rid the world of Uxilan for good.

“There’s nothing else I want,” Metust replied. “It appears that we are quite in a conundrum, Your Majesty.”

Villains had to be handled with care. They were overconfident bastards, as they called them in Kai Martin’s world, which meant that they could be played.

“I can offer something.” Sebastian turned to face the Uxilan again. “The Shimmering Cavern.”

Reya would never forgive him. But he would make sure that Metust died with him, and the world would be left without evil bent on destroying it.

Metust frowned and looked at him carefully. “The Shimmering Cavern cannot be destroyed. If Ifigia disappears, your goddess can make another. But not without that magical place that creates life out of nothing.”

Not out of nothing, Sebastian wanted to correct him but stopped in time. What did this assassin know about love? His dark heart couldn't comprehend the notion.

"It can," he said with confidence. "Only I know how."

"Are you trying to make a fool out of me, Your Majesty? The role doesn't suit you."

"No, nothing of the kind. Tell me what is needed to make that curse, and I'll give you my life and the Shimmering Cavern along with it."

"I still cannot get my head around how you've spent weeks here without giving yourself away," Tani whispered as they followed Galien down the hallways of Sebastian's palace.

"Trust me, it wasn't that easy," Kai replied. "I mean, at least several times I thought I was done for. And it surely felt as if I had some sort of protection, now that I think about it."

"What kind of protection?" Tani asked.

"I don't know, especially since Pepin told me that whatever Reya cast over Sebastian to protect him from those magic jerks was gone. But still, seeing how those Uxilan assholes died by their own poison like I was wearing a high-powered anti-magic reflective coat or something..." Kai stopped. "No way," he whispered. "I think I know who protected me."

"Who?" Tani couldn't hold in her excitement.

"Galien," Kai asked, "how can I find Luna Celeste's quarters? I mean, I did wander in one day by accident, but I don't really remember where that was."

"She only appears when needed," Galien offered his reply. "Now let's go. We don't have time to waste. Don't tell me you're suddenly in need of a charm. You should know that Luna Celeste only wields lesser magic."

"Actually, I do. I totally have a sweet tooth and I need a fix, like ten minutes ago," Kai said.

"Sweet tooth? What kind of charms does this lady give?" Milo intervened.

"You'll see," Kai replied. "Now, Galien, what should I do? Should I call for her? Luna Celeste! Luna Celeste!" he suddenly shouted, making all the others turn toward him to shush him. "Ah," he said with excitement, "look!"

To their right, a conspicuous door had just appeared and soft light irradiated from within. Kai didn't wait for his companions to protest and barged through the door. "I know you cast protection magic on me so that I could defeat the magic jerks," he said in one breath while pointing at Luna Celeste, who stood at her table, smiling all sure of herself.

“Galien, please close the door,” Luna Celeste said in her pleasant voice. “Now, who wants a charm?” She clapped her hands, and in front of her, on the table, various mini-cakes materialized, causing Tani to let out shouts of wonder.

“Must you indulge these children?” Galien asked with a huff, but he obeyed and sat on one of the chairs, just like everyone else.

“I must,” Luna replied. “Let’s see now…” she pondered as she took them in and then looked at the cakes. “For you, Galien,” she said and picked a cake powdered with white and adorned with red cherries. “May your love life be blessed.”

Kai observed with satisfaction how, despite his protests, Galien hurried to take the offered charm.

“For you, Kai Martin,” Luna continued and took a beautiful layered thing in three different colors. “May you find your home.”

“I want one, too,” Tani complained.

“Tani, be polite,” Kai warned.

“Easy for you to say. You got your cake,” Tani accused.

She was usually much more behaved, but it was probably impossible to resist the temptations the lady with charms offered so freely.

“For a clever and beautiful girl,” Luna said, making their quarreling stop. “May you always stay the way you are today.” She handed Tani a multi-colored cake adorned with a tiny unicorn on top.

That left only one guest. Kai didn’t touch his gift and looked at Luna and then at Milo. The charming lady appeared to ponder over her charms. Eventually, she picked one in moving shades of blue. “May you always choose what’s right for your heart, Milo,” she said softly and appeared to hesitate for a moment before handing him the charm.

Tani sighed in delight after taking the first bite. “Have you been eating these things every day, Kai? How come you’re not fat?”

Luna laughed, throwing her head back and showing the column of white that was her neck. “My charms never make anyone fat.”

“Now I truly know we’re in a fairytale,” Tani said with another reverent sigh.

They all dug in without another word, and for a while, only the sound of their teaspoons against the porcelain plates could be heard.

“Why are you here?” Luna asked and rested her chin in her palm. “I thought you’d try to stay out of harm’s way.”

Kai decided that he was the leader of their group. “Yes, but I had to see Pepin, and Galien had to see Conrad, and Milo had to see Sebastian.” Oops, that last bit had been a slipup.

“And I wanted to see Seb’s palace and meet everyone,” Tani added, smoothing over his mishap.

Luna looked at them with a fond smile. “You’re right, Kai. I did protect you, and not only that time, and not only you.”

Kai hesitated for a moment. “You’re more than just a charming lady with charms, right? Despite what people say.”

Luna angled her head and examined him thoughtfully. “I’m just someone who has dear people in her life, and that is all.”

“But I’m a stranger,” Kai pointed out.

“Even so, you came here, and because of your strong soul, and Sebastian’s, too, you are all here.” She pointed at their group. “What is whole should never split.”

“Hmm,” Kai managed pretended that he understood what she was saying. “Have you ever protected Sebastian? Even when his mom didn’t?”

Luna nodded. “And you, while you were in his body.”

“Because Sebastian is the ruler of Ifigia?” Galien asked, evidently curious.

Luna smiled. “That’s only a small part.”

“Because he’s the son of a goddess?” Kai asked.

Luna nodded slowly, leaving room for interpretation.

“Because you love him,” Milo surprised everyone by jumping in the conversation.

Luna’s face lit up. “Yes. Because he’s my son, too.”

Chapter Thirty-Six – From These Tales, We Are Born

“What a freaking bomb!” Tani was the first to interrupt the shocked silence that followed Luna Celeste’s confession about who Sebastian’s parents were. “Does he know?”

Luna shook her head. “No. Reya,” she began and shook her head for a moment, “she’s quite the willful kind. For many, she might seem cold and unfeeling--”

“Yeah, like who lets her son without protection after fighting the bad guys, right?” Kai said and then quickly put his palms up in apology. “Sorry, my big mouth got ahead of me.”

“I believe I should tell you a bit about myself and how I got to serve the ice goddess,” Luna said and offered a small forgiving smile.

“You’re... her Lelian, right?” Kai asked, a bit cautiously.

“That explains a lot,” Galien commented. “And she had us all believe that she’s powerful enough to conjure life from thin air. Icy thin air, but still.”

“Don’t act so spoiled, Galien,” Luna shot him down with a well-aimed stare. “Whereas Sebastian received nothing but a rigid education, you were left to your own devices a bit too much. No wonder you have the reputation you enjoy today.”

Galien scoffed, but under Luna’s gaze, he eventually conceded. “My apologies, my lady.”

“Good. I know you to be a well-mannered young man.”

Tani pulled at Kai’s sleeve. “She can be a little scary,” she whispered.

“I heard that,” Luna said, but right away chuckled with mirth. “I should start by telling you that I was born in the far north, in a poor village of farmers and craftsmen.”

“And how come we know you to come from a well-established family of witches?” Galien asked. “Please, ignore me,” he added hastily, “we would very much like to hear the truth.”

“As I was saying, my origins are humble. I was born a Lelian and my talents for creating charms manifested at a young age. The people in the village were frightened by me. I shouldn’t have been born to a family of farmers with fear of magic or anything beyond their comprehension. My parents were good people, and once they realized that I was... different,” she added after a short moment of hesitation, “they decided to protect me in the only way they knew how.”

“Did they send you to Reya?” Tani asked, her eyes as big as saucers.

“No, unfortunately. They hid me, kept me away from the eyes of the other villagers, afraid that they might hurt me due to their ignorance and superstitions. But, I wasn’t the kind to spend all my waking hours hidden in a barn. I quickly devised ways to get out and enjoy the big world out

there. And I always came back before my parents would notice I was gone. However, one day, shortly after turning eighteen, I went on a longer trip because I really wanted to see the fair organized by a village located at a good distance from ours.”

Luna Celeste stopped for a bit, and her eyes flooded with memories. Her smile was fond, though, and that gave Kai peace of mind. At least, Luna’s story wasn’t a sad one, not all the way, and it was all that mattered. She offered him a tiny smile. “Yes, you are right, young man,” she said.

“You are kind of reading minds, aren’t you?” he asked, throwing her a suspicious glance.

“You’re easy to read.”

“Ah,” Kai said as the sudden realization struck him, “so, as long as there’s a happy end…”

“Is there going to be a happy end? I want to see it, now!” Tani jumped on her seat, most probably high on sugar and meeting amazing people like a lady with charms.

Luna’s smile grew all-knowing and a tiny bit strange. “Do you care to hear mine?”

“Totally,” Kai said eagerly. “Everyone, let’s just keep silent so that Luna can tell us her story.”

“Who put you in charge?” Tani mumbled. “But, yes, we want to hear Luna’s story. Sorry for interrupting.”

“No need to apologize,” Luna replied. “That day, at the fair, it was the first time in my life I had mulled wine. And emboldened by the strength offered to me by the drink, I began making charms and offering them to anyone who happened to walk by. Soon enough, there was a long line, and people were even throwing coins at me.”

“I would have totally thrown all my coins, too, for cakes like these,” Tani said with conviction.

“However, people who had stalls at the fair and had paid hefty sums for them got mad, and soon, I was surrounded by guards. Needless to say, I found myself thrown in jail, on the account that I was trying to fool people out of their money.”

“Weren’t they aware that you had magic?”

“The northern lands are not that rich in magic. So no, they just thought I was playing tricks and trying to sell confectionery at higher prices than allowed. It was not my fault people thought it a good idea to pay me so much. Although I appreciated their appreciation of my charms,” Luna added with a small laugh.

“So you were in prison,” Kai reminded her where her story stopped.

“Badass,” Tani murmured.

“Yes, and it wasn’t an easy time for me. But I suppose that it was just my luck that one day, Reya stopped by in search of hard workers. She needed laborers for making Ifigia into the magnificent place you see today.”

“And she just picked criminals for that kind of job?” Milo asked, visibly distraught by that revelation.

“The northern territories are harsh, and people are harsh, too. Many farmers who end up stealing because they cannot feed their families are thrown in jail. I didn’t tell you something you cannot know since you’re from a different world. Those lands are not part of Ifigia, but free of any ruler. They govern themselves, and I cannot tell, hand on heart, that they are doing that great by this choice. Reya was allowed to pick her laborers against a generous amount of grains and other types of food she brought with carriages by the dozens. You see, she can tell when someone has evil in their heart, just by touching them. So she knew who to pick.”

“What happened when she saw you?” Tani asked excitedly.

“I was overlooked at first, being a woman, and therefore useless for hard labor, but the guards were mean enough to want to play a trick on Reya. They had me dressed in men’s clothes, cut my hair, and sent me in front of her. They didn’t care if I ended up dying of exhaustion in a work camp somewhere, just to get more from Reya for the workforce they exchanged.”

“But you’re really pretty,” Tani intervened again. “Couldn’t everyone tell you weren’t some farmer or laborer or something? Reya, all the more, since she’s a goddess and all that.”

Luna smiled, clearly flattered by the compliment. “Let me just tell you the story of how it happened. I was sent to her, and she placed her hand on my forehead. Then, she stared into my eyes, and I froze on the spot. Her eyes can be so intense, you wish you’re anywhere else but in front of her. She opened her mouth, and at first, I couldn’t make out what she was saying. I was afraid, I have to admit.”

“And what did she say?” Tani asked. “Did she know you were a lady with charms?”

“She knew all right. But what she said was that she had been looking everywhere for a handsome young man to serve her tea in the morning.”

“So you began making tea?” Kai asked, just as curious as his sister.

“Yes, all the while not believing that the ice goddess could have been fooled by the rough fabric of my clothes. I lived in fear that night, fear that she might just decide to abandon me by the side of the road, somewhere in those cold lands, or worse. Therefore, imagine my surprise when, the next morning, while we were camped at a fair distance from the prison where I had spent long months, filled with suffering and deprivations, she asked me a question.”

“What question? Just tell us already,” Galien demanded, in an exasperated tone, as Luna stopped and looked at all of them like she was gauging whether she had all their attention or not.

She appeared satisfied by his impatience. “She asked, and these were her words to the letter, ‘And where would my charm be?’ as I served her tea.”

“She knew! She totally knew!” Tani cried out.

Luna Celeste grinned and wiggled her eyebrows. “Yes, she knew. And so I was promptly raised from being a tea boy to a lady with charms.”

“Wait, this cannot be all,” Milo said this time when she fell silent. “How did she find out you were a Lelian and could carry an heir to Ifigia?”

“That happened later. I wasn’t aware myself why it meant that I was one. When I was a child, a passing witch had said that about me, but my parents and the other villagers didn’t know what that meant. They were more scared of my magic, as benign as it was.

“I believe I’ve always been in love with Reya,” Luna continued. “But in secret. One day, she told me that she had to search for a Lelian and secure an heir for Ifigia, since, as a goddess, she was bound to create a world for humans, but she couldn’t be the one to rule it, at the same time. When I understood what that meant, my heart was broken. But the word Lelian stuck with me, and I knew I had heard it before. At the time, I didn’t remember that it had been a word thrown at me as an insult as a small child. My parents made sure to shield me quickly of the villagers’ bad words.”

Another small pause followed. “I knew Reya would soon become sworn to this Lelian she was searching for, and I wanted her to know how I felt, even though I was nothing but a servant to her. So I gathered all my courage and wits and asked her, ‘What if I am a Lelian and you don’t know?’ What possessed me to say that to her, I cannot tell, but I knew I had to do something to stop her from belonging to someone else. She knew I loved her, so she said that she would grant me my wish and see if I were one. To this day, I believe she indulged me only because she was fond of me and loved my charms. Otherwise, I could have been banished for daring to impose upon the ice goddess in such a shameless manner.”

“I bet she got the surprise of her life!” Tani exclaimed.

“She had to take me to the Shimmering Cavern and perform the ritual to see whether I was a Lelian or not. It wasn’t an easy endeavor, and yet, she remained patient through it all.” Luna smiled at the memory playing in front of her eyes for no one else to see. “And when she discovered I was, indeed, a Lelian, I could tell she was even happier than I was. Well,” she clapped her hands suddenly, “that is how I become Sebastian’s mother.”

“But why does Reya keep it a secret?” Milo asked. “That you are her Lelian, and Sebastian’s mother, too?”

Kai had to admit that he admired his best friend for asking the most important questions.

“I told you, she can be quite willful. And possessive, but also very clever,” Luna replied. “Lelians are very rare. They are the only ones that can offer heirs to kingdoms in this world. Goddesses can create kingdoms, but the heirs are not something in their power to create. And goddesses aren’t supposed to pair with them, only mortals.”

“She totally broke the law for love,” Tani decided. “So cool.”

“Yes, she did. A Lelian considered unpaired can be claimed, hence her decision to keep my secret.”

“But wait... wasn’t everyone like really surprised to learn that Reya suddenly made herself an heir to Ifigia, when other goddesses cannot?” Kai asked.

“As I said, she’s clever. The Shimmering Cavern is her creation. It is capable of creating life, and that is why Pepin brought you here, Kai. He knew you would be healed. Other Lelians create heirs, let’s say, the old-fashioned way. So no one could really contradict her when she appeared with Sebastian in her arms and placed him on the throne of Ifigia. They just thought she was that special.”

“Gawd, this is better than any reality TV,” Tani decided. “But why couldn’t she say she got herself a Lelian? Is that against the law?”

“You could say that. An unwritten law, a law of witches,” Luna explained. “But the witches didn’t think of ever condemning a goddess creating an heir by herself since they thought that wasn’t possible to begin with.”

“Reya really likes to live dangerously,” Tani concluded.

That earned him a chuckle from Luna. “I suppose you could say that. She didn’t want to abandon the kingdom she created to some stranger, hence her decision to have Sebastian. And now, I believe you should go home and have some rest. Let my charms guide you in your dreams.”

“Are we going to leave Sebastian all alone here?” Tani asked.

“He’s not alone,” Luna replied. “I will watch over him as I’ve always done, while we untangle this incredible tale of you, Kai, and he being made to travel to the other’s world.”

“Well, you’re his mom, you know better,” Kai said and stood. He helped Tani off her seat by offering his hand. Not that they would just sit idle, now that they knew so much. “By the way, do

you have any idea why we are here, I mean, the three of us?" He pointed at Milo and his sister, then at himself.

"Milo is easy," Luna said as she tapped her lips with her index finger. "Sebastian loves him. You are explainable, because Pepin loves you. As for your adorable little sister," she added and threw Tani a thoughtful look, "it must have happened because she swore to protect you all her life."

Kai felt his jaw-dropping. He looked at Tani, who also had her mouth hanging open, and stared at Luna Celeste in disbelief.

"How do you know that?" Tani whispered.

"What? Is it for real?" Kai asked. "I'm the older brother, I'm supposed to protect my sister!"

Luna shrugged. "We never choose the way people love us. That's entirely up to them."

"Tani, do you really think I'm incapable of fending for myself?" Kai asked his sister.

Tani shifted in her place. "It's not like that. Just that, after dad... passed away," she said with difficulty, "you were just so sad all the time and not eating. So I began sneaking food onto your plate when you weren't watching. And mom always insisted that you eat everything, and at least, when she was there, you were forced to clean the plate," she said quickly. "And I might have promised to Lulu-chan that I'd protect my skinny brother all my life. There, now you know."

Kai didn't know what to say and just leaned in and kissed Tani on the top of her head. "Thank you, butthead, for making promises to some random magical girl for my sake," he whispered, too overwhelmed to find better words to say. Then he knelt and gestured at his back. "I bet you don't want to mess up those pretty slippers on your way back."

Tani happily climbed on his back again. "Bye, Luna. You are the most awesome lady with charms I've ever met."

Sebastian watched as Metust placed the black symbols carved in iron inside a glass bowl and handed it to him.

"Even a witch with lesser magic will be able to conjure this curse," the head of Uxilan said. "I fail to understand what you need it for, but seeing how this trade is in my favor, I won't dwell on it."

Sebastian turned his back on the assassin to scribble something on a small piece of paper. Luna Celeste would understand once she learned of it. Now, there was only one thing left to do. He faced his archenemy and looked him in his dark malicious eyes. "I believe that it is up to me to keep my end of the bargain now."

He grabbed the assassin by his right shoulder and squeezed hard, making him squirm. “Are you trying to kill me? If you have no honor --” Metust reached for his dagger.

Sebastian continued to stare into Metust’s eyes in search of the truth. As expected, something was amiss. “You’re keeping something from me.” Being able to stare into the minds of others was an ability he rarely used, but now, no matter how immoral he thought it was, it was much needed.

“Do you blame me? You’re powerful enough to destroy me, even with that wound opening inside your chest.”

Sebastian had felt it, growing like a chunk of nothingness, the more he spent time close to the Uxilan assassin. That was their power, and Metust didn’t hesitate to use it on him.

“The final symbol. Give it,” Sebastian ordered. “And I will not go back on my word. The Shimmering Cavern will be no more.”

Metust’s eyes were shifting, a sign of how the Uxilan was trying to find ways to fool Sebastian into not giving him the complete recipe of the curse.

“You’re right, I’m still strong enough to destroy you. Do you want your life to be in vain? After I destroyed your kind?”

His words were poisoned and aimed true. Metust set his jaw hard and then let out a long exhalation that materialized into the last symbol necessary for identifying the recipe for the curse. Sebastian picked it from mid-air and placed it into the bowl, next to the rest.

“Now we can go,” he said simply after covering the bowl with a lid.

Just one moment of lack of awareness was enough. Metust sank his hand quickly inside Sebastian’s chest, grabbing the tendrils of black now rising from the wound. “Now that you have everything you asked of me, I believe I also need to make sure that you’ll keep your end of the bargain,” he said with dark satisfaction.

Sebastian grunted, and it took him all his willpower not to cry out in pain. The assassin now had a hold on his heart. “I am a man of my word,” he said through his teeth.

He seized Metust’s arm and said the words. For a moment, just before they disappeared, he heard the doors to his quarters blasting open, allowing someone inside, but he couldn’t see anymore. It didn’t matter now. It was done.

They were about to get inside the tunnel that reached Galien's estate at the other end when someone cried out for them from afar. They turned to witness Conrad rushing toward them, running as fast as his feet could take him.

"Sebastian!" he said in one ragged breath. "He's gone! I don't know where." Conrad stopped so that he could breathe for a moment. "But I have it on good authority that an Uxilan assassin is with him."

"Where could Seb have gone?" Tani asked, visibly worried.

"There's just one place where he can go in such fashion," Galien said through his teeth. "You say that there was an Uxilan assassin with him?"

Conrad nodded. "I eavesdropped but caught only a few words exchanged between them. That's how I know. When I barged in, they were gone. I should have just walked in on them."

"Don't worry about that now," Kai said. "Seb's at the Shimmering Cavern, right?" he asked Galien. "Then that means that we need to call Adhe for another trip," he added after receiving the confirmation.

"Another dragon ride?" Milo asked. "I supposed I'll keep my eyes open this time."

"Glad to see you on board, my dude," Kai said and slapped Milo's shoulder. "Oh, no, Pepin has the dragon scale. We need to..."

Pepin was already running toward them. He didn't even stop and took the dragon scale from his pocket.

"How did he--" Kai started.

"I told him as I hurried here, and he just went to grab the dragon scale," Conrad explained.

The sound of flapping wings above them announced to them that Adhe was already there.

"So much better than Uber," Tani declared.

"Just hold on tight," Kai told her while everyone began climbing on the dragon's back.

Sebastian lay down on the altar, with Metust's hand still hooked inside his chest. The assassin thought himself clever, but he was, actually, where Sebastian needed him to be. Indeed, the Shimmering Cavern was a magical place, and he had always known where its power came from. Death was not allowed there, only life. But now, for the sake of saving Milo and his friends, he would turn against it, against the very nature of the place, and taint it.

He calmly placed his hand over Metust's wrist. "You will have to hold on tightly," he said, "if you truly want to kill me. Your desire for me and this place to be destroyed, I must hear it."

Metust's eyes crinkled at the corners. Then, he began speaking in the ancient language of his people. Sebastian felt coldness rising beyond what he was usually accustomed to. His hold on the assassin's wrist increased. What Metust didn't know was that they would go together, caught in the entanglement of fate, for which both were responsible, each one in his own way.

So that was how it felt when life was truly leaving one's body, Sebastian mused. He had been in mortal danger before. Reya had been clear about him not being immortal; powerful, yes, beyond any mortal's wildest dreams, but nothing more than that. And yet, all those situations from before didn't compare to what he was feeling right now.

A single tear formed inside his eye and rolled down on his temple as he looked at the icicles adorning the ceiling. Their tiny lights flickered, burning bright for one moment, then fading for a while.

Sebastian felt at peace. He hadn't planned ever on sacrificing his life for nothing, and now it felt like he was doing it for the only thing worth sacrificing for. With the last of his strength, he held on to Metust's wrist, sending tendrils of ice up the assassin's arm, even as he was pinned there, to the altar, and his archenemy thought that he was winning.

"Have you ever imagined that, Your Majesty?" Metust's eyes glinted with malice. "That I'd be the last thing you'll ever see before closing your eyes forever?"

"What about you?" Sebastian asked, and his breath rose like icy fog from his lips. "You'll die with me here."

Metust laughed at first. "You're wrong. I can see it. Your goddess's beloved Shimmering Cavern, dying around us. What a magnificent sight! Here, I will establish my new house, and my brethren will rise once more!"

Sebastian felt his cheeks hurting as he smiled. "This is the end of the road for you, just as it is for me."

"You jest, most surely," Metust said and twisted his grip inside Sebastian's chest, making him gasp in pain.

Sebastian responded by clamping down hard on Metust's wrist and sending more of his ice power through the assassin's veins.

Metust howled and knelt by the altar. He tried to break his hand free, but Sebastian was holding him there.

"Sebastian!"

He turned his head with difficulty only to see an entire group marching into the cave. “No,” he whispered when his eyes fell on Milo. “You shouldn’t be here,” he added, his lips now shaking.

“Like hell,” Milo said through his teeth and walked toward him.

Galien and the others made a move to get close, but, with his last remnants of strength, Sebastian used his free hand to cast a wall of ice between them.

“You gotta be kidding me,” Tani moaned. “What is going on? Is Sebastian...” she choked, “is he dying?”

Galien ground his teeth so hard that Kai thought he heard it or was it just his imagination?

“Children, stand aside.”

They all took a step back, forced mainly by Conrad, who appeared to know what would happen next. Galien took one deep, loud breath. Kai jumped up and down to see above Conrad’s shoulder, but all he gleaned was how a sudden ball of fire smashed against the wall of ice raised by Sebastian.

“Cool!” Kai exclaimed. “Go, go, Galien! You’re one hell of a fire mage!”

“I’m not called that,” Galien protested and grunted as he launched another fireball. However, the flames seemed to be no match for Sebastian’s magic.

“I’m not going to just sit and watch,” Milo declared and surprised everyone by breaking away from them and rushing to the ice wall.

They all gasped as Milo jumped high and caught the edge of the wall. For a moment, he hung from it, but then he swung his body and managed to catch the edge with one foot, too. Before one could count to three, he hiked himself over the wall and disappeared from view.

“Is he totally mad?” Galien exclaimed.

“Madly in love,” Tani concluded in a whisper.

Kai couldn’t agree more.

Sebastian could hear what they were talking about on the other side and saw the flames licking the ice wall, but to no avail. Galien had never been destined to wield magic, and that showed in his clumsy attempts to tear down the obstacle Sebastian had raised for their own good. He

focused back on holding on to Metust so that he could get the world rid of that pest forever. He thought he heard something like a thump not far from him.

“How about you let go of him, asshole?”

Sebastian’s eyes shot up and took in with absolute horror how Milo stood there, hands curled into fists, ready for battle.

“Milo, stay out of this,” he ordered.

“You’re not my boss,” Milo shot back. “You, yeah you, ninja asshole, step the fuck aside.”

Metust grunted and tried to speak, but Sebastian’s ice must have already invaded his lungs by now, choking him.

“Oh, shit!” Milo exclaimed. “You’re actually the one holding him! Sebastian, just let go, for fuck’s sake!”

“I cannot,” Sebastian barely managed. “I must kill him, even if it kills me, too.”

“I’d rather you not die.” Milo hurried to them and began to try pulling Metust’s hand away from Sebastian’s chest.

“Milo!” Sebastian shouted. “Don’t touch him!”

“That’s not exactly a choice,” Milo replied and pulled at Metust from all possible angles just to separate him from Sebastian.

As the assassin’s hand began to disentangle itself from the marsh of tar that Sebastian’s chest was now, something changed. Sebastian felt a slight relief but immediately noticed how Metust tensed, a sign that he was gaining his power back. It felt as if time stopped as the assassin’s eyes glinted with malice once more, and his free hand flexed on the dagger he kept at his waist.

He shot a shard of ice that hit Milo in the shoulder, making him lose his balance and grip on the assassin. Then, Sebastian grabbed Metust’s hand again and forced it back where it had been before, forcing the assassin to drop his dagger.

“No!” Milo shouted. “What are you doing? He’s killing you!”

“Go away, Milo!” Sebastian ordered. “Don’t fight battles that are not yours to fight!”

“Tough luck, dude. It is my fight!”

Sebastian could feel his power waning, and by how Metust began to steel himself against the hold, he feared the consequences. “Why would you fight for someone who doesn’t give a damn about you?”

“That’s rich,” Milo said and rushed against Metust, managing to make him lose his balance and soften the grip he had on Sebastian’s chest. “I’m like your chosen or something.”

“Step away from my son!”

The resonant voice came from above, and Sebastian witnessed powerlessly as Reya’s face materialized inside the ceiling, larger than life.

She breathed ice, and Milo was pushed away like a doll. Metust cried out, a high-pitched inhuman sound, and turned into ice that kept his shape only for a moment before turning into a brittle heap that fell to the ground, followed by the sound of tiny pieces rolling down in all directions.

Reya descended and materialized by his side. “Sebastian,” she called desperately, “my son!” She touched his chest, but her white hands soon turned black like tar.

“It’s all right,” he whispered to her, wanting for the first time in his life to soothe her worries. Reya never worried. She was made of ice.

“Who did this to you?” She straightened up and looked around. “Who is this?” she bellowed as her eyes must have landed on Milo. “Who is this stranger?” she spat the word like it was poison.

“Mother, no!” Sebastian clutched at her dress just as she raised her hand. An ice goddess should have been forbidden to have such a quick temper. “He’s the one I chose!”

“He’s... what?” Reya stared at him in disbelief. “Sebastian, what are you saying?”

“Yes, you heard right,” Sebastian said and breathed deeply. From the wound in his chest, blood black like tar was gushing out.

“Did you taint the holiness of the Shimmering Cavern by bringing him here?” Reya shouted. She knelt by his side and pressed her hands again against his wound.

“I came by myself,” Milo intervened. “And can’t you see he’s dying? Are you really going to be mad at him for choosing someone you didn’t already choose for him?”

Without a care for his own safety, Milo jumped to his feet and walked closer. He choked when Reya suddenly grabbed his throat.

Sebastian tried to push himself up, but his vision was fading. “No, Milo,” he whispered.

Chapter Thirty-Seven – Heroes Never Die

“What the hell is going on there?” Kai paced to and fro and tried in vain to climb the wall just like Milo did. “I’m totally hearing that scary ice goddess, and she sounds pissed!”

It looked like none of them could equal Milo in jumping abilities, and they were just as unsuccessful as Kai was. Even Tani was kicking furiously at the wall, frustrated about not being able to help in that kind of situation.

“I wish I paid more attention to my mother’s lessons now,” Galien huffed as he tried to make some of the ice melt, but with no visible results.

“Out of the way, children,” a voice announced.

“Luna!” Tani exclaimed. “How did you get here?”

“My son is in great danger,” she said, and without paying them no mind, she walked through the wall of ice like it was nothing.

“Did you see that?” Tani said slowly.

“Yeah, totally cool,” Kai confirmed. “Wait, we’re still trapped on this side!”

Sebastian could only hear what was going on around him. Shivers shook his body, and his eyes were closed. He tried to move, but he no longer controlled his body, not even his tongue, to beg for his beloved’s life. What had his powers ever served him if he couldn’t help Milo right now? By the sounds he could still hear, Reya still had her hands around the boy’s throat. He had to do something; he had to move somehow.

“Put him down immediately!”

He jolted at the sound of that voice. What was Luna doing here?

“Do not dare to intervene! Haven’t you meddled enough?” Reya hissed. A thump followed. “You hit me!”

Now, Sebastian could hear Milo struggling to gain back his breath.

“And I will again. Let the boy go. We must save Sebastian,” Luna said hurriedly.

“But this boy is the reason why the cavern cannot heal Sebastian anymore!” Reya thundered. “Out of my way, Luna! Don’t make me say it twice!”

“Reya, stop!”

Sebastian groaned, hoping that he could get through somehow. All that mattered was that Luna was helping him and trying to save Milo from the goddess's wrath.

"Can't you see, Luna? I need his blood!" Reya demanded.

"And I tell you that you won't have it!"

Sebastian could hear Luna speaking in a strange language and understood right away. She had found the recipe for the curse. Of course, it was an incantation, not a thing one made. His strength was leaving him, but it would be all right. Luna would send Milo home, back to safety.

"Sebastian!" He heard Milo calling loudly. "Will I ever--"

He didn't hear the rest.

"Oh, no, I think we're traveling again!" Kai shouted as he felt his entire body bloating and squeezing and doing all kinds of crazy stuff that he couldn't begin to understand. He really hoped that Tani and Milo were with him because it would be tricky to find an explanation for why they disappeared if he got home only by himself.

The next moment he opened his eyes, he was in his bedroom. And the next, Tani landed right on top of him with a scream. "Are you all right?" he asked and shook her.

Tani was lolling her head right and left. "Stop shaking me! And I think my ears are still ringing!"

"We're home!" Kai shouted. "O. M. G. Somehow, we're home! Wait, where is Milo? Do you think he got teleported to his home?"

"I'm here," someone called groggily from under the desk.

Milo emerged from there, walking on all fours, looking rightfully dazed.

"We're home!" Kai shouted again but then deflated right away. "We're home," he said again, but this time in a lot less cheerful voice. "And Pepin is there, in Ifigia. And Sebastian. Oh, no, what the hell happened?" he asked Milo.

Only then, Kai noticed his friend touching his neck gingerly. Milo leaned against the desk and groaned again. "What the hell, man? Are those finger marks?" Kai moved closer to examine the situation. "Did someone try to strangle you? Was it an Uxilan assassin?"

"More like an angry potential mother-in-law," Milo said and winced as he rubbed his neck.

"What? She did this to you?" Tani scooted over. "Wait, did you just call her your mother-in-law?"

“Potential,” Milo pointed out defensively. “It’s just that,” he began quickly like he couldn’t spare another breath without sharing what was on his mind, “I knew Sebastian was doing something stupid, like sacrificing himself. And Conrad told us as much, that he was striking some kind of deal with that Uxilan ninja jerk.”

“Ha! I knew those guys looked like ninja jerks!” Kai intervened. “Sorry, tell us everything.” Both he and Tani sat on their knees, all eyes and ears, leaning toward Milo.

Milo fell quiet and looked down. “I’m not totally sure, but Sebastian looked like he was... very sick.”

Tani surprised Kai when she grabbed Milo by one arm. “What do you mean, very sick? Was he dying? But he cannot die! He’s the hero, right? Kai, tell him. Tell him that heroes never die.”

Kai didn’t have the heart to explain to his sister the true meaning behind that phrase. Heroes never died because they remained in the minds and hearts of people, even after they passed away. And Milo just didn’t dare to say it out loud. Or maybe he just didn’t know, and they had to settle for that.

“Stop it, butthead,” he said and pulled his sister back. “If Milo says he only looked sick, he must have been. An Uxilan dagger diet might not be easy on anyone’s belly,” he added. “But Luna was there, and I bet that she can make him better.”

“I think she saved us, that lady,” Milo said. “She smacked the ice goddess so hard over her arm that she dropped me.” He looked away. “Just that Sebastian, he was no longer moving,” he whispered. “I called for him, but he just lay there. And then, we were all back.”

They all hung their heads low in sorrow. Kai could contradict Tani for hours, but that didn’t change anything. And the worst part was that they couldn’t find out what had happened. Maybe never. Or was that something that could give them hope?

“Come on, guys,” he said, trying to sound a lot more cheerful than he felt. “We don’t know anything. And that’s a good thing,” he added quickly. “As long as we don’t know for sure, let’s not cry like stupid people.”

He was about to offer more encouragements when the bedroom door flung open, and a very disheveled mother walked through it. “There you are! Where have you been?” she shouted.

“Um, we played video games at Milo’s,” Kai said quickly. Oh, shit, shit, shit, just how long had they been gone? A day? Maybe two? It didn’t feel that long...

“Kai Martin, don’t you dare lie to me! Milo’s parents are worried sick! Milo, call them right now or I will!”

Milo froze for a moment, but then he jumped to his feet. “I will, I will, but--”

“No ‘buts’, young man,” Kai’s mom said sternly. She had dark circles around her eyes, and her hair was unkempt. “And no, there’s no time for you left to come up with some crazy lie that you can share while trying to fool us!”

“We got isekai’d!” Tani shouted.

“You got what?!” Their mother shouted so loudly that Kai worried she might burst something, like an eye or a vein, all very frightening possibilities.

He grabbed his sister and covered her mouth. “Mom, we’re very, but really, truly, very sorry,” he said cautiously. “We just went on a little adventure,” he tried to smooth things over.

“For four days? Without your phones? Without telling me? The police got involved, they’re questioning everyone--” She stopped and took one deep breath while running her hands through her hair as if she was trying to steady herself. “We’re going to talk about your little adventure later. Now, I have to put some very worried people’s minds to ease. Milo, go. Your parents are out of their minds.”

Milo moved quickly and gestured a hastened goodbye at them. Their mother walked out and slammed the door shut. A moment later, she opened it again. “I hope I don’t have to say it loud and clear. You’re both grounded!”

They were both startled when the door slammed again behind her.

“We are in deep shit,” Tani said slowly.

“Yeah, sis, you can totally say that,” Kai agreed.

“So,” their mother sat at the kitchen table with a notepad open in front of her, “we need to establish some ground rules.”

The questioning was starting. Kai held Tani’s hand, clammy and cold as it was, and exchanged one look with her in a last attempt to convince her not to say the word ‘isekai’ again.

“From today until you graduate, you’ll only know school and home, Kai. You’re allowed to have your phone with you, but not when I’m at home. And I’m taking your computer, too.”

It wasn’t that bad, Kai tried to be philosophical about it. He didn’t think he would be able to get back to his life as usual and start playing video games again, not while knowing Sebastian could have sacrificed for them to be able to get back to their world, and Pepin was waiting for a baby.

“After graduation, you will find work,” his mother continued. “And you’ll continue to be grounded even then.”

“Until when?” Tani asked.

Kai squeezed his sister’s hand. She was supposed to remain the free agent, not to bring the wrath of a worried mother upon her head.

“Until I say he’s no longer grounded,” their mom said promptly. “As for you, young lady--”

“It wasn’t Tani’s fault,” Kai intervened. “Milo and I got this crazy idea that we should live without technology for a few days, and then I thought of getting Tani weaned a little off her phone and basically kidnapped her.”

“Couldn’t you have done that without leaving home and skipping school?” Their mom questioned.

“It was a more complex experiment.” Kai gestured wildly to emphasize his explanation. “We needed to reconnect with nature.”

Their mom pinched the bridge of her nose, mumbled something to herself, and let out a long deep breath. “I don’t buy it, Kai, not for one moment. But now, come here, the two of you.” She gestured for them to get off their seats and come closer.

As soon as they were close enough, she caught them in her arms and hugged them tightly. “Don’t you ever scare me again like this. Do you understand me?”

“Yes, mom,” he and Tani said at the same time.

“But you’re still grounded,” she warned them. “And you still owe me the truth.”

“Yes, mom.”

“Now, go. I’ll have dinner ready soon. Ah, both of you, bring me your phones. I’ll not have you chat about your adventures with your friends, when you don’t want to say anything about them to your mom.”

Kai breathed out in relief. Well, for the moment, it had been easy. But his mom would surely question them more later when she caught them alone. She was that kind of investigator, trying to catch them tangled in their own lies.

“How was it, with your parents?” Kai asked Milo the soonest they met in school the next day. As he had expected, his mom had tried to approach him and Tani separately so that she could discover the truth. The only problem was that the truth was unfathomable, and they couldn’t just say what had happened to them over the last days and to him, Kai, even longer than that.

“Ugh, don’t ask. They took my phone,” Milo said. “Actually, you don’t have to ask because I’m going to tell you everything. They don’t buy it that we went on a little paragliding adventure.”

“Paragliding? I told my mom we went to the hot springs,” Kai moaned.

“And I told mom and dad we wanted something exciting. Doesn’t paragliding mean exciting? I thought you said that one time,” Milo said and shook his head.

“Ugh, my mom now thinks we wanted to reconnect with nature. Well, she doesn’t really buy it.”

They both sighed at the same time.

“It’s not like we can tell them the truth,” Milo pointed out. “They’ll never believe such a crazy thing. I’m not even sure I believe it. Are you sure I didn’t dream getting dragged to a fantasy land where I rode on the back of a dragon and kissed an ice prince?”

“You kissed an ice prince?” Kai was suddenly all eyes and ears and forgetting about his own predicament.

The bell announcing the start of their classes interrupted him. Milo was suddenly very eager to get back to the classroom.

“Saved by the bell,” Milo offered with a strained smile.

“Not over, dude, not over,” Kai warned him.

He plopped down on his seat and took a look around. It was so weird to be back after living in that land of adventures for what felt like a lifetime. He somehow felt bigger than his high school uniform. His eyes fell on Chet, and the guy stared at him for one moment for a deer caught in headlights and then hurriedly looked down. Kai frowned for a moment, and then he remembered. He was, supposedly, a badass who had smacked Chet in the face with a pole or something. That was a good reason to grin.

“Mr. Martin, we’re surely glad to have you among us again. Tired of fighting dragons?” Mrs. Marwin asked and grinned.

What the hell was that? Did she sound almost... friendly? Math was one of Kai’s biggest known enemies, and it wasn’t like... Oh, wait, Milo had told him about Sebastian doing great in school in his stead.

“Actually, I’m done fighting dragons. Now I’m riding them,” he replied promptly.

He expected the class to burst into laughter, as usual when he was talking about video games, completely unrelated to what teachers wanted to hear from him. Yet, instead of that, everyone turned in their seats, and a collective gasp of surprise came out. What on earth had Sebastian done to these people?

“Just joking,” he said and made a small placating move with one hand.

It looked like his classmates were pretty disappointed to hear that. Everyone turned back to their notebooks, and for the first time in a long while, Kai actually paid attention to class. If he were to provide for Pepin and a baby, he needed to get better grades and land a better job than scanning items in a supermarket. Just in case they ever tumbled to this world, he had to be prepared, even if that meant learning math.

The first thing he experienced before opening his eyes was a pleasant smell. It reminded him of something from his childhood, but he couldn't pinpoint it and tie it to a particular memory. Then, as his senses came to him slowly, he realized that it smelled like freshly baked cookies. Which could only mean one thing...

“Luna?” he called weakly, hating his voice and the eagerness in it right away. Eagerness for what? To reach out for someone? When had the ice prince of Ifigia ever needed someone's help?

“You're awake!” A rustling of clothes, and someone was rushing by his side. “How are you feeling, Sebastian?”

“Milo,” he whispered. “Is he... gone?”

Luna placed a cool hand on his forehead and then felt his cheek, too. “I found the incantation you left for me. I examined it for traces of anything foul. Milo and his friends are gone, so they must be back to their world.”

“Reya... didn't hurt him a lot, I hope?” His voice continued to be unsure and reedy, belonging to a weak and sick man.

“I couldn't let that happen. He was fine.”

“You could just ask me that directly,” another voice intervened with a huff.

Sebastian's eyes snapped open at the sound of Reya's words. He looked confused at the two women, side by side, both staring worriedly at him. He groaned as he tried to sit up and refused the helping hands that jutted at him right away from Luna and Reya. “How long have I been asleep?” he asked, trying to hang on to unimportant things just so that he could postpone a little all the explanations Reya was probably waiting for.

“A few days,” Luna replied. “You shouldn't strain yourself, Sebastian.”

“Don't coddle me. You're not my real mom,” Sebastian retorted, falling back on memes from the other world as a measure of postponing the inevitable for the time being.

A look was exchanged between Luna and Reya that he didn't miss. The fog in his mind began to dissipate. "What?" he asked, using a rougher tone than he intended. "What are you two conspiring together again? Wait," he said, suddenly aware that the short glance between the women was loaded with a hard-to-miss significance. "You two..."

Luna put a hand on his shoulder and forced him on his back. He was that weak that he couldn't oppose a woman. "Yes, we two want you to get better."

Sebastian caught Luna's wrist. "You were the one to have me? She didn't just..." his words trailed off as his eyes moved between them.

Reya stepped closer. "We had you together. Yes, Sebastian, I did have a Lelian, I do still, and it's Luna." She didn't sound entirely comfortable saying that, but Sebastian couldn't care less about her feelings at the moment. "There, now you know."

It hit Sebastian, the smell of those freshly baked cookies, with all the memories he hadn't been able to recall. Throughout his childhood, on the rare occasions he fell sick, that smell had been part of getting better, along with a gentle hand on his forehead and a tender smile. "A bit too late for me to celebrate having two mothers," he mumbled.

Luna must have cared for him during those times. She must have been that person he didn't recall well at the moment.

"It's never too late," Luna retorted.

Sebastian winced as he tried to laugh. "I'm not a child anymore, and it would have served to know I had someone to run to with a scraped knee." He felt the need to be slightly vindictive, and it didn't suit him. As usual, what suited him was to get out of that sick bed and see about the kingdom and its needs.

"You did exactly that," Luna said promptly. "I just had to make sure you didn't remember."

Sebastian let his gaze travel to Reya. "Why?" he asked her directly.

The ice goddess granted him the majesty of her profile as she stood erect and set her chin high. "It was not a secret for you to know."

"Bullshit."

Both women gasped at the rudeness of his reply.

"Well, I did pick a few things while away," he commented.

"Yes, about that," Reya started. "Imagine my astonishment when I discovered that your chosen is some boy--" she spat the word with obvious disgust.

“His name is Milo,” Sebastian interrupted her. “And yes, he is from a world completely different from ours. Therefore, no need for you to fret. I will never see him again.” As he said that, a sudden pain squeezed his chest. He felt it and found the ragged edges of a strange wound. Of course, the last revenge of Uxilan; he appeared to still carry it with him. “I gave you the heir you wanted,” he added quickly. Reya couldn’t know that Pepin actually carried a baby that belonged by half to a different world.

“Oh, that,” Reya commented in a vexed tone and began tapping her foot. “I’m still mad at Luna for taking part in this charade. I’m well aware now that your servant, a mere Lelian, thought himself clever enough to fool a goddess.”

Sebastian strained against the growing pain in his chest. “What did Luna have to do with anything? And what have you done with Pepin?”

The goddess scoffed. “What we do with traitors in these lands. He’s under lock and key.”

Sebastian felt anger rising. “Did you destroy the shard?”

“Well, that’s the thing. He hid it, the scoundrel,” Reya said. “And I cannot rid Ifigia of him until I learn where that rogue child is.”

“Release Pepin immediately,” he demanded, trying to make his voice sound as it used to.

“He tried to fool you into accepting his bastard,” Reya said. “With Luna’s help,” she added pointedly.

Sebastian ignored Reya and looked at Luna. “How can you allow this injustice?” he asked through his teeth.

“She’s lucky I care for her so much,” Reya replied instead. “And you, as well. Were you anyone else, I would have sent you both to the lands up north, just to see what it means not to have my protection any longer.”

“Protection?” Sebastian ignored the hollowness in his chest. “Maybe I don’t need it.”

“Oh, is that so?” Reya turned on her heels. “Should we see how that works out?”

Luna stopped her by holding her arm. “He’s very weak still. Do not get him upset more than he already is.”

Reya pulled her arm free. She and Luna no longer seemed thick as thieves as he had always known them to be. “Enough, Luna. I believe it’s time for you to learn your place. I need to be alone with my son. Be gone.”

Much to his dismay, Luna looked down. She offered him a last apologetic smile as she walked out of the room.

“What would you have me do, Sebastian?” Reya started.

“Stop this nonsense,” he said. “Release Pepin or I will. And accept the child. His soul is part of the Shimmering Cavern. You know what that means. His birth right is to sit on the throne of Ifigia once I’m gone.” He felt his chest again as that almost unbearable pain blossomed once more. That might happen too soon. An unborn child would inherit the kingdom.

“He is a bastard!” Reya shouted, turning on her heels and making her long dress swish over the polished floor. “I would not have you made into a mockery--”

“A mockery?” Sebastian mustered all his strength, and it wasn’t enough to confront his mother. “Who would have the courage to say that the heir is not my child? I suppose you and Luna can at least keep your mouths shut about it.”

Reya stared at him like he was growing another head. Never before had he gone against her in such a fashion. “How dare you?” she hissed. “I’ve gone through so much to make Ifigia into what it is today. To make you into a ruler deserving of its beauty.”

Sebastian sighed and dropped against the pillows. It looked like he had to take it, all of it, lying down, as much as he disliked the notion. “Did you ever ask me if I wanted this honor?”

“We are born into duty,” Reya replied. Her voice had the weight of ice covered by frost. “We do not question it.”

“You are a goddess. I’m nothing but a mortal, as you cared to remind me so many times before. You made a choice for me, and I don’t want it anymore.”

“And what do you want? That boy?”

Sebastian closed his eyes, too exhausted to argue with his mother. He needed to save his strength if he were to save Pepin and the child. “Yes, I want that boy,” he murmured petulantly as his eyelids grew heavy. “Not that he’s a choice I could make.”

“Sebastian!”

His mother’s alarmed voice forced him to make an effort to open his eyes and offer her a meek smile. “Now, I need to sleep, whether you like it or not. Don’t make any rash decision concerning Pepin. I’ll never forgive you,” he warned in a whisper.

Reya’s hand was cool on his forehead, and it felt good. He didn’t say anything as she sat by his side and pulled his head into her lap. The world of dreams beckoned again.

Chapter Thirty-Eight – This Is What Getting Isekai'd Does To People

“What’s wrong with him? Why is he not waking up?”

Reya’s anxious questions pulled him from the abyss of tar in which he felt his entire body succumbing. He fought to wake up. So like her, not to allow him a moment of peace. “Don’t you have better things to do? I thought goddesses always had something on their plates, building kingdoms and such.” He knew his attempt to joke would be overlooked. Reya didn’t know him to be capable of joking.

“Sebastian, thank heavens,” Reya cried out and pressed his head against her chest.

“You are suffocating me,” he protested, and his voice came out muffled. “Luna, help, if you’re around.”

“It looks like our boy is in pretty good spirits if he affords to jest in such a manner,” Luna said, but by the tone of her voice, she sounded relieved, too.

Reya finally released him, and Luna hurried with a cup of tea and a cookie. This time, he didn’t protest and grabbed both. He felt famished.

“You two should really stop hanging around my room. I’m twenty-two and perfectly capable of handling myself,” he said. Luna’s cookie, whether it was a charm or not, was sweet on his tongue, and the tea warmed his belly, giving him the much-needed warmth. “And I have a servant,” he said pointedly.

“You’ll be appointed someone else, as soon as you get better,” Reya retorted, her voice decisive and harsh.

“I am better, and I’ll have no one else but Pepin,” he insisted. “He’s the only one who knows how I like to take my bath. Also, he’s my betrothed.” It didn’t look like Reya had changed her mind during the few hours he must have been asleep. “How does it look not to have him by my side, especially now when I’m in this dire predicament?”

“You don’t worry about that. Your dire predicament is our worry,” Reya said.

“My dire predicament is having two women in my royal quarters day in, day out. Even as mothers, you are becoming a bit too overbearing. Have Pepin help me.” He hoped that it would eventually work if he insisted like it was his birthright to command Reya to do his bidding. And if it didn’t, which was much more likely to be the case, he would just get back on his feet and release Pepin by himself.

“When have you become so demanding? You’ve always been stubborn in your ways, but this--”

“Forget it.” Sebastian made an effort to get away from Reya and out of bed, struggling with keeping his balance once he was on his feet. “It looks like I have to do everything by myself.”

His throat was still parched, and there were so many things to do. First on the order of business was to find where Pepin was and let him go free. The kingdom had been without its prince for a while now, which meant that many people must be waiting for him to perform his duties as usual. Then, he would have to train the knights. Yes, plenty of things to do, and none of them was to think of Milo.

Or about the wound in his chest that didn’t want to give in. One would think that a goddess and a lady with charms would be at least capable of dressing a wound properly. Apparently, they were out of their depths, and he truly needed Pepin, who, among other things, was quite adept at dealing with such things.

“Your stubbornness will not convince me to release that traitor,” Reya warned him.

“Very well, then,” he said. “I will search for him on my own. But, now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a kingdom to run.”

“Are you sure you’re strong enough, Sebastian?” Reya asked.

The pain in his chest was coming and going. Sebastian put on a shirt while freezing his face into a mask. “You made me strong enough,” he said matter-of-factly while he adjusted the cuffs.

“Let’s allow him some time on his own,” Luna suggested.

Sebastian snorted. That would have been handy while growing up with a mother who only cared about his training, someone who would curb the goddess’s propensity for being overbearing and only in matters that interested her.

“We’ll visit later, Sebastian,” Reya warned.

He waved a perfunctory goodbye, and the women walked out of the room, leaving him alone with his thoughts.

And pain. Not the one affecting his flesh, but the one that ran deeper. To think that minstrels so often sang about the broken hearts he used to leave in his wake. Was there a song about his heart being split in two, impossible to mend?

“Guys, what are you going to do?” Tani whined as she grabbed both Milo and Kai by the hands and walked between them on their way back from school. “I mean, can you really just go back to studying, and by that I mean you, Milo, not Kai?”

“Look at her, acting all grownup,” Kai said and pulled at one of his sister’s pigtails to get her attention. “And I’m studying, too,” he added, a bit defensively. “If I’m to provide for Pepin and the baby, I need to land a better job once school’s over.”

“Maybe if your grades are good enough, you could think of college,” Milo suggested.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Kai pointed out. “Let’s just focus on graduation.”

“How about we also focus on finding a way to travel to Ifigia?” Tani said.

“Come on, butthead, it’s not like we know how to even start to do that,” Kai retorted. “Wait, actually, we have like thousands of websites that must be talking about things like that. We should start our own research, especially since now, we’re kind of specialists. I mean, who else can say that they traveled to an isekai kingdom and came back?”

“Exactly,” Tani hurried to back him up. “I mean, you two should still study since you have your finals coming up, but you could leave it to me for a while.”

“No way I’m just going to study and let a pipsqueak like you handle all the heat,” Milo intervened, pulling at Tani’s other pigtails.

Tani let go of their hands and brushed her tails down. “Hello, you need to get good grades or you’ll be grounded forever.”

“By the way,” Kai said, “how long are you grounded, Milo? For me, it appears to be indefinitely.”

Milo shrugged. “My folks are usually cool, but this time, they really went bananas. It’s true that I’ve never given them any reason to worry, but still. I mean, they’re talking in this grave voice when they address me like I’m supposed to be put in my place and never forget it. Dad forces me to sit down and talk to him about understanding my responsibilities ever single evening. Mom just tiptoes around, eavesdropping. I wonder how long this will take.”

“Mom is a bit more forgiving,” Kai said. “And it’s only been a couple of days since we got back. They’ll go easy on us if we don’t give them any more reason to worry.”

“And how are we going to do that?” Milo retorted. “I mean, there’s not a single moment when I’m not thinking of Sebastian.”

“Ha!” Tani said all knowingly. “Did you finally realize that you’re in love with him?”

Milo stiffened and pulled his shoulders back. Kai examined him from the corner of one eye. Leave it to Tani to ask all the uncomfortable questions. “I’m not in love with the guy, but come on, he must have sacrificed himself for us to get back. How do you explain that while he lay there, dying or something, we got hurled back to our world?”

“Let’s not be so negative,” Tani intervened. “You cannot know that Sebastian is dead. He’s not dead,” she insisted. “We would have had some sign if that happened. Do you see any sign, anywhere?”

“And what’s that sign supposed to be?” Milo retorted. “A sudden black hole in the sky?”

“You’d feel it,” Tani pointed out, “because you love the guy.”

“Did I ever tell you, Kai, that your sister is an annoying piece of work?”

“At least a thousand times, all in different ways. The thing is that we want to know what happened there, in Ifigia, right?” Kai chose the middle ground. Milo was still figuring things out, which meant that he was in a not-so-good place. At least Kai knew how he felt about Pepin. That little certainty was enough to make his head clear enough to make the right decisions.

“Ugh, too bad we cannot talk on the phone and compare our notes,” Milo said. “I’ll start my research on isekai stuff as soon as I get home.”

“I’ll do that, too,” Kai added. “And I suppose that butthead here will do the same.”

“You can totally count on me,” Tani said with determination. “If there’s a way to get there... I mean, of course there is. We just need to find it. We will find it.”

That was a good way to look at things, Kai decided as he exchanged one last look with Milo before saying goodbye. They had computers and the Internet and whatnot. Somewhere in the belly of that virtual beast had to be the answer to their burning question.

How does one travel to another world?

Sebastian sat stiffly on the throne, ignoring the throbbing pain in his chest, as nobles and peasants alike brought forward their grievances. As he had expected, the line of plaintiffs was quite long.

What he hadn’t expected was what was happening right now in front of his eyes. A young peasant girl placed a basket filled with mountain flowers at the foot of the throne. “We all wish you well, Your Majesty.”

She wasn’t the only one there with her arms full of get-well gifts. Sebastian accepted each one gracefully, wondering whether he had never noticed the people of Ifigia caring so deeply for him, or simply they hadn’t cared before.

Too bad none of them had a remedy for what was ailing him. The poison of Uxilan was still alive inside him, and he knew it. The only uncertainty was when it would finally do him in for good. That meant that he had to find a way, and quickly, to discover where Pepin was, as well as the

unborn child destined to sit on the throne in his stead. Securing a future for Ifigia was among the most important priorities at the moment. Reya had her limitations, and she couldn't use Luna to create another heir as far as he knew. Unless she could summon another Lelian out of thin air, the Shimmering Cavern was of no use to her for making another ice prince to satisfy her ambitions.

There had to be a reason why Reya hadn't decided to simply order Pepin's execution. Lelians were incredibly rare. On the one hand, his powers must have been depleted the moment he had offered himself to carry Kai Martin's child. But on the other, he was still a Lelian. Reya had plans of her own, and Sebastian wondered what they could be.

Pepin no longer had the shard, or the goddess would have found it already. But could the shard survive without Pepin's love and care? Sebastian remembered Reya's lessons on how an heir to the kingdom was supposed to be cared for. While they were all the Lelian's responsibilities, Sebastian hadn't backed away from acquiring the knowledge involved in the process.

"Your Majesty, would you like to take a break?" One of the eldest councilmen approached him carefully.

He must have slumped in his throne, prey to complicated thoughts and the pain that lived inside him. With unrivaled effort, he straightened up again. "No," he said abruptly. "Who is next?"

It had been a long and demanding day. Sebastian took off his coat and felt his chest. Through the fabric, he could feel the wound continuing to ooze that tar that it appeared to be made of.

"You're far from healed."

He jumped at the sound of that voice. "Conrad," he said stiffly.

For some reason, his concubine was there, splayed on the bed in what looked like scanty clothes. He had wondered briefly where the captive prince could be, but he hadn't expected to find him there, in his quarters, and worse, his bed.

Conrad moved out of the bed and came to him. He pushed Sebastian's shirt away and examined the wound with a frown etched on his face.

"What are you doing here?" Sebastian asked and batted his hands away. "I don't require your services."

Conrad scoffed and pulled him by the shoulders, forcing him to walk toward a chair so that he could collapse in it. "Don't let my lack of clothes fool you into thinking that I'm coming to your bed with the intention of offering services we shouldn't name."

Well, at least they had that. Conrad appeared in no mood to entertain him, and Sebastian surely didn't want to be entertained, to begin with.

"It was the only way to fool your beloved goddess into allowing me to see you. She appears to think that you need the distraction. Not that it made her happy, by the look on her face."

So, Reya was still there, around the palace, probably annoying the hell out of every living soul.

"However, she put together this outfit for me, and even told me that I should do my best to ensure that you forgot a certain someone."

"Too much info," Sebastian said and waved.

"You do sometimes speak in that strange manner," Conrad remarked.

"Indeed. I don't really know why."

"It must be because it reminds you of your beloved."

Sebastian groaned and let his head back. He had grown into a weakling, both in soul and body. But if Conrad was there, he could ask a few questions. "Since you're not here to entertain me, much to my relief, the question still stands."

"Galien worries," Conrad said directly.

"Ah. Of course. Tell him I'm fine."

His cousin had to be back to Kelonia by now, busy with ruling over his own duchy.

"You're not fine, and I'm not going to lie to him," Conrad retorted. "I suppose that I am here to offer my services, only that not those that pertain to my abilities between the sheets."

"Thank goodness for that," Sebastian grunted. "I'm in no shape to enjoy a man's body, as you can easily see."

"And luckily for me, I have no time to indulge in desiring you as I used to," Conrad replied promptly.

Of course. The thing they didn't have was time. He didn't have time. "Do you happen to know Pepin's whereabouts? Reya treated him as a traitor and had him locked somewhere, but she's adamant about not letting him go free."

"Unfortunately, I have no such information, but I will do my best to acquire it."

"Conrad, with all due respect, you're ill-equipped for gathering intelligence on the matter. You're a soldier through and through, as I well remember." Sebastian let his eyes travel down

Conrad's body. Wasn't it an incredible thing that his loins no longer filled with anticipated pleasure when he looked at such a magnificent body?

"Yes, but I can travel to Kelonia without being seen and have Sir Galien look into it. I can act as liaison between you and him."

"Sir Galien? Just earlier, I heard you drop the honorific."

Conrad stopped and grimaced. "I certainly did not. The wound on your chest might be affecting the way you remember things, Your Majesty."

Sebastian shook his head. He was in no mood to contradict Conrad. "Why would I need someone else to talk to my cousin?"

"You don't know, but your goddess forbade Ga... Sir Galien from coming here, and no one from the palace is allowed to go to Kelonia."

"Why? Does she think him responsible in some manner of what happened?"

"She only has suspicions. But her sister was here, demanding to see you, and she denied her."

Fiana, his aunt, was a goddess with an even more legendary temper than Reya. Sebastian had understood from a young age that the two didn't see each other eye to eye well, but it looked like the ice goddess didn't trust her own family at all.

"Uxilan did this to me," Sebastian said matter-of-factly. "Why would Galien be involved in any shape or form?"

"Ah, your goddess doesn't think of that, either. But she was extremely furious to learn that Galien harbored your chosen in his palace. In her eyes, it appears that such a thing is both condemnable and unforgivable."

"Galien did only what I told him to do," Sebastian said sharply.

"And yet, your goddess and mother expected him to run to her the moment he had learned something like that about you, having decided on a chosen that was not approved by her."

In all truth, for years, he had thought Galien to be on Reya's side, too. Regardless of that, his cousin had proven nothing but helpful and understanding of his situation, as unfathomable as it was, such as falling in love with a high school student from another world.

"When you see Galien, you can tell him that I very much appreciate his role in everything. But how do you know so much, especially about conversations that must have taken behind closed doors, such as those between Reya and Fiana?"

Conrad appeared slightly uncomfortable for a bit. “Sir Galien cared to keep me informed of what transpired between his mother and yours. I’m not the kind to eavesdrop.” The captive prince set his chin high as he said that. It made Sebastian wonder what uncomfortable things he might have been subjected to by Galien. His cousin was a trickster by nature, and while he knew no details about what was happening between Galien and Conrad, he could only suppose that his so-called royal concubine couldn’t have been spared.

“You and Galien,” Sebastian said suddenly. “What is going on there?”

“Nothing,” Conrad said, a tad defensive and taking a small step back. “I am still your loyal servant as promised.”

“I don’t recall you being so accommodating toward me.”

“A lot of things changed. You defeated Uxilan, Your Majesty, and rid the world of great dangers.”

Conrad surprised him by taking a knee and bending his head.

“You can stand, and just call me Sebastian. Seeing how many embarrassing things you must know about me by now, it would feel a little grating to keep this pretense of formality.”

Conrad stared at him but didn’t change his position. “Galien must have said a thing or two. Not that I necessarily believed him,” he added hurriedly.

Sebastian narrowed his eyes. “What could he have possibly told you?” By embarrassing, he thought of his current position, wounded and weak, not of whatever Galien must have run his mouth about. “Speak,” he ordered when he saw that Conrad chose to remain silent.

“Some imagined incident concerning a certain flower supposed to grant the person eating it, um, certain benefits concerning his stature and ability to handle diplomatic conversations,” Conrad said, stumbling on his own words.

Sebastian gasped in disbelief. “He did not dare,” he said.

“He swears that he didn’t know it would have such an effect,” Conrad added in an appeasing tone.

Sebastian knew precisely what effect Galien remembered. He had been forced to sit through an entire day dedicated to welcoming delegations from all corners of the kingdom with his manhood at full mast, all the while dressed in relatively tight-fitting clothes. It had been an ordeal to endure. And at the end of it all, Galien had even dared to laugh and tease him over making a fantastic impression on the delegates. Sebastian was sure the diplomats hadn’t dared to comment on his state only because it would have meant going against the goddess who had made their blessed homes and coveted positions in the kingdom possible.

“I do not wish to learn anything more about what that good for nothing cousin of mine decided to share with you. And just stand already. All right,” he said quickly, “if it is possible for you to move unhindered to Kelonia and back, tell Galien that I need him to find Pepin and the heir to Ifigia. It is a matter of life and death. I will do my part, although I doubt Reya would have decided to keep Pepin in the dungeons here.”

Conrad stood erect like a soldier. “I will find Pepin for you, Your Majesty... I mean, Sebastian.”

“Good. Do so.”

Conrad made a move to go out the door. “Sebastian, about your wound--” he started.

Sebastian waved sharply. “We all do what we must. My wound is mine to bear.”

Conrad nodded and walked out without another word.

Sebastian slumped further in his chair. At least, he had allies. Reya was the embodiment of stubbornness, and Luna was at her beck and call. Galien and Conrad had to do for now.

And Fiana, he remembered. His aunt had power just as much as Reya, and she couldn't be easily contained, certainly not like Galien, who was a mere mortal.

For now, he would rest a little. Too bad the only thing playing in front of his eyes as he closed them was how Milo had kissed him that last time. At least that pain was sweet, not bitter like the one in his chest.

The knock on the door didn't surprise him. His mom came every evening to have a soul talk with him. Apparently, their parents, both his mom and Milo's folks, believed them to have rebelled against bullies by their sudden disappearance as a warning that they were free beings who could do whatever they wanted. That was all some weird stuff that a bunch of psychologists specialized in teenage angst had told them.

Well, it had to do as well with how Tani, against his advice and any better judgment, had blurted out at their mom again that they had been isekai'd. She had also been caught lurking forums filled with people who claimed to have been hit by trucks and living a life of adventures in other realms.

“Is it about Tani?” he asked her directly.

His mom nodded and sat on his bed. “People told me she witnessed how you hit some kid with a stick over the face. And now she's making all these things up. Did you hit that kid, Kai? That bully?”

Technically, no, so it wasn't lying. "No," he said promptly. "I have no idea why people say that. She didn't witness anything traumatizing. But you know, she's a teenage girl," he added, full of importance as if he were some specialist in young girls' behavior. "Next month, she's going to say that the cutest guy from BHS is her soulmate and have you shopping together for her wedding dress."

To his relief, his mom laughed softly. Ugh, good, she was buying it. *Sorry for throwing you under the bus, Tani. At least, I'm not throwing you under truck-kun.*

"I still wish you could tell me the truth," his mom said. "About your disappearance. Your story and Milo's don't match up. We, the parents, talk to each other, you know?"

Well, they should have thought of having a bulletproof story to tell their parents before they got reverse-isekai'd. Now, there was that, and Kai couldn't tell his mom that he was actually some sort of dad to an heir to the throne in a fantasy land. And that he would become one soon. He had no idea still how those things worked.

"Trust me, mom, you wouldn't believe it," he said without thinking.

His mom grabbed his shoulder and turned him toward her. "You should be the one to trust me."

Kai just shook his head. "It has nothing to do with bullies, I swear. You have nothing to worry about."

"I'll always be right here," his mom said. "Whenever you feel ready to tell me about it, because it surely feels like it changed you all."

"What do you mean?" Kai asked, surprised by her words.

His mom brushed his hair out of his eyes and kissed his forehead. "You suddenly seem wiser and you're really applying yourself. Milo's parents say that they have never heard their son sighing so often or saw him daydreaming. And Tani, well, I suppose that she might just be a teenage girl, after all," she joked. "Good night, baby."

"Good night, mom," Kai replied.

Sure thing, they were all changed. That was what getting isekai'd did to people.

Chapter Thirty-Nine – The Old-Fashioned Way

Sebastian had never experienced such a thing before. He truly thought himself incapable of sensing heat in any shape or form, but as of this evening, it seemed impossible for him to go to sleep. The covers lay on the ground in a heap by the bed, and his skin was sensitive all over. Could it be a side effect of the poison eating his body away? It wasn't unheard of.

He traipsed to the window and pushed it open. Seasons changed in Ifigia as they did in Milo's world. Summer was just starting, but the night breeze was supposedly chilly enough to send him back to bed. None of that happened. His skin burned, soothed only marginally by the night wind coming through the window.

Caught between palace responsibilities and his trying his damnest not to let Reya in on his plans, Sebastian was beginning to feel something akin to exhaustion. If he hadn't been trapped in Kai's body for a few weeks, he would have never experienced the feeling, but now he was aware of it.

His body wouldn't last long, and it was a fact that couldn't be denied. The worst part was that he was no closer to finding out about Pepin's whereabouts and where the shard was hidden. He leaned against the window sill and stared into the darkness.

Something blinked in the sky but only for a moment. Lightning? A thunder should follow, Sebastian thought, but only the silence of the after dark with its quiet choirs of insects and solitary birds could be heard. What could that have been?

He rested his forehead against the cool glass. Was he leaving Ifigia in good hands? Reya would quickly reclaim her role as protector, but she wouldn't be allowed to rule. Being the kind of goddess never to overlook a slight, she wouldn't allow Pepin and Kai's child to come into the world.

What was he to do? Conrad would be gone tonight to see Galien in secret, but what was the son of the fire goddess to do when the ice goddess was firm in her ways? Sebastian hoped a lot. His perusal of the palace dungeon and other places that could serve as a jail of sorts had led him nowhere.

Unless, his mental gears began to turn, he was looking in all the wrong places. Reya appeared not to have an interest in terminating Pepin. His value as a Lelian should have been forfeited when he gave himself to Kai Martin, yet the ice goddess still wanted him alive.

Was it possible to revert what Reya saw as being damage done? If the shard was found and destroyed, would she force Pepin and him together? He couldn't see how she would be able of such a feat since none of them nurtured feelings of affection for the other, at least not the kind required for creating an heir for Ifigia.

That could only mean one thing. He grabbed a shirt and a pair of pants and wished with the power of his mind to travel there, the only place where he could want to be and get there and back again.

The Shimmering Cavern had suffered while he had laid there, consumed by the Uxilan poison. Sebastian could see it clearly in the streaks of melted ice that changed the scenery here and there. Before, it had been a perfect place, not one icicle thrown together haphazardly. Yet, now it was more beautiful, he thought as he ran his hand over the walls.

It wasn't a big place. One couldn't easily get lost inside it, but few were allowed to know its secrets. If there was one place where Reya would have put Pepin, it had to be right in front of his eyes.

Sebastian grunted as he pushed against the altar with all his might. Before the wound in his chest, it would have been easy to do so. Now it required almost all of him, but his purpose was a noble one.

He stared at the young man trapped in the ice under the altar. Pepin appeared asleep, his natural beauty made surreal by the translucent glaze lending his complexion a blue hue. His hands were set on his chest, and his mouth was frozen in what looked like a determined grim line. To think that a mere servant had the nerve to confront a goddess. Sebastian didn't quite believe it, knowing the sense of duty that motivated Pepin in everything he did. It appeared that the perfect servant had a rebellious streak in him, after all.

So, he had guessed right, but that didn't make the problem any easier. Getting Pepin out of his ice prison was not something anyone could do. Reya's magic was powerful, much more than his, who would be considered merely her shadow as far as his ability to command ice was concerned.

Sebastian stared at Pepin's sleeping face. New white flowers began to blossom on the surface, and he stopped. He knew very well how to make ice, but not necessarily how to melt it, not when there was stronger magic than his at work.

What he needed was fire, earth-scorching fire, and he knew exactly where to find it.

"Tani, for real," Kai tsked but followed his sister to her room. "If mom catches you again--"

"Hush, she doesn't know I know exactly where she keeps our phones. And she must be dozing by now. Stop making so much noise."

"You're the one talking too much," Kai retorted but kept his voice low.

Tani walked into her room, looked around, and then gestured for him to come quickly inside. He shook his head but entered, curious of his sister's latest findings.

"Why exactly did you scan the room before you left me in?" he asked after Tani made a show of closing the door without making a sound.

"You never know," Tani replied promptly and then grabbed her phone. She held it high triumphantly and on the point of bouncing with excitement.

Kai looked and mumbled as he read the words on the screen. "*Pic of fantasy castle taken with my drone.*" He snorted. "Come on, butthead, it's clearly 'shopped."

"Look," Tani insisted. "When we were riding the lady dragon, you showed me Seb's castle from above. Doesn't it look familiar?" She pushed her phone against his nose until he had to grab her wrist and hold it at a reasonable distance from his eyes.

Now that he looked closer... "But it's clearly taken at night, and it's not even that good. I mean--"

"Stop being a non-believer. It's the only trail we have. And it's the right shape, don't you think?"

"Yeah, but it's not like Sebastian's castle is one of a kind in the land of--" He stopped abruptly and grabbed Tani's phone, triggering a frustrated groan from his sister. She was right about the shape, but that wasn't it. Even at a distance and with not so great resolution, the blue shimmering adorning the highest roofs was impossible to miss. "Oh, shit," he murmured, "it's either the coincidence of a lifetime, or this dude really took a photo of Sebastian's castle!"

"Told you, didn't I?" Tani snickered and then put her hand up. "High five, bro."

"Bro? I'm not your bro," Kai said but grinned and slapped his hand against Tani's open palm.

She rolled her eyes. "That's like the stupidest thing you've ever said in your life. I'm actually the only one who should be allowed call you 'bro'."

"Yeah, yeah, you have a point. We need to get in touch with this dude and ask him where he took the picture."

"Already done that," Tani said promptly. "I sent him a message, and any moment now, he should reply. Let me check again."

Kai stared over his sister's shoulder as she logged in. All that tension was killing him. He stole furtive looks toward the door, expecting their mom to walk into the room and start yelling at them. She usually wasn't the yelling kind, but the last events must have rattled her pretty badly. It wasn't like Kai could blame her; any moment he allowed his mind to go to Pepin, and the

unborn child was making him feel things he had never experienced before, such as a level of frustration at himself for being incapable of defending them.

“He replied!” Tani shouted, and Kai hushed her again.

“What is he saying? OMG, he took the pic not far from here! What the hell? I mean, did we rip the fabric of interdimensional boundaries while we traveled back and forth?” He was just throwing ideas at random, but hope was just starting to rise inside his soul.

“He says that his drone is messed up now, and that he tried to use another, but although he’s pretty sure he followed the same path, the castle no longer appears to be there,” Tani said as her eyes followed the guy’s message word by word.

“Still, it happened once,” Kai insisted. “Oh, damn, why do we have to have school tomorrow? I want to go there right now!”

“You’re telling me? I want to get isekai’d again like five minutes ago.”

Tani wasn’t the only one. Pepin could be in danger. Sebastian clearly was in a bad place, with that Uxilan wound in his chest, and there was also that scary goddess who had tried to strangle Milo, albeit his being as good as her son-in-law.

“I’ll think of something. We also need to let Milo know of all this.”

“I sent him a message. He’ll see it in the morning, when his folks let him have his phone for school day.”

“Tani, the hell?” Kai moaned. “His parents surely read his messages now!”

“Oh, shoot,” Tani let out in frustration. “Do you really think they’ll go through his phone?”

“We all disappeared for four days. They might think they’re totally entitled to do that. And if they already saw it, then --”

The rap on the door made them both groan and roll their eyes. They made poor spies, or agents, or whatever. They were making way too many mistakes.

“Kai, Tani, what are you two doing?” Their mom had let herself in after the short warning that she already knew what they were up to. “Is this thing with whatever you’re learning from those kids shows not over yet? And Kai, I thought better of you.” She crossed her arms and watched them both with disapproving eyes. “None of you has any excuses, understood? Now, the phones. I see that I need to confiscate them indefinitely. And Tani, if I catch you sneaking about again, no more TV for you either.”

“But mom --” Tani started.

A single look from their mom convinced even his opinionated sister to keep her mouth shut.

“What is this about? Do you truly find your lives so boring? When I was your age, we didn’t have smartphones and so much entertainment, and we survived just fine. These,” their mom said while gesturing with their phones that were already in her hand, “are the problem. Kids today would rather live in imaginary worlds than deal with homework and everyday life,” she murmured under her breath. “I don’t want to hear the word isekai from either of you for the rest of your lives. And yes, I do know what it means now, not that I’m any wiser for it. You’re both too old to be so invested in fairytales,” she added sternly.

Tani opened her mouth to comment on that, but Kai grabbed her hand and squeezed it tightly.

“Now go to sleep. You have school tomorrow.” Their mom sounded weary. She probably thought them both to be nothing but irresponsible teenagers who couldn’t tell that they hurt her by insisting on how they knew of worlds beyond the one they lived in. Well, at least there was one world in which people like Pepin lived, and Kai much wanted to be part of it, as much as the one he shared with others he loved, like Tani and his mom.

Was there really a way for them to make the two worlds come together? The pic taken by that guy with his drone showed that there was hope. Now, they would be without their phones throughout the day, as well, which meant that they would have to deal with everything the old-fashioned way, something he had no idea what meant.

“So, pipsqueak got us a break and then managed to let us without our phones while in school, as well,” Milo said matter-of-factly as soon as the three of them got together. They couldn’t skip any classes, or their teachers would go bananas and call their parents in an instant, so all they had was their lunch break.

They were all munching on their sandwiches, as well as the barely-there solutions that kept coming and going from their minds.

“Really sorry about that,” Tani replied.

Milo pulled at her pigtails but with affection. “It already happened, so don’t sweat it. I suppose that we just need to look at this differently. Kai, any ideas?”

“We need to do it the old-fashioned way,” Kai said promptly.

“What does that mean?” Milo questioned.

“It’s tough because we’re going to make our folks mad at us again. Today, after school, we go to the place the guy with the drone talked about and investigate it by ourselves.”

“That means that we’ll get home late tonight, right? We’re basically going into the woods and we don’t have a clue if we’re going to find anything,” Milo pointed out.

“We cannot depend on the Internet anymore, and if we use school computers, the grownups will catch whiff of it like this.” Kai snapped his fingers. “That’s why I’m thinking about doing it the old-fashioned way, which is to go in person and investigate.”

Milo seemed to ponder for a moment. “We might not find anything. And if we give our folks more reasons to doubt us--”

Tani interrupted him by grabbing his elbow. “Come on, man, don’t you want to see Seb again?”

That seemed enough to convince Milo. He straightened up and smacked his palms together. “Let’s do this, mad parents or not. We’ll convince them once we find Sebastian’s castle.”

“Right,” Tani agreed. “I so want to see mom’s face when she learns that isekai exists!”

“Are we all in?” Kai put his hand forward, palm down. Milo covered it with his, and then Tani put both of hers on top.

They broke it off without a word, exchanging knowing looks between themselves while the bell rang to announce the start of the next period.

Sebastian waited in his quarters. As little as was left, his energy had to be conserved for the confrontation that was bound to follow. Conrad had come back the night before, and as soon as Sebastian had shared his findings, he had left for Kelonia again. It seemed that the fallen prince enjoyed his newfound role a lot more than that of a royal concubine. In passing, Reya and Luna had asked him about how he was feeling, but he had sent them quickly away under the pretext that he only needed the rest.

However, the moment his aunt would step foot into the palace, Reya would know, and something of how she looked at him told him that she was suspecting him of hiding important information.

He groaned as he peeled off the shirt from his body and stared at the wound with searching eyes. “I need only a little more time.” His plan was simple but effective, he liked to believe. If he made it official, if he took Pepin in front of a cheering crowd, letting everyone know that a new heir was on the way, not even Reya would dare to go against something like that, not without sacrificing more than what she was willing to. Of course, the servants gossiped about Pepin’s disappearance, and the ice goddess had to know that not even her actions would go unnoticed when there were so many eyes and ears around.

Now, it was all a matter of good timing. Fiana had to be there so that she could travel with him to the Shimmering Cavern, the only way that wouldn’t take days. Sebastian thought of the dragon

Kai Martin had somehow tamed, but that was out of the question. He was known as a hunter of dragons, not one who would get along with their species.

Reya would know her sister was there, but Sebastian planned on being faster than her. Once Pepin was out of his ice prison, and Sebastian took him in front of the people of Ifigia, Reya would have no choice but to accept him and the heir, as well. And then, after he was gone, Pepin would rule in his stead until the child became of age and could sit on the throne to rule the kingdom that was his by birthright.

The soft knock on the door made him raise his eyes. It wasn't like Fiana to be so shy, so it had to be someone else. "Come in," he said in a weak voice that he hated more and more without being able to do anything about it.

Luna stepped into his quarters and looked around like she was expecting someone to be there. Sebastian winced; could it be that she already knew some of what he was planning? It was still unclear to him where Luna's loyalties stood, as much as she claimed that she loved him. At the same time, she loved Reya, too, which meant that she couldn't go on rebelling against her partner and mistress, no matter the reasoning behind her actions.

"You're still hurting," she said as she walked toward him.

Sebastian made a move to grab his shirt, but Luna stopped him. "Why are you here?" he asked gruffly.

"I'm worried," Luna admitted. "There should be no reason for the wound on your chest not to give in."

"I'm fine," Sebastian said through his teeth.

Luna took his hand and held it. It wasn't difficult to feel how cold his fingers were. Luna's warmth around them felt good, but it wasn't enough. "A part of you isn't here," the woman said. "That must be why you're not healing."

"How is that supposed to help me?" Sebastian asked while Luna rubbed his hand slowly, making some of the pleasant feeling climb up his arm and ease the pain slightly.

"No man is ever whole by himself alone," Luna said. "Or woman. I know it very well. In your travels to that strange world, you gave up willingly on something important, Sebastian."

"And? If I did, it was my choice," he said, trying to set his chin up and stare her in the eyes. He only half-succeeded.

"There's only one cure. I asked high and low," Luna insisted. "You must find him. He's the only one who can help you."

“That is impossible,” Sebastian said promptly. He didn’t want to think that Luna was right. Even though they weren’t saying Milo’s name, he understood precisely what Luna tried to tell him. “He’s not here, nor will he ever be again. Why waste time with complaining about the present, when we should be take care of the future?”

“What are you planning, Sebastian?” Luna continued to warm his hand, and he was thankful for the reprieve from all the pain that had been a constant in his life ever since he had returned to his own body.

“I’m planning to leave Ifigia in good hands,” he said and let his head back.

“Don’t say such nonsense. You’re not leaving anywhere,” Luna said. Her voice trembled a little. “She’s stubborn and proud, but right now, she’s hiding her tears.”

“She shouldn’t have taken Pepin away,” Sebastian said. “And she should save her tears. She made herself a mortal son. She must have known that this moment would come.”

Luna caressed his hair. “Yes, she knows that, but not like this. Not so soon.”

Sebastian forced a snort out of him. “She made me to fight monsters and put myself in harm’s way every moment of the life she gave me.”

“And that doesn’t make her less of a mother. Or me.”

Sebastian closed his eyes. “For what is worth, Luna, I apologize for the pain I’m putting you two through right now.”

“If only I didn’t wish for you to find love,” Luna said with regret in her voice. “Nothing of this would have happened.”

Sebastian laughed softly. “Aren’t you changing like the weather now? I thought that all the joy and pain was worth it.”

“I thought it, yes,” Luna admitted. “But not for a moment, I expected it to cost you your life.”

“It was still worth it,” Sebastian said, the warmth now spreading throughout his body as Luna continued to hold his hand, lulling him in a pleasant state of relaxation. “You did nothing wrong. I’m simply thankful for it.”

“Did he at least love you in turn?” Luna asked.

“You should know,” Sebastian said in a playful tone. “Aren’t you the lady with charms who can read others’ thoughts?”

“You’re thinking too highly of me, Sebastian. Only now I see how helpless I truly am.”

“You’re not. You made the impossible happen. And yes, I think he did love me in turn, at least a little. He kissed me, you know?”

“He did?” For a moment, Luna seemed so much younger than her years. In a way, it reminded Sebastian of Tani, Kai’s sister, one always ready for a romantic story.

“Yes, and it was the most wonderful thing that ever happened to me.”

Luna brushed a few strands falling over his forehead. “Rest a little, Sebastian. I must find a way to bring your beloved back to you.”

Sebastian caught her arm. “No. He’s happy where he is. Please, don’t make everything I did to be in vain.”

“But, Sebastian--”

“It’s all I’m asking. Don’t even think of pulling Milo from his world. He belongs there, not here.”

Even if that were possible, even if a part of him, the weakest one, wished for it to happen, it wouldn’t be right. Who knew if they would be capable of sending him back? He doubted he could still be saved, but that was something he didn’t dare to tell Luna. The hope she still nurtured made her pain bearable, and now, Sebastian knew a few things about pain.

“I had no idea the woods here would be so chilly,” Tani said and pulled her jacket around herself tightly.

Kai wrapped one arm around her shoulders and held her close. “Yeah, it’s pretty chilly. And dark.”

“Good thing I have this,” Milo said as he turned off a flashlight and pointed around. “What I didn’t expect was for us to take so long to get here. Now, let’s see if we can find our way to Sebastian.”

“And Pepin,” Kai added.

“And that lady who knows how to make the best cakes in the world,” Tani chimed in. “Hey, guys, is it just me or what is that, over there?”

Kai looked where his sister was pointing. Undoubtedly, there were lights through the trees. “Guys, let’s keep quiet,” he whispered. “Maybe it’s something magical at work.”

“Or just other people who are looking for a way to the castle, just like us,” Milo offered the much more logical explanation.

A group of teenagers emerged from the woods right in front of them, armed with flashlights and what looked like packed backpacks, obviously much more prepared than them. “Hey, are you searching for the Blue Castle, too?” one of them asked.

“It’s actually the seat of power for a kingdom called Ifigia,” Kai said, full of importance.

The teenagers exchanged looks between themselves. “Are you the guys who got isekai’d?” one of the girls asked.

Kai stopped and stared at Tani. “What did you say on those forums, butthead?”

“Don’t blame your sister,” Milo intervened. “I told the Internet, not her. And I was hoping for help,” he added.

“And you’re getting it,” the girl from the group said promptly. “We have everything here, flashlights, warm clothes, tents, food, water. Care to join us?”

“Well?” Milo asked.

Tani hung on Kai’s arm like there was any need to convince him. “We’re in,” he replied.

“Cool,” the girl replied. “So, how was riding a dragon, for real?”

Kai felt like smiling. Grownups could say whatever. Here, they were among their people, aka the kind who believed in isekai and whatnot, no matter how crazy that sounded.

Chapter Forty – Life Is, Sometimes, A Stairway

Sebastian woke up, startled and aware that he shouldn't have given in the temptation of closing his eyes, to begin with. Luna must have helped him to the bed, but he didn't recall the particulars. He forced himself to his feet and dressed, groaning every step of the way. Luna was wrong, after all. Even though the thought of seeing Milo again was soothing for the soul, Sebastian knew, for a fact, that he wouldn't allow his beloved to see him in such a sorry state. His fate was sealed, and he was at peace with it, but he still had things to do, and right now, he was wondering what Conrad and Galien were doing. By now, they should have let Fiana know that he needed her help.

He was barely decently dressed that the doors to his quarters flew open. Reya walked in, her eyes in flames of blue steel. "What is she doing here, Sebastian?" she asked.

Fiana emerged from behind her, looking majestic in her red dress, adorned with rubies and feathers of the same color. She was slightly taller than Reya, something that Sebastian knew that irked his mother to no end, and she had an even more tempestuous temper. Although goddesses had no age and were immortal, he had heard plenty of rumors of how Fiana was slightly older.

"What I'm doing here, my dear sister," Fiana said in her no-nonsense voice, "is to come to the rescue when my nephew is calling for help."

"He doesn't need your help," Reya said through her teeth.

"Are you sure? He looks a bit paler than usual." Fiana ignored Reya and stepped in front, quickly reaching him and tipping his chin. "Yes, I see."

"I need your help," Sebastian said directly. So much for perfect timing. Only if he hadn't overslept.

"Anything," Fiana said, earning an annoyed groan from Reya right away. "Don't mind your mother. Sometimes, she can be blind to your needs. Now, tell your auntie what you need from her."

"I need you to melt some magical ice," Sebastian replied.

Reya gasped in disbelief. Even without looking at her, he could picture her narrowing her eyes. "What magical ice, Sebastian?"

"I know where you keep Pepin," Sebastian replied. "Fiana, help me." He took his aunt's hand and wished for them to be whisked away. Reya would follow them, but it didn't matter now. He had powerful allies by his side.

The next moment he opened his eyes, they were at the Shimmering Cavern. Reya was already standing between them and the altar, her eyes determined and her mouth set in a grim line. “What do you want to do, Sebastian?”

“I want Pepin free and by my side. We have an heir to raise, and a kingdom to rule. Or did you forget that he’s my sworn beloved?”

“Interesting family drama,” Fiana commented. “Galien told me everything he knew, but it’s still astonishing to see with my own eyes how still set in your wrong ways you are, Reya. Step aside. My nephew needs me.”

“Over my dead body,” Reya hissed.

“Funny thing to say, seeing how you’re immortal,” Fiana replied. Moments like this made it clear where Galien took his sense of humor from.

Sebastian slapped one hand over his mouth to stifle a laugh. How could he even think about laughing under such circumstances? He was pitting the two sisters one against the other because he hadn’t thought of a better solution. Still, he had no time for regrets.

Reya raised both her hands, making spears of ice fly. Fiana laughed and waved, making them drop in midair and turn into puddles of water by their feet. “You haven’t changed at all, I see. Now, Reya, play nice for a change. All I want is there,” she said and pointed at the altar behind Reya.

“You cannot. Sebastian would be ruined! What would people think--” Reya fumed and made another attempt to raise the icicles around them as an army.

Fiana laughed. “They’ll think of him as a brave and generous ruler, just as he is.”

Sebastian was looking back and forth between the sisters, a witness at best, as there was little else he could do when such powerful beings were at work. He pressed one hand against his chest as sudden pain gripped him again. Reya flashed one worried look at him, and that moment was enough for Fiana to step quickly by her and put her hands over the altar and whisper words only she could understand.

“Fiana!” Reya called loudly but stopped when Sebastian leaned to one side and let himself crumple to the floor.

She was fast enough to catch him in her arms. Sebastian let his head rest against her shoulder as she held him tightly. “It’s all right, mother,” he whispered as he looked into her eyes, swimming in tears. “Let Pepin rule in my stead until our heir is of age. It’s all that matters.”

“That’s not true!” Reya shouted.

“What else? Ifigia will live,” Sebastian added, his eyes closing.

“I don’t care about it,” Reya said and pressed her forehead against his. “I just want you to live!”

Kai rubbed against his chest and stopped for a moment. Good thing Sebastian had trained this body of his for a little while, or probably he would have to be carried by now. Unlike him, Milo kept up with the rest and was actually in front. Plus, he had Tani hanging on his back, so there was no other that could offer to carry him, as well.

Still, he needed to rest for a bit, so he lay with his back against a tree and groaned as quietly as possible. Maybe he would close his eyes for a few moments and catch a breath. Then, he’d follow the others just like that.

Lately, each time he closed his eyes, his mind wanted to think of nothing else but one thing, or better said, a certain someone. Maybe that was true for anyone in love, but for him, it was indeed the first time to experience anything of the kind. Pepin’s clear eyes came to mind unbound, and Kai smiled. “Well, I’m actually coming for you, so make sure you have some of those tiny omelets ready ‘cause I’m starving.”

It wasn’t because of the omelets that he wanted so much to see Pepin, but surely, they were a bonus. Hmm, but what if Pepin had like morning sickness, and now he couldn’t stand the smell of eggs whatsoever? Yes, he had read some mom’s blog about what to expect when expecting, and now he liked to think that he was a tiny bit ready for what it meant to care for someone pregnant. Surely, some of that advice might not apply since Pepin was a dude, and the baby was magical, but still, he had to take all kinds of things into account. Like learning how to cook stuff that wouldn’t make Pepin puke all the time.

Well, that was on the do-to list. But first, he needed to get on the move and to Pepin as fast as possible. Kai stood to his feet and brushed the bottom of his pants. And next, he looked around only to realize that he was alone.

“Um, guys?” he called out cautiously.

The forest was pretty dark, and the evening had already set. However, the worst thing was that there were no traces of light through the trees like before. Kai inhaled, exhaled, and began walking. “Hey, anyone around?” he shouted.

Damn, he must have fallen asleep or something. How else could have the rest of the group gotten so far that they couldn’t hear him anymore?

With determination, he set himself to walk. Did they go in that direction? He turned around, but all the trees, tall and dark, seemed precisely the same. “What was that thing that people into hiking did to find north?” Kai put one finger into his mouth and extended his arm up. That was

supposed to help him get it which way the wind blew or something. And north had to be where moss grew, so he began to feel the trunks of the trees for any signs of growing lichens.

“Ouch!” he exclaimed as he tripped over an unearthed root and fell face first. Clearly, all of Sebastian’s training must have gone to waste if he managed to be so terribly uncoordinated. “Great, now I’m never going to find Pepin because I managed to get myself lost,” he murmured and closed his eyes for a moment.

“You’re stronger than that,” a voice called from above.

Kai turned on his back and stared. To his surprise, it was no longer dark, but a gentle light washed over the forest around. His dad smiled and offered his hand to help him to his feet.

“I’m totally dreaming,” Kai said to himself but accepted his dad’s hand.

“Let’s stretch our legs a little,” his dad suggested and took him by the shoulders.

There was something different from the last time he had dreamed of his dad. There were more silvers in his hair now, and he seemed older. It was no longer evening around them, but it felt like a chilly invigorating morning. Puffs of steam floated in front of them each time they breathed out and disappeared like mist only to be replaced with their next exhalation.

“You’re the strongest boy I’ve ever known,” his dad said.

“Which means that you haven’t known many boys, right?” Kai joked. “Come on, dad, let’s face it. I’d totally embarrass you if you were still alive...” The words died on his lips.

His dad just laughed. “I am still alive, Kai. You still remember me. And Tani, and your mother, too. Just for the record, you’re not embarrassing me at all. But I’m not here to talk about me. Tell me what’s on your mind, son.”

“It looks like I got lost,” Kai explained. “And I must find Pepin. Shoot, you don’t know, but I sorta, kind of, um, how should I say this... I guess there’s no easy way to say it, so I’ll just say it.”

“Say it, son,” his dad encouraged him.

Kai took one deep breath. “I got him pregnant. In some magical way that I can’t explain because I don’t even know how it happened. So we’re basically expecting, as the Internet says, and I don’t exactly know what that means.”

His dad chuckled. “You’ll know what it means as it happens to you.”

“Hey, that’s not very helpful. I mean, I’ve read some mom’s blog about it when I could because mom took our phones... The thing is that I don’t know what to do exactly. And the baby, you know, the one Pepin and I are expecting, is not some ordinary baby.”

“I’m sure he’s not. That’s why you shouldn’t fret so much. You’ll be a good dad, Kai. Because you care.”

They stopped, and his dad pointed ahead. “Was this where you needed to be?”

Kai raised his eyes, and his jaw dropped right away. “We’re at the Shimmering Cavern! How did you--”

Like before, his dad was already gone. Kai smiled. He didn’t feel abandoned like before. Whatever lay ahead, he would know what to do. Somehow. His dad said so, and he was always right. With that thought in mind, he set himself to walk the steep stairway that allowed mere mortals entrance to the cave. His answers had to be there, and with all that had happened lately, Kai was pretty sure that nothing would take him by surprise. Funny thing, when he had been to the Shimmering Cave before, he hadn’t noticed a stairway, but he had been on Adhe’s back, so he might not have paid attention to that kind of details.

Luckily, he wasn’t completely out of breath when he reached the entrance. “Hello?” he called out tentatively.

He stopped dead in his tracks at the sight in front of his eyes. Sebastian lay in his mother’s arms, completely still. And there was someone else there, a tall lady in red leaning over the altar of ice at the center of the cave. “Oh, no, did I get here too late?” he asked.

The ice goddess only then seemed to notice his presence. For a moment, her teary eyes took him in like he was some kind of alien, or a bug, or an alien bug. “Who are you?” she hissed.

The question was merely an afterthought because Reya didn’t wait for a moment for him to reply and sent a spear of ice toward him. Kai stared in disbelief, his body jolting in expectation of the pain that would surely follow, but the spear melted just as it was about to hit him square in the chest.

His eyes moved to the other woman who was holding a stretched arm, a small fire burning from the tips of her fingers. “Thanks,” he mumbled but didn’t move for the simple reason that he couldn’t. “By the way, I’m Kai Martin, and,” he added while rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment, “I’m the dude that Sebastian swapped bodies with.” That was a proper introduction in that kind of situation; he was sure of it.

A strange growl came from the ice goddess, but the other woman placed herself between her and Kai. “Galien told me about you,” she said. “I’m Galien’s mother, Fiana.”

“Fire goddess, so cool,” Kai said with a stupid grin. He was pretty sure it was stupid. “I mean, nice to meet you.”

“This stranger is responsible! Get out of my way, Fiana!” Reya shouted.

Kai held his jaw as Fiana silenced Reya with a single flick of the wrist. The ice goddess took a step back, and the tiny fire summoned in front of her face followed.

“Because of you, my son...” Reya suddenly broke into tears.

Kai’s attention turned toward Sebastian. Without caring for getting speared with ice or whatnot, he hurried by his side. “Damn,” he murmured, “it’s because of that wound, right? From that ninja asshole.” He clearly saw black blood seeping through the ice prince’s pristine shirt.

He had no idea what he was doing, but he placed both his hands on Sebastian’s chest. Too bad he knew jack-shit about offering first aid and such, although whatever Sebastian suffered from required high-level surgery or something like that.

At this point, he no longer doubted that this wasn’t a dream at all. “This isn’t fair,” he mumbled as he continued to touch the wound gingerly, feeling awfully responsible but also helpless at the same time. “I was stupid enough to let myself get stabbed.”

There had to be something that could be done. After all, if he traveled here so easily, maybe Sebastian could travel to his world, too? And maybe he could get some high-level medical aid, although again, Kai knew absolutely nothing about magical wounds and what they needed to get healed. “He needs surgery and stuff,” he added with only half-conviction.

A warm hand on his shoulder stopped his mind from reeling. “I don’t know what you mean by that, but Sebastian needs something else to heal.”

“Like what?” Kai turned his head and looked at Fiana.

He was a bit startled when the fire goddess brushed her fingers against his cheeks, wiping a few tears away. He had no idea he’d been crying, which was pretty weird.

“The only thing that could make him whole,” Fiana replied. “Take your hands away.”

Kai stared down. His fingers, where they touched Sebastian’s wound, were starting to get black. “Hey,” he said, “what’s that?” He was beginning to get weak.

Fiana squeezed his shoulder and tried to pry him away, but it felt like Kai now weighed at least several tons because he remained stuck in place. He couldn’t even turn his head, and his eyes set on Sebastian’s face, his eyelids bluish and streaked with jagged thin lines that were almost black. “I suppose I had that coming,” he muttered as he realized what was going on.

Sebastian’s eyelids began to lift, and his icy blue eyes stared at him in disbelief.

“Hi, man,” Kai said. “Looks like I’m here to right at least one wrong.”

“Kai, no!”

Kai stared at the ice prince, wondering how the hell he could talk without moving his lips. The next thing he knew, he was embraced, and only then he realized that he had heard Pepin's voice, not Sebastian's.

"Pepin? Is that really you? Sorry, I can't move my head."

His face was caught by smooth hands smelling like summer flowers, and his lips were kissed. Any strength he had inside was draining quickly, and Kai felt like he couldn't keep his eyes open anymore. And he wanted so much to be able to look at Pepin and his cute face, even if it felt like it was the last time he would do so.

"Foolish boy," someone growled, and this time, Kai knew it was Sebastian.

His wrists were caught in a vice-like grip, making him cry out in pain. Quickly, he was losing any feeling in his hands, but he didn't have the time to process what was going on because he was pushed away by a relentless force and made to fall on his back.

Someone was breathing hard, and it took him a few moments to realize that it was him. Pepin hovered above him. "Kai, Kai, are you all right?"

"I think so, although Sebastian might have broken some bones in my body," Kai replied with a groan. "Wait, what are you people doing here? Don't tell me that the baby is already here!"

Before Pepin could say anything, he was lifted into the air and thrown away. Kai barely had the time to push himself up on his elbows, only to witness helplessly how Reya was holding Pepin by one arm and shaking him. "Because of you!" she hissed at the servant.

"Hey, let Pepin go!" Kai managed to get to his feet, although he was wobbly and couldn't keep his balance. "He did nothing wrong!"

Fiana rushed to save the day again. She made Reya drop Pepin and caught him right in time, seemingly without breaking a sweat. She unceremoniously pushed the servant toward Kai. "Children, leave. Now," she commanded.

"But Seb--" Kai pointed at the ice prince who was barely holding himself, propped on one elbow, and in horrible pains, by the looks of it.

"Go," Fiana ordered as she put herself between them and Reya. "Tell that boy he's the only one to make Sebastian well again," she threw over her shoulder.

Kai wanted a bit more clarifications on the topic, but Reya raised her arms, and icicles from the ceiling began falling. A blast of wind pushed him and Pepin away, and Kai noticed, wide-eyed, how that had been Sebastian and not one of the goddesses fighting right in front of them.

Sebastian locked eyes with him. “Don’t tell Milo anything, Kai Martin,” he said, forcing each word out of his mouth. “It’s the only thing I ask of you.” He moved his arm again, and this time, Kai found himself tumbling out of the cave, down on the stairway, with Pepin following closely.

He grunted and groaned as the slippery slope made it impossible to stop. Luckily, there was an end to it all, and he eventually stopped. Pepin landed on top of him, and Kai caught him quickly. “Ouch, Pepin, did you gain some weight or something? Oops, I shouldn’t say anything. You’re just as beautiful as always,” he hurried to say as he remembered something else from the mom’s blog.

Pepin smacked him playfully on the forehead. “What do you mean, I gained weight?”

Kai grimaced. “I said nothing! Damn, that was some nasty fall, are you okay?” He turned his head to look at the stairway, but it was no longer there.

And it was late evening again. Kai blinked a couple of times. So, was it a dream? But no, Pepin was still crushing him, so...

“Where are we?” the servant asked, visibly confused.

“Pepin! You’re home with me!” Kai exclaimed. “Wow, you just got reverse isekai’d! I mean, we both were... You know what? It doesn’t matter. You’re in my world! With me! Yes! Mission accomplished!”

Pepin was the first to get to his feet and helped him up, as well. Kai quickly wrapped one arm around Pepin’s shoulders, afraid that he might just be dreaming again and not wanting to let go.

“Is your world a forest?” Pepin asked, looking around. “It doesn’t look a lot different from Ifigia.”

“Just wait for it,” Kai said with a knowing smirk. “You’ll have the shock of your life. Have you ever seen a dishwasher? Or a smartphone?”

“No, what are those?”

“I have so much to show you!” Kai felt energetic and a lot stronger than before. “Are you all right with walking through all these bushes? You know what? Climb on my back.”

“Why? I’m not tired,” Pepin retorted.

Kai stopped. “I don’t care. I want to carry you. I can. ‘Cause I’m a man,” he said with conviction.

To his dismay, Pepin began laughing.

“I mean it. I mean, we’re still due to become parents, right? I still have to graduate, but I’ll find a job--” he began jabbering.

Pepin silenced him with a kiss. “I’ll climb on your back if you’re so bent on it. Just don’t ever complain that I’m fat, okay?”

“Cross my heart. That’s a mistake I won’t ever make again,” Kai promised. “Pepin, the shard, though...”

Pepin took his hand and placed it over his chest. “It’s safe, here.”

“Here, where?” Kai asked, confused, as all he could feel was Pepin’s shirt and nothing else.

“I had to protect it,” Pepin said. “It’s inside me now.”

“Well, that means that I haven’t read that mom’s blog for nothing,” Kai joked. “You’re properly pregnant, then?”

Pepin laughed softly and climbed on Kai’s back. “Are you sure you can carry me?”

“Totally. But I have a question?”

“Yes?”

“Is that a dagger or something or you’re really happy to see me?”

That earned him another playful smack from Pepin. Kai grinned and hiked Pepin up, lacing his arms under the other’s legs and setting up to walk.

“I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!”

The hissed words brought Sebastian back from his stupor. He winced as he forced himself to get up. Kai Martin had been about to commit the biggest mistake of his life and take upon himself that horrible curse of the Uxilan wound. Good thing he had intervened on time. Now, hopefully, he and Pepin were already far, hiding somewhere. The servant must know of at least a few places where he could take his beloved and make a living for themselves.

That changed the initial plan, of course, but it looked like Kai liked to choose the strangest and most inopportune times to make an appearance. How had he traveled back to Ifigia? Obviously, he hadn’t switched bodies with anyone this time, which made everything uncanny. Nonetheless, it was the reality, and Sebastian had no time to waste on wondering how any of that was possible.

Fiana and Reya both hurried to help him.

“I’ll take care of you,” his mother promised. “You’ll be well again.”

Sebastian had doubts. Kai had just proven that one way for him to be rid of the curse was to transmit it to someone else, and that was something Sebastian couldn’t live with. The other way, Fiana thought, was for Milo to come to him and heal him somehow, but that, again, was not something he would wish for.

“Your beloved will be with you, soon,” Fiana said, sounding perfectly convinced.

“He won’t,” Reya contradicted her in a harsh voice.

“Do you want your son to die, when he could be alive and happy? What kind of mother are you?”

Sebastian huffed. “Thank you, aunt. You helped me. But you can leave me with my mother, now. Somehow, the right thing happened.”

It was nothing like he had planned, but it was still right. He felt it in his heart.

“I’ll search everywhere for those traitors,” Reya promised.

“No,” Sebastian said firmly. “Leave them be. I’m asking nicely,” he added, and he hoped his frosty tone was enough to convince his mother.

Fiana kissed his forehead. “I’m not leaving your side just yet.” When he tried to open his mouth, she silenced him. “Someone needs to keep an eye on your willful mother. Your friends will be fine. And your soul will be whole soon.”

Sebastian no longer had the power to argue. Fiana was well-intended, but now, his heart was at peace, even without an heir to follow on the throne to Ifigia. Reya will find a way to protect her beloved kingdom.

Chapter Forty-One – Isekai Emergencies

“O.M.G.!” Tani shouted. “You found him!”

After meandering through the forest for about half an hour, they were finally in luck and stumbled over the others. Kai let Pepin get down carefully, and his sister rushed like a bulldozer right into his arms. The rest of the group made a circle around them, excited to meet someone from a different world. A couple of girls ran their flashlights over Pepin, exclaiming and wondering at his clothes. Kai pulled him close in a protective gesture when the girls got a little too forward and began to touch him, too.

“Everyone, this is Pepin. He’s from another world, so please be kind to him,” he said in a voice he hoped to be commandeering enough.

“Are you a prince?” one girl asked.

“No, I’m a servant,” Pepin replied dutifully.

“If servants look like this, how do princes look like? I’m totally shooketh,” another squealed in delight.

“You’re not a servant anymore,” Kai cared to insist.

“What am I?” Pepin asked and turned his head.

Kai wanted to kiss him. Yeah, totally, that was the only thing crossing his mind. “My boyfriend, obviously.”

A dreamy sigh emerged from all the girls while some guys let out a few embarrassed snickers.

“Don’t mind these guys,” he told Pepin. “They’re kind of cool once you get to know them. Not that I know them very well, but they’re into isekai, just like me and--”

Only then, he realized that he hadn’t seen someone he did actually know. “Where is Milo?” he asked Tani.

A flashlight blinded him for a moment from afar. “Where is Sebastian?” Milo asked as Kai shielded his eyes. “I looked around and couldn’t find him.”

Shoot. Now that was going to be a tough conversation, Kai thought and sighed from the depths of his soul. “Guys, thanks a lot for helping us tonight, but we need to regroup a little,” he addressed the little crowd.

“But what about the Blue Castle? And how did your boyfriend end up here, with you? Did you go there to get him? How? Show us the gate, man!”

Kai put one hand up to cool the hotheads. “We’ll talk at large about everything. Our parents have our phones, so we can only communicate while we’re in school. But now you’re with us, you know, the inner crowd, and all that, okay? I won’t leave my isekai brothers and sisters in this hour of need,” he added with emphasis. “Milo knows where to find you, right?”

There were a few murmurs of discontent, but they soon died down.

“Fine,” a girl said. “But you better not hog all that Ifigia world for yourselves, or we’re gonna be pissed.”

“How do they know about Ifigia?” Pepin asked.

“I told them,” Kai replied. “Not a lot of things, but you know, these people are totally stoked on traveling to different worlds and stuff. It’s quite the big thing for people like us.”

Pepin nodded thoughtfully and took a step forward. “Esteemed Earthians,” he said in a courteous voice, “I will personally answer all your questions about Ifigia. It must be later, as right now, I must understand the customs of your world, first.” He took a short bow at the end of his speech, which caused other squeals of delight from the girls.

“Are there girls as pretty as you in Ifigia?” a boy with a lisp asked.

“Hey, he said he’d answer everything later,” a girl intervened. She grabbed the boy and dragged him away. “We’ll see you guys soon, right?”

“Without a doubt,” Kai confirmed.

“So,” Kai began, as soon as everyone was out of earshot, and Tani took Pepin with her to walk in front, probably bent on filling the poor guy’s head with all kinds of stories about their world.

“So, Sebastian is not with you,” Milo said. He sounded confused and hurt.

“He’s not. But, Milo, man, we gotta find a way to get you to him. He’s--” Kai stopped abruptly. What if they couldn’t find it? Would Sebastian—No, he refused to think that, especially since he was pretty responsible for getting stabbed like an idiot while in the ice prince’s body. “Well, his aunt said that you must go see him or something.”

“His aunt?”

“Yeah, Galien’s mom. Fire goddess. Totally cool,” Kai explained. “Anyways, Sebastian is kind of ill--”

“Kind of?”

Kai sighed. “Because I got wounded by that Uxilan dude that time, and I was in Sebastian’s body, well, now he’s like cursed. And you’re the cure. That’s what Seb’s aunt says.”

Milo stopped abruptly. “And you’re saying it now? Let’s go back and show me what you did to go to Ifigia and get Pepin.”

“It’s not that easy,” Kai mumbled.

“What? Don’t tell me that now that you got Pepin, you don’t care--” Milo started to rant.

Kai stepped into his face. “My dad took me there.”

Milo fell silent. “Your dad?”

“Yeah. So, I’m really sorry that I cannot take you to the gate or whatever those isekai people think that exists to go to Ifigia. I simply don’t know how.”

Milo covered his face. Kai put his hands on his friend’s shoulders. “Still, that doesn’t mean that it’s not possible. We’ll search for it. Your Seb is in good hands. He has two goddesses with him, not to mention Luna who surely plies him with those delicious mini cakes she makes day in and day out.” He wished he sounded surer than that. Hell, if he thought for one moment that it helped, he would spend the entire night scouting the woods for that gate. Actually, it wasn’t that bad a thought. “You know what? Let’s go where it happened that I traveled back and forth. Guys,” he called for Tani and Pepin. “Change of plans. We need to find a way to make Milo end up on the other side.”

Just as he said those words, he noticed lights through the trees. Those people were really bent on searching for the gate, apparently. Kai wouldn’t stop them if they wanted to do so. “Hey,” he started to shout. “We’re here!”

“They’re over there!”

Kai froze as that voice, grownup and authoritative, was followed by barks. Were those dogs? Just how many people were into isekai? And who—

The lights drew near, and soon they were surrounded. A flashlight scanned his face and followed to inspect the rest of them. “We found them,” the man spoke into his shoulder, and only then Kai realized that the guy wore a dark uniform. “Kids, you’re in some serious trouble.”

Officially, Pepin was a cousin from the countryside who was big into cosplay. He didn’t have ID on him, which was a bummer, but it looked like the police officers in charge of recuperating them hadn’t cared to look too much into it, as it was late, everyone was tired, and they were pretty sure that these kids were no immediate menace to the society.

Plus, the people at the police station thought that they would have it pretty bad once their parents got there to take them home.

Which left Kai with the challenge of convincing his mom that it was all right to take Pepin home with him and that without saying the word *isekai* once. That could be particularly daunting for Tani, but everyone was nice to her since she was just a young girl.

Milo's parents were already there, and soon, the entrance doors flew open, letting Kai's mom walk in. And he thought fire and ice goddesses were scary. But he was brave now, right? He went directly to her and caught her hands into his. "Mom, I know you're mad, but we needed to go and save someone from a terrible fate," he said quickly. "Just say that you know this guy," he whispered quickly and gestured with his chin over his shoulder at Pepin. "He's our relative."

His mom hesitated for a moment, but then her eyes searched his face carefully.

"I'm counting on you, mom. He's a good guy, and he needs us." *Also, he's my boyfriend, I got him pregnant, and he comes from a different world, but let's take it slowly, one shock at a time.*

She didn't say a word, but when the police officer came and asked her about Pepin, she confirmed everything, not one trace of hesitation in her voice.

Well, they were home. His mom had been silent on their way back, and Kai hadn't said a word, either. Tani had followed his example by instinct, and Pepin had kept his eyes down, his hands demurely folded in his lap. Once in a while, his mom had stolen looks at them in the rearview mirror, and Kai hoped that she could see how calm and collected he was.

In all honesty, he was a bit scared shitless, not for himself but Pepin. They clearly hadn't thought it through, and how difficult it would be for Pepin to integrate into their world, seeing how he was practically an undocumented alien. If the wrong people caught a whiff of his being from another world, the chances were that he would be used as a guinea pig for who knew what experiments.

Kai shivered at the thought. His mom gestured for them to get into the kitchen and then pointed at the chairs around the table.

"Well?" she asked as soon as everyone was seated. "May I know why I suddenly have a nephew I've never seen in my life?"

"Pepin is my boyfriend," Kai blurted out.

By how his mom's eyes widened at that abrupt revelation, he knew that he had gotten that ace out of his sleeve a bit too quickly. "Are you trying to pull my leg, Kai?" she asked sternly. "I'm not in the mood for one of your jokes."

“Milady,” Pepin said in a flawless aristocratic accent, “I can assure you that your son is not joking or lying. I am, indeed,” Pepin paused for a moment, “his boyfriend.”

His mom stared at Pepin, then at Kai. “Why does he speak like that?” She seemed to be beyond puzzled.

“He’s from…” Kai racked his brain for a good lie that wasn’t anywhere close to sounding like an isekai kingdom.

“France!” Tani intervened. “Which is in Europe!”

“I know where France is,” their mom said slowly. “And how had he managed to go through customs without ID?”

“He came incognito,” Kai explained. Oh, man, the lies he was going to say… Good thing their mom didn’t know one word in French. “He ran away from home.”

“Why? Where are your parents, young man?” Her stern voice was making Kai’s heart grow tiny.

“I’ve never known them. I was sent into servitude at the age of six, and no one ever told me about who they were,” Pepin replied.

“Servitude?” Their mom sounded stricken now. “At the age of six?”

Kai put his hand over Pepin’s to stop him from digging himself a bigger hole. “Lost in translation,” he said quickly. “The thing is that the people who took him in when he was little treated him like a servant, forcing him to cook all day and sweep the floors, and stuff like that.”

“I enjoy cleaning and cooking,” Pepin intervened.

Now his mom was staring at their guest like he was growing a second head. “I need to see that to believe it.”

“You’ll see it. Pepin makes killer mini omelets,” Kai hurried to say.

“They’re not poisoned,” Pepin said. “How are they killer?”

Their mom crossed her arms and examined Kai and Pepin quietly. “You, kids, are going to make my hair turn white before its time comes. What are we going to do with him? Where is he going to sleep?”

“In my room,” Kai said and knew that very moment that it was the wrong thing to say.

“Under no circumstances,” their mom countered. “Tani will sleep with me, and Pepin will have her room. Don’t forget that you have school in the morning,” she added. “Tomorrow is another

day, and I'll think of something by then. You do realize, Kai, that he will have to go back, eventually. He's practically an illegal migrant."

"No way, we need to keep him," Tani spoke up.

"Tani, I don't want to hear a word from you. And Kai, how did you get yourself a boyfriend from France?"

"Online," he said quickly. "That's pretty standard with my generation," he added to sound convincing.

"And did you taste those killer omelets by taking a bite out of your phone?" their mom questioned further.

Ah, damn. "No, but I saw pictures. Pepin showed them to me."

Their mom shook her head. "Head over to sleep, all of you. I'll show Pepin where to find everything."

Kai had plenty to object to that, but for now, he only threw Pepin a begging look. Well, if he sounded weird while their mom showed him where the bathroom was, the fact that he was from France was as good an excuse as any.

Without a phone, it was pretty damn hard to pass the time until he could be sure that the entire house was asleep, and by that, he mainly meant his mom. He tiptoed onto the hallway, wincing at every sound the door to his bedroom made as he opened it. "Like a ninja," he whispered under his breath as he slinked along the wall and stopped in front of Tani's door.

He needed to be extra quiet, but at the same time, avoid scaring Pepin, who would probably be startled by someone walking into his room at night like a thief.

He managed to open the door, step inside, and close it without making outstanding noises, and only after he allowed himself to take in his surroundings. Pepin had fallen asleep with the bedside lamp on, just like Tani. He was no longer in his butler livery, and it looked like his mom had found some night clothes for him to wear. Good thing, Kai's clothes appeared to fit him like a glove. He had a white t-shirt on and probably pajama bottoms, which was Kai's preferred combination for sleeping, as well.

Pepin slept on one side, and he seemed deep in the world of dreams. Kai considered whether it was a good idea or not to wake him up, but it felt like they had been apart for too long. He walked over and crouched near the bed. After looking at his boyfriend for a few more seconds, just to enjoy watching his sleeping face, he brushed against Pepin's forehead. "Hey, Pepin, it's me," he whispered.

The curly eyelashes fluttered, and the blue eyes he now loved so much stared at him. “Kai?”

“Hush, not so loud. Let’s not wake up mom.”

“All right,” Pepin whispered. He lifted the blanket and held it in invitation. “Do you want to climb in?”

Kai sighed. “I shouldn’t because I only wanted to see how you were doing... but why the heck not?” He snuck under the blanket and enjoyed how quickly Pepin’s arms wrapped around him, holding him close. “So,” he started, “how do you deal with everything? I mean, you must have been shocked by our world, at least a little. By the way, kudos on keeping a straight face at the police precinct and everything.”

“I understood that we were in danger. Why do the rulers of this world consider it important to have their guards follow you?”

“Tough to explain, but I’ll try. Here, the police serves the people, and it was my mom – and Milo’s mom and dad – that called them. Trust me, it’s not easy to be a teenager around here. Just dare to disappear from home once because you got isekai’d, and everyone will be up in arms to get you.”

“It does sound tough,” Pepin admitted. “But now tell me, how come you have a fountain in your home, when we’re so high up? And what a magical contraption, that carriage that took us up here, through that mine-like shaft!”

“By fountain, do you mean running water? Well, that’s pretty standard. And it’s very convenient, you’ll see. I’ll show you more how to use everything tomorrow.”

“Your mom explained a few things to me. Is this imaginary France I’m coming from a backward country compared to here? I felt like your mother had a hard time explaining everything to me.”

“No, it’s totally cool, and Tani has this idea that all pretty anime boys must come from France, hence the whole thing. They’re just different people there from here, and I bet that my mom didn’t want to insult you by just assuming that you were familiar with the same appliances back home. By the way, I can barely wait to show you the fridge and my mom’s favorite non-stick pan.”

“I cannot wait for you to show me everything,” Pepin replied excitedly. “But Kai, are you in trouble because of me? Your mother seemed quite upset.”

“Well, I did spring the whole boyfriend thing on her out of the blue, so I cannot really blame her. But everything is going to work out. And as soon as I graduate, I’ll find work and a place for the both of us.”

“Work? Shouldn’t I work, too? Are there many openings for servants in your world? There’s hardly anything else I know how to do.”

“Don’t worry about it for now. And like Tani said, you could be an idol or a model. I bet you’ll end up bringing the big dough home.”

“Dough? Is it important to have a lot? For making bread?”

Kai kissed Pepin on the tip of his upturn nose. “I mean money. You know. Like coins, but there are actually bills or just a piece of plastic. I’ll explain everything to you.”

“All is so amazing,” Pepin said dreamily. “I hope I won’t embarrass you too often.”

“You can’t do that even if you tried, and if anyone looks funny at you, we’ll just say you’re a foreigner, and that’s it. I should thank Tani for coming up with that France idea.”

“What happens if we actually meet someone who’s from there? I don’t know the language or anything else about the place,” Pepin pointed out.

Kai kissed his forehead. “I’ll buy you a phone, as soon as I get my hands on some money. While he was in my body, Sebastian blew my savings away on getting a tattoo. This one,” he said and showed it proudly to Pepin. Even though he hadn’t been the one to suffer through the making of it, he felt like he could brag a little about looking so badass now.

Pepin caressed the lines of the skin art. “What is a phone?”

Right. They needed to start from the bottom, like with the fundamentals.

Sebastian was slouching on the throne, ignoring the constant pain like usual. After all that drama at the Shimmering Cavern, Luna, Reya, and Fiana had taken turns to fuss over him. He felt slightly better as Luna had dutifully had taken upon herself to warm his body the same way she had done the last time. That granted him a few hours during which he could see about his duties as usual, and he didn’t want to neglect them, not now, when his days were numbered, and the people of Ifigia would remain without a ruler sooner than everyone thought.

He had noticed the guards casting glances at one another and then to the floor. At one point, he thought he heard someone sobbing but pretended not to notice. These people were obviously in pain because they had to watch him in that sorry state. They might not have to endure that for long, he believed.

Not that he was as strong as others were led to believe by his curt manners. He had his regrets, and the knowledge that he would never see Milo again was carving a wound inside his chest that hurt differently from the one inflicted upon his body by that Uxilan dagger.

Fiana liked to think Kai and Pepin were no longer in Ifigia and returned to Kai's world, but Sebastian wasn't sure of it. After all, Kai might be capable of moving between worlds because of some uncanny abilities, but Pepin had no such skills in his possession. For their own sake, Sebastian hoped that they were somewhere far enough to be sheltered from Reya's wrath. He could tell that his mother was by no means appeased but refrained from talking about Pepin's fate – and Kai's as a consequence – only because she finally understood not to upset him more than needed.

The morning had just started, and only a few of his subjects had presented their grievances so far, and he already felt tired. He would endure it just a bit longer, he decided, before showing any sign of weakness in front of these people who had come to believe in him as their trustworthy ruler.

One man well into his late years was explaining in a soft trembling voice that his sheep had gone missing again and that he suspected his neighbor of tempting the four-legged creatures with some tastier pastures when the doors to the throne room flew open, and two of his guards marched in dragging with them a young man.

Sebastian stared at the scene nonplussed for a moment.

“We caught a spy, Your Majesty!” one of the guards announced.

The young man was dressed in what Sebastian had come to know as hipster fashion and probably fancied himself an explorer by the looks of his backpack.

“I'm not a spy,” the visitor protested. “I was just looking for the Blue Castle!”

“Shut your mouth, spy.” The other guard smacked the visitor upside the head. “And address His Majesty as you should. Kneel.”

The young man was about to protest when Sebastian pushed himself up to his feet. “Let him step forward,” he ordered the guards.

The visitor straightened up his clothes and walked purposefully toward the throne. Two feet away, he hesitated and finally bent the knee. Sebastian huffed in annoyance. “You don't have to do that,” he said impatiently. “Come closer.”

Eventually, the young man stopped in front of him and shifted awkwardly from one foot to the other. Then he rubbed the back of his head. “Um, Your Majesty, can you please not order my execution? It's the first time in my life that I get isekai'd.”

Sebastian kept from rolling his eyes with some difficulty. It seemed that there were others like Kai Martin in that world. He gestured for the visitor's backpack. “Do you have a phone in there?”

“They confiscated it from me,” the visitor accused and pointed at the guards behind him.

“Give me the phone,” Sebastian ordered. The guards traded a perplexed glance. “That object you took from this young man here.”

He hoped the guards hadn’t destroyed it, afraid of its magic. But all seemed fine, he noticed with a sigh of relief as he grabbed the phone from the guard’s hand. “Get me in,” he ordered to the visitor.

“Your Majesty, do you know what this is?” the young man asked, gaping like a fish, as he took the phone and unlocked the screen so that he could hand it back to Sebastian.

“Of course, I know,” Sebastian replied. “It’s a smartphone,” he said with self-importance, and the entire court gasped in disbelief as he began to type in what used to be his own number until not so long ago.

Kai couldn’t stop wondering what Pepin might be doing at home by himself. He had caught on quickly how to use all the appliances like he hadn’t just been transported there from a different world and had even put together a delicious breakfast under Kai’s so-called supervision. His mom had been impressed but hadn’t said much as she hurried to get to work, but Kai could tell that she was thawing slowly, seeing how dutiful Pepin was, as well as talented, in everything he did.

If only school didn’t have to take so much of his time, he thought with a sigh. At least, he had the phone with him, not that he could use it during math class. Still, he could steal a moment and check the isekai forums for any sign of Ifigia appearing on the map.

To his surprise, his phone buzzed, and he noticed an unknown number on the screen. Maybe it was one of those people who hunted the gate to Ifigia, so he stuck his head under his desk and answered.

“Yeah?” he whispered. “I’m in the middle of math class, so if it’s not important--”

“Is this Kai Martin?” an authoritative voice asked from the other side.

Kai smacked his head against the desk, breaking the stupor that had engulfed the entire classroom like a blanket while the teacher was droning on about something they mainly were too stupid to understand, without a doubt.

“Mr. Martin, what are you doing?” the teacher shouted.

He got from under the desk, holding the phone. Then, ignoring the teacher completely, he turned toward Milo. “I have Sebastian on the phone,” he whispered like he couldn’t believe it himself.

Milo looked at him in shock for about one second and then jumped to his feet, snatched the phone from Kai's hand, and ran out of the classroom, with Kai following.

"Mr. Bennett! Mr. Martin!" the teacher sputtered, not believing what they were doing.

"Sorry, teach," Kai threw over his shoulder. "This is an isekai emergency!"

Chapter Forty-Two – Are You Proposing?

Sebastian waited with bated breath. He could tell something was happening, as some commotion could be heard after Kai's whispered apology that he was in the middle of math class. But nothing prepared him to listen to a voice he had heard over the phone before just like that.

"Sebastian?" Milo breathed out. "Is this really you?"

"Isn't this Kai's phone?" Sebastian asked. He had just wanted to check if the visitor's device could be used to contact the other world.

"Is this what you want to ask me?" Milo's voice broke, and its owner seemed to be performing some kind of physical activity.

"Why do you sound so breathlessly?" Sebastian asked another inane question.

"We're on the run from Mrs. Marwin. She'll have our heads for this, but it's not important. Sebastian, where are you?"

"I'm sitting on my throne," Sebastian replied. Why did he sound like he only had half a brain all of a sudden?

"For real? In Ifigia? And how come you have a phone?" Milo continued.

"One of your people is here," Sebastian explained. "He somehow found his way here, to the castle."

"Awesome!" Milo explained. "Put that guy on the phone. I need to ask him something."

Sebastian offered the visitor his phone back, not without reluctance. The young man took it, and after a few short ah's and oh's, he began to explain something rapidly. When he realized what was going on, it was too late. He had only wanted to hear Kai Martin and learn that he and Pepin were safe, and now things were getting out of hand. "Give me the phone back," he ordered, but the young man ignored him, putting a hand over his free ear and daring to turn his back while he continued his conversation with Milo.

Sebastian took one step and grabbed the phone.

"Hey," the visitor protested. "I was in the middle of--"

Sebastian put one hand up. "Silence!" he ordered. "Milo, listen--" The line was dead. Sebastian groaned as he stared at the screen shutting down.

"Um, sorry about that. I should have charged the phone before heading here," the visitor said. "My older sister is actually to blame because she grabbed my charger because she couldn't find hers--"

Sebastian plopped down on the throne. “I don’t want to hear another word.”

One of the guards took a step forward. “Should we throw the spy in the dungeons, Your Majesty?”

“The dungeons?” the young man squealed. “For not having my phone charged?”

“No,” Sebastian said sharply and dismissed the guards with a wave of the hand. “He’s our guest.” A maid approached him quickly at a sign he made. “Prepare a room.”

“Thank you, Your Majesty,” the young man said in relief. “I’m a bit hungry actually, but really, is there not a single electric outlet in this huge place? Right, there’s no electricity,” he concluded for himself, after a pointed glance at the candle lights lining the walls.

“Your needs will be fulfilled,” Sebastian said. “But, first, you will have to tell me how you traveled here.”

“Hello? Hello?” Milo insisted in a more and more impatient voice. “Ah, damn it, there’s no answer.”

Kai couldn’t breathe anymore. Running after Milo like that was two steps from passing out. He took the phone from Milo’s hand, stopped to inhale air into his lungs, and then called the number. The robotic voice announcing to him that the number couldn’t be reached made him growl in frustration. “Did you manage to get enough info from that guy?”

They were behind the school, and if they climbed the fence, they would soon find themselves on the side of freedom.

“I did,” Milo confirmed. “It shouldn’t be far from where we were last night. We need to get there. Why isn’t the guy’s phone working anymore? Do you think something happened to Sebastian?”

Kai shook his head. His lungs were burning. “More like the guy’s battery went dead,” he explained what he thought to be a more likely option. “Let’s go.”

Milo put his hand on his shoulder. “Are you sure you can continue?”

“It’s for my best friend. And isekai,” Kai added. “Sure thing I can. Just give me a minute.”

“There they are!”

They both turned at the sound of the shouting voices. Their math teacher must have summoned the school guard to capture the truants.

Milo took a step toward the wall. “Kai, let’s go.”

Kai stared at the school guard rushing toward him while holding his belly with one hand. That was, most probably, the most excitement the guy had seen in all his career. “Just go, man. I’ll hold them.”

“What? This isn’t some action movie--”

“Milo, my dude, just go!” Kai said. He couldn’t run anymore, so he was like one of those herd animals who were too old or injured to keep up with the rest. “Don’t let my sacrifice be in vain!”

Milo nodded solemnly and rushed toward the fence. The guard got a hold of Kai. “Got you, kid.”

“Totally,” Kai said. “Now I’m ready for some more math. Don’t bother with my friend, though. He needs counseling,” he said the first thing that came to his mind.

“What for?” Mrs. Marwin had managed to be there, somehow, too, and she looked pissed.

“For being traumatized by math,” Kai replied airily. “Yeah, he’s got a serious case of PTSD after the last test.”

Sebastian questioned his guest at large about how he came to be there while servants and maids got busy around, placing and removing plates in a flurry of activity.

“Wow, you have such amazing food here,” the visitor commented as he helped himself to another serving.

“Do you really mean that you just walked through the forest and ended up here?” Sebastian asked. He couldn’t swallow a bite, that nervous he felt. If that was true, it only meant that there was a road somewhere between him and Milo. But was that really what he wanted? For Milo to see him perishing away?

It surely didn’t feel like there was still something wrong with him ever since this stranger had walked into the castle. More like being dragged there by dutiful guards, but aspects were not at all critical at this point. Sebastian felt the wound in his chest to verify if it was still there. Nothing had changed, except for the trembling excitement he kept on experiencing at the thought that he would be able to see Milo again.

“I’m telling you, man, ever since we’ve heard about the Blue Castle, we’ve all been up and about. I’m so lucky to be the first to find it,” the visitor said and groaned in pleasure as he took a bite from a tiny drumstick. “What is this called?”

“I don’t really know,” Sebastian said brusquely. “And do you happen to know Kai and Milo?”

“And Tani,” the young man confirmed. “Only from the forums, though. I mean, others have met them while they searched for the Blue Castle last night. And is this an entire world? Are there dragons, for real?”

“Yes, for real.” Sebastian had no idea what to make of the whole thing. Couldn’t it be that the fabric separating the worlds had been ripped apart somehow? Could that have happened because of all that back and forth Kai Martin seemed capable of?

“So, rumor in the streets says,” the visitor gestured with his drumstick, “that you and Kai got body-swapped.”

“Yes,” Sebastian confirmed.

“So cool! That’s how you know how to use a smartphone. But wasn’t it a big shock? How did you survive?”

“Quite easily,” Sebastian replied. “Now, if you’ll excuse me. Someone will see you to your room.”

He needed to see everything with his own eyes. If that had happened, dangers could lurk at every corner. Who knew what would happen with the worlds no longer being separated?

He grabbed Thunder’s reins and a sudden pain flared in his chest. Was he that weak that he couldn’t even properly ride a horse? Thunder neighed and pulled away from him. “Today’s not the day, Thunder,” he warned.

He could choose another horse, but none was as fast as Thunder. He managed to pull the young stallion outside, all the while grunting and cursing under his breath. “Why are you so stubborn?”

A flapping of wings behind him made him turn in bewilderment. Was this day going to hell faster than he thought possible? There, in front of him, was a dragon, but there were no cries of distress from the people around the castle, as there should have been.

Sebastian reached for his sword and cursed when he realized he didn’t have it, as he never wore it when dealing with his subjects’ problems in the throne room. He must have been too much in a rush to realize that he was leaving without it.

“Your Majesty, I’m a friend of Kai,” the dragon said. “That makes you a friend, too. If you need me to take you somewhere, please, climb on my back.”

“But I’ve hunted your kind--” Sebastian started.

“Which you won’t do again, will you?” the dragon asked in a playful tone.

“Was that a joke?” Sebastian mumbled.

“Half of it. Just tell me where you need to be, young prince,” the dragon urged him in her pleasant voice.

He hesitated only for a moment. Thunder had taken advantage of his lack of attention and was happily grazing at a reasonable distance from him. Trying to get him to heel would be a pain and a waste of time, and that wasn't something he had at his disposal.

He scouted the crowns of the trees with keen eyes. A clearing appeared below his feet, and then he saw something moving or, better said, someone. The black clothes stood out, even from that height. “There, can you put me down there?” Sebastian asked the dragon.

“Of course, Your Majesty.”

The running person stopped and looked above. Sebastian held one hand over his heart as he descended. He was barely down when Milo rushed to him and toppled him in the blink of an eye. The air moved by the dragon soaring into the air and leaving them there ruffled Milo's hair, making it play wildly around his head, and Sebastian just kept staring. “Are you really here?” he asked the dumbest thing he could ask.

Milo laughed and kissed him shortly. “I am. As soon as I heard you, I knew I had to ditch math class and rush here.”

“Mrs. Marwin might not be too happy with you right now,” Sebastian pointed out.

“And I'm willing to live with it,” Milo promised solemnly. “Now, Kai tells me you're still ill, and that your aunt, a fire goddess – are you kidding me, man? – says that I'm the cure or something. So, here I am. How should we start?”

Sebastian stilled. In all that excitement, he had forgotten the most important thing, that he was not supposed to pull Milo from his world only to have him deal with something that was beyond his power.

“My aunt tends to be overly dramatic,” he said. “I will get well in due time. There's no need for you here,” he added.

Milo stared at him for one moment like he couldn't believe his ears. “Right,” he said slowly. “Because magical wounds disappear through magic.”

“Yes, just like that,” Sebastian replied. “I'm telling you, you should see about your math classes and graduation, not rush here to--”

Milo stopped him with another kiss. “You know,” he said as he pulled away, leaving Sebastian breathless but not because of pain like before, but of an overwhelming feeling growing inside his chest, “I kept on wondering who I was in love with, after all that body-swap mess-up. And I know the answer now.”

“You do?” Sebastian whispered.

“Yeah. Kai is just stubborn in different ways. When you get like this, I know I need to put my all behind it if I’m to make you mine.”

“Make me... yours?” Sebastian mumbled. “But if it’s only for the wound, I’m telling you that I’m fine--”

Milo nodded like he was just paying half attention and pushed Sebastian’s shirt high. “Ugh, man, that doesn’t look fine at all.”

“Milo, what are you doing?” Sebastian tried to cover his chest.

“I’m assessing the situation because you’re too big a liar; that’s what I’m doing,” Milo replied, completely unfazed. It looked like Sebastian couldn’t quickly push Milo away in the present situation, and the young man was holding him between his thighs and pressing him down.

“Milo,” Sebastian said in a pained voice, “I don’t want you to see me like this.”

“Why?” Milo stopped. “Do you think I’d be grossed out by magical wounds and all that?”

“I hope not,” Sebastian replied, alarmed. He shook his head when he realized that Milo was just pulling his leg. “It’s just that you belong to your world, with math teachers, and video games, and basketball.”

Milo scrunched up his nose. “I like math, but I’m not crazy about it, I don’t really play a lot of video games, and basketball can wait while I’m dealing with you.”

“But you have graduation knocking on your door,” Sebastian argued. “It’s the most important quest for people your age.”

“You sound just like my parents. I mean, the first part, not the one with the quest. Right now, the most important quest for me is to make you well, and I’ll do it.”

He should have known better than to argue with such a determined young man. Milo pushed himself to his feet and then offered Sebastian his hand.

“Milo,” Sebastian insisted, but his arguments were losing ground under the other’s loving gaze. “All right, I’ll take you to the castle, but if things don’t change or change for the worst--”

“Just shut up already,” Milo said with a theatrical groan. “Now, can you walk, or should I carry you on my back?”

“I don’t think you can carry me,” Sebastian pointed out.

“Try me.”

Small laughter from not so far interrupted their arguing. It looked like the female dragon hadn’t flown too far. “If you two are ready to go back, I’m right here,” she offered.

“Ah, that’s so cool,” Milo said slyly. “Don’t think I’m completely selfless in all this.” He nudged Sebastian in the ribs, making him wince. “How many guys in my world can brag that they have a boyfriend who rides a dragon?”

Sebastian shook his head but laughed, too. The pain in his chest flared again, warning him. Milo hurried by his side and wrapped one arm around his waist. “I’m here, and I’m not letting you die, okay?”

“Okay,” Sebastian agreed, the tiredness from before returning in full force.

When he opened his eyes, he was in his bed, and the first thing he saw was the ceiling. Sebastian tried to move and realized that someone was embracing him fiercely. The warmth was spreading from the body beside his, seeping into his bones, soothing all the pain away.

“Hey, Seb, you awake?” Milo asked sleepily.

“Yes, but I need a glass of water.”

“Just stay here. I’m going to get it for you.”

Sebastian didn’t protest. Not in his wildest dreams, he could have imagined having Milo right there, with him, playing a servant’s role like it was nothing. Milo was back with the glass of water and handed it to him carefully. He even helped Sebastian straighten up and fluffed the pillow so that he could sit upright and drink without fear of choking.

“Is it evening already?” he asked.

“Night, even.”

“How come they let you here, with me?” he asked.

“They? Only your mom was against it, but for like one second. Luna and Fiana were all over her, and she fell silent. Luna pushed me in here with you and told me to keep you warm. How do you feel?”

“Quite good. I don’t think I’ve felt so good in ages.”

Milo kissed his forehead and took the glass away from him. “Um, Seb, I don’t really know how this healing stuff is supposed to work, but your aunt said some things that made my ears so red they started to hurt.”

“What things?” Sebastian asked.

Milo groaned and bought some time by crossing the room to place the empty glass back on the table. “Do you really want me to repeat them? They were a bit too descriptive to be said by a grownup woman to a guy my age.”

“My aunt can be a handful, I know. And she has a bit of a loose tongue, which is exactly where Galien got it from, too. Look, if Fiana was too forward, I apologize for her. My family--”

“—is pretty awesome,” Milo said. “I mean, I have an ice goddess as a mother-in-law. Just how awesome is that?”

“Mother-in-law?” Sebastian said slowly.

“Ah, sorry, sorry, it’s just a way of saying,” Milo hurried to interrupt him. He climbed on the bed and took Sebastian in his arms again. “Just so you know,” he whispered in Sebastian’s ear, “if you feel something poking you in the side, it’s nothing. And I’m not really thinking of following your aunt’s advice. Unless, you know, you want me to.”

Sebastian turned toward Milo and pressed his lips against the soft ones, opening right away to let him in. “I think you should do everything you want.”

“For real?” Milo whispered against his lips. “I might want to do things that are not exactly advisable when one of the two people involved is injured. At least, in my world, this kind of thing would be a no-no.”

“We’re not in your world, are we?” Sebastian asked softly.

“Guess not,” Milo said with what seemed like relief in his voice. “Do you mean it’s all right if we... you know?”

“Yes, it’s all right,” Sebastian confirmed. Just having Milo so close by his side was enough to ignite the familiar fire in his veins, and if that wasn’t a sign that he was still alive, he didn’t know what that could be.

Milo maneuvered him slowly on his back, and his kisses increased in intensity. “You know, I still cannot wrap my head around how I’m with an older dude.”

“I’m only a few years older than you. Is it too much in your world?” Sebastian asked, his heart in his throat.

“No, not at all. Age difference is not that big a deal, unless it’s a generation or more. For some people, it’s even a kink. Ah, what am I saying?”

“Is it a kink for you?” Sebastian asked. “Or do you find my body disgusting?”

Milo snorted and laughed. “You mean,” he said playfully, “do I find these washboard abs disgusting?”

Sebastian sucked in a breath as Milo let one hand wander over his abdomen. It could be that, because he hadn’t indulged in such pleasures for a while now, he was overly sensitive everywhere.

“Or these perky things?” Milo continued to taunt him as he played with Sebastian’s nipples, drawing a soft, shameless moan out of him. Then, he snuck a hand underneath and grabbed Sebastian’s ass. “Or this butt of which they sing songs in this world?”

Only then, Sebastian realized that he was completely naked. And that Milo was just as naked, too.

“Kai, is really not a single day that you’re not doing something to take years off my life?” his mom exploded.

Milo’s parents were there, too, and they wanted to know why, at ten o’clock in the evening, their son was yet not home, and that after disappearing previously for four whole days without saying a word or phoning them so that they didn’t worry. The thing was, Milo had left in such a hurry that he had left everything behind, his textbooks, his backpack, and even his phone. Kai had taken them after classes, and they were now stashed in his room.

“I can explain everything,” Kai said and put his hands up to keep the adults from making his ears bleed from all that shouting.

Pepin moved around quietly, placing hot chocolate and cookies on the table.

“Pepin, please, that’s enough,” Kai’s mom said in a tired voice. “I will not send you away from here if that’s what you’re afraid of.”

“Why would Pepin be afraid...” Kai’s words trailed off.

Pepin looked away guiltily. “I must earn my keep. I cannot stay here and do nothing, while your mother--”

“What did you tell him?” Kai asked his mother.

“Nothing of the kind, I assure you. This child has done more in a day for this household than you and Tani combined in ten years,” she replied. She turned toward Milo’s parents. “Can you believe that I found all the laundry done, ironed, and put in all the correct places when I got back from work today? Not to mention a full-course meal, and even,” she pointed at the table, “dessert.”

Milo’s mom took a sip of hot chocolate. “I believe it because you say it. Also, this is simply delicious, Pepin.”

Kai examined everyone as they also grabbed some cookies and munched on them while praising Pepin’s cooking. Clearly, the former servant had nothing to worry about; he made himself liked and appreciated regardless of world and time.

“Still, it is you I have a beef with,” his mom turned toward him. “Where is Milo? Can’t you see his parents are worried?”

“I’m sure Milo is perfectly fine,” he said. “He must be spending the night in Ifigia--”

Oops, what the hell was he saying?

“Ifigia?” Milo’s mom asked. “Is that some new club? Are they doing drugs in there?”

Ah, damn, how the hell was he going to dig himself out? Kai rubbed his head, forcing the melon to think for a change.

“Ifigia is a kingdom over which Prince Sebastian rules,” Pepin began speaking. Kai stared at him, gaped like a fish, and stretched one arm toward him in slow motion like in movies when the characters know that they cannot stop something, even though it’s like a life-or-death kind of thing.

“A kingdom? But Milo left his passport at home,” Milo’s dad pointed out. “How did he get there? And I suppose the plane ticket is expensive.”

Pepin opened his mouth, but Kai promptly silenced him by simply blocking any words that might come out of there with one hand.

The door to the kitchen flew open, and Tani burst in. Kai looked in horror at the tiny troublemaker. His sister had his eyes all shiny and a little puffy. What the hell had she been doing? And why wasn’t she sleeping already? “Ifigia is a fantastic world, and Prince Sebastian is an ice prince!” she shouted. “And Milo’s in love with him!”

“Tani!” Kai yelled at the same time as their mom.

“You cannot silence me anymore,” Tani declared. “Did Pepin make cookies? And you weren’t going to give me any?”

Pepin took Kai's hand away from his mouth. "I put some away for you," he said.

Tani rushed to him and embraced him, pushing Kai away as showily as she could. Then she looked up at Pepin with loving eyes. "You're the best brother-in-law that a girl like me could have."

"Brother-in-law?" Milo's mom asked. "Is Kai getting married?"

"These kids are taking me to an early grave, I swear," their mom said with a sigh. "Apparently, my firstborn got himself a boyfriend from France." She pointed at Pepin, and Milo's parents let out a slight sound of surprised admiration. "Online, as everything happens these days, according to the same son of mine. Of course, they're very young and very foolish, so they should postpone any rash decisions until they're older, but I wouldn't mind a responsible son-in-law like Pepin."

"Do you really mean it, Mrs. Martin?" Pepin said and pressed his hands over his chest, looking at her with eyes full of hope.

"If Kai doesn't do something stupid," she said while throwing Kai a pointed look, "soon you'll have to start calling me 'mom'."

Kai let his jaw drop and put it back promptly. "For real, mom? You're letting me marry Pepin?"

"Let's not hurry," his mom warned. "And Tani, what is all this craziness about... an ice prince?"

Pepin sighed. "Kai, I apologize, but I cannot keep lying to your mother. I'm not from France." All eyes in the room were on him. "I'm from Ifigia, and Prince Sebastian used to be my master until only a little while ago."

Chapter Forty-Three – That’s How A Prince Does It

“Pepin, you too? Did Tani put some strange ideas in your head?” Kai winced as he took in his mom’s expression. She seemed pretty upset with Pepin at the moment.

However, Pepin didn’t seem fazed by it. Instead of backing down, he walked slowly toward the table. “Tani says the truth, and I can prove it.”

“You can?” Kai and Tani both shouted at the same time. “Do you have magic?” Kai added. “What kind? And why didn’t you tell me?”

“Not magic, not like Sebastian,” Pepin replied. The adults in the room were staring at him, completely baffled. “But I have this,” he said and opened the buttons of his shirt to reveal his chest.

Kai had to crane his neck to look. “Wow, Pepin, is that--”

His mom and Milo’s parents jumped from their chairs and began to speak all at the same time. “What is this? Why is his chest glowing? Is it a prank? Kids, you should know better--”

“No, it is not a prank, I assure you,” Pepin continued.

Not only that part of Pepin’s chest was glowing, but Kai could clearly see the shape of a tiny child inside what had to be the shell of the shard from which he was supposed to get born. And he was breathing, his tiny eyes blinking from time to time.

“This is my and Kai’s child,” Pepin added.

“Mrs. Martin!” Milo’s mom shouted in alarm.

Oh no. Kai hurried to catch his mom, who had dropped into the chair, on the point of fainting. He held her, and she stared into his eyes. “Do you want to give me a heart attack, son?” she asked, but, beyond the shock, Kai could read tenderness. “Is that a child, or just one of your strange ideas of shocking me so that I buy you some crazy computer build for Christmas?”

“No computer build,” Kai promised solemnly. “I’m a grownup now. I need to work to support Pepin and the baby. So maybe you should keep whatever you wanted to spend on my Christmas gift for him.” He helped her back into the seat, and she got a hold of her bearings. She ran her hands through her hair and stared a little more at Pepin’s chest. “Is it possible to touch him?” she asked.

“Yes, he is protected until birth by the magical shard from which he will be born,” Pepin explained.

“He has your hair, Kai,” his mom said. Indeed, the mop of dark hair on the baby’s head looked pretty much like the mess he had to tame each morning without much success. “But Pepin’s eyes, I think,” she added, as she looked closer when the baby blinked. “He’ll be a stunner.”

Not only Kai’s mom but Milo’s parents, as well, moved closer to touch his chest. “It’s warm,” Milo’s mom said in disbelief. “We’re either going to wake up soon, or this is all real. Are you from outer space, Pepin? From a different galaxy than ours? Did you come on a spaceship?”

Milo’s dad pulled her back a little. “Darling, aren’t you asking the wrong questions? What I’m more interested in knowing is whether my son is getting pregnant some ice prince from a fantasy land this very moment.”

“Are you sure this is okay?” Milo asked softly as he moved between Sebastian’s legs, rubbing against him with all his body. “Once I start, I’m afraid that you’ll have to pour ice water on me... or freeze me with your magic to stop me.”

“Why would I want to stop you?” Sebastian whispered and ran his fingers through Milo’s hair, eliciting small moans of pleasure from his lover.

“Because you’re in no shape for this, and I somehow manage to be just a horny dog, regardless of circumstances. Ah, I should just blame your aunt for putting strange ideas in my head.”

“Don’t talk about my aunt when we’re like this,” Sebastian chided Milo and shivered when another kiss planted on the side of his neck made his pleasure soar. “And this feels so good, I wouldn’t stop you for the world.”

“It feels good? Are you starting to heal?”

“It’s not about that. I don’t feel anything else but you, here, with me.”

Milo bit his ear and licked it. “You’re a romantic, aren’t you? And you’re a hunk... and are you sure you’re only into bottoming?”

Sebastian wrapped his arms around Milo’s waist and helped him further. For a moment, he squeezed his eyes shut and hissed as his body opened to welcome the other. Milo groaned. “Damn, I think I’m losing my mind.”

“What? Why?” Sebastian asked, unsure of what Milo meant by that.

“You feel so good, Sebastian,” Milo whispered. “I’m totally topping a gorgeous guy... the most gorgeous guy in Ifigia and any other world I know. And it feels amazing.”

Sebastian didn't protest as Milo held his hips and began moving slowly to a rhythm they both knew so well. Only that now it was right because they were in the bodies that belonged to them, and there was no strange magic at work, not anymore.

Except for the kind magic that had allowed Milo to come to him and hold him in his arms as if he belonged there for all eternity. Milo stopped from time to time and kissed him for minutes. Sebastian huffed as his frustration was slowly growing. His body demanded satisfaction, but just as he was about to get there, Milo thought it a good idea to take those kissing breaks.

Not that he minded them that much, but his need became imperious with each thrust. Sebastian dug his fingernails into Milo's shoulders. "Milo, please," he begged.

His lips were taken again. Their kisses were loud in the silence of a room that had once been the scene of so many sensual trysts. None of them mattered now, Sebastian realized as his lover increased the rhythm of his hips, moving them closer and closer to the release they both desired.

"Seb, I gotta ask," Milo asked breathlessly. "If I come inside you, will you get pregnant?"

Sebastian groaned and grabbed his naughty lover by the hair. "I'm not a Lelian, you beautiful fool."

"It was worth checking. Then your mom would have had no choice but to welcome me into the family."

Were those just the words of a young man prey to pent-up desires? Sebastian no longer had time to think as Milo pressed their mouths together and brought their bodies slowly to the point of no return.

It was morning again, and Sebastian felt solid on his feet as he got out of bed and walked toward the window. He welcomed the chilly air and inhaled it repeatedly. By habit, he touched his chest, and only then, he realized. The wound was no longer there. Incredulous of it, he rushed to the mirror and stared at his body. No traces of the wound could be seen anywhere.

"Milo!" he shouted and turned toward the bed.

A groan was the immediate reply. "Why are you up so early?" Milo complained. "I guess it shows who did all the work last night."

They had ended up rustling the sheets for a good part of the night, and Sebastian felt responsible for it. He hurried to the bed and kissed Milo on the forehead. "The wound is gone," he whispered into the wavy hair.

Milo's head shot up. "For real? Your aunt really said the truth."

Sebastian laughed. “What did she tell you, anyway?”

Milo snorted. “In a much more colorful language that I’m using right now, she told me that I should keep you awake all night long, and not by reading horror stories to you if you catch my drift.”

“I think I catch your drift quite well,” Sebastian replied.

Milo snickered and hid his face in Sebastian’s lap. “You’re so funny.”

“Funny how?” Sebastian asked airily. “Milo,” he said, only then realizing the situation, “wouldn’t your parents be worried over your disappearance?”

“Oh, shoot,” Milo exclaimed and jumped out of bed. “What time is it? I should be in school!”

“Not for one hour or so,” Sebastian said, well aware of the schedule Kai and Milo had. “I’ll have Adhe take you as close to your world as possible. Ah, and you might have to take that other visitor with you, the one with the discharged phone.”

Milo was putting his school pants on. “So the battery was dead, huh? Listen, Seb,” he said as he buttoned his shirt quickly, “you’ll have to do right by me.”

“Of course. Name anything you want. You healed me,” Sebastian said tenderly.

Milo grinned, hurried to him, and kissed him shortly. “I’m not talking about that, Your Majesty. You’ll have to make an honest man out of me.”

Honest man? But Milo was honest enough, wasn’t he? Sebastian wanted to ask what he meant, but an energetic knock on the door interrupted his train of thought. He pulled the blanket over his naked body. “Come in!” If it was some emergency, it couldn’t be postponed. And now, it looked like he had all the power back, so taking care of the kingdom problems was mandatory.

Reya, Luna, and Fiana rushed into the room, all three talking simultaneously.

Luna was the first to sit on the bed and pulled him to her. “How do you feel, Sebastian? Is your chest still hurting?”

“Seb is fine,” Milo pointed out as he smoothed down his high school jacket. “It looks like your advice worked, Fiana.”

His aunt smiled, full of importance. “Of course, it did. I knew exactly what my nephew needed.”

Reya hurried to him and pulled at the blanket to examine his chest. She felt his skin in what seemed utter disbelief. “It’s gone; it’s truly gone!” Then she pulled Sebastian into a hug, making him stop breathing for a few moments. She released him abruptly and then headed toward Milo, who seemed in a big hurry to be out of there. Sebastian couldn’t blame him. Math was the first

class that day, if he remembered correctly. After the stunt from the previous day, Milo was probably in for a lecture and even detention.

“Young man,” Reya said in the most royal voice she could muster, “name your reward. You saved my son, so I am in your debt.”

Milo grinned broadly and looked directly at Sebastian. “No worries. I already did that. Sebastian will just have to make an honest man out of me. Now, for real, Seb, I need to take your dragon to school.”

“Yes, Pepin left that scale somewhere...” he began. He stopped as right at the window, Adhe was hovering, flapping her wings happily. Great, any moment now, the entire palace would rush in and congratulate him while he was still as naked as the day he had been born.

“Off I go, then,” Milo said cheerfully and opened the window.

Sebastian watched as the young man who had healed him and stolen his heart at the same time jumped from the sill of the window directly on the dragon’s back like he had been born to do that.

Too late, he realized that he had forgotten to remind Milo to take the other visitor to him. But a proper means of transportation would be arranged for that young man, as well.

“What does he mean by that?” Luna questioned. “Why does it depend on you for him to be an honest man?”

Sebastian didn’t know, either. But he knew exactly who to ask.

Kai hiked Milo’s backpack on the other shoulder and walked into the courtyard. Next time Milo rushed to Ifigia, he better take his phone with him, he thought. Eventually, he had appeased Milo’s parents and convinced them to go back to their home and sleep without worries. Of course, that hadn’t happened for a solid two hours, time during which Pepin had to offer a thousand of one tidbits of information on Ifigia.

That had definitely worked a lot better than he could have ever dreamed of. His mom had taken Pepin with her to have a talk after Milo’s parents had left, and Pepin was secretive about that conversation. Apparently, it had to deal with what being pregnant meant and stuff like that, so Kai didn’t even pretend that he understood why Pepin and his mom had to be so hush-hush about everything. On the upside, they seemed to get along in the most remarkable ways, and he had heard his mom laughing while she and Pepin were in the kitchen, making breakfast.

Now, he really hoped Milo wasn’t crazy to miss school. Okay, maybe for one day, he could, but then he might just get in too much hot water with his folks. Was it enough for him to heal

Sebastian, though? He yawned. With all the excitement last night, he hadn't managed to get his usual number of hours of sleep.

As he tipped his head back, his eyes grew wide. "No way," he whispered. "Adhe!" he cried out happily.

The entire student body stopped and stared at the sky and then broke into a frantic run, screaming from the top of their lungs.

"Guys, guys," Kai tried to calm them down, "you won't get shish-kebabbed or anything! This dragon lady is really nice!"

His voice was too weak to make itself heard over the frightened voices of all the others, but soon, the court was empty, and that allowed Adhe to land without a problem. Milo jumped from the dragon's back, his face all a grin.

"Dude," Kai whispered, "you took Adhe to school?"

"Fastest way, Seb said," Milo said with a shrug like it wasn't a big deal. "Adhe, thank you. The ride was awesome."

"Goodbye, Milo, Kai," Adhe said and soared into the air.

Kai waved at her, but his arm was like made of wood. "Man, I bet that the entire city is--" He didn't continue his thought and pulled out his phone. "You're on the news," he said and showed Milo the screen.

"I see," Sebastian said and pondered as the visitor continued to explain all kinds of useless things to him. He had what he needed. After all, Milo had given him enough hints about that, and only a deaf and blind man wouldn't have understood by now what had to be done. "I will accompany you so that we establish the connection between our worlds," he told the young man and dismissed him for the moment. There were so many things to be taken care of and only so much time.

The three women in his life, plus Galien and Conrad, turned their eyes on him.

"It must be done the proper way," Reya began. "This is no trifling matter." Then, she started to shout instructions. "Who'll take care of the white stallions?"

Galien promptly put his hand up. "I will."

"Make sure that it's not a single dark hair on their backs," Reya warned him. "I will take care of the flowers, so I'll have to hurry, so the rest of you decide which of these you want to do," she addressed Luna and Fiana.

Sebastian no longer paid attention to the conversation. Without a doubt, the preparations will take days, but Reya was right. Everything had to be perfect.

“I cannot believe we’re finally graduating.” Kai held the phone high for a pic with Milo, who put both thumbs up and smiled, but only half-heartedly.

He knew exactly what was eating Milo. After the dragon ride to school, everything had happened at the speed of light. Sebastian had even been on the news to explain to everyone how the kingdom of Ifigia was now open for establishing agreements with Earth via the gate that had opened between the two worlds. The gate wasn’t really a gate, though, only if one counted the forest at the edge of their city as being that.

All the media had blown up. They had been interviewed, asked all kinds of things by the authorities, even inspected by medical personnel with stern faces, but, in the end, all was fine. Kai was thankful to his family and Milo’s for keeping Pepin’s magical pregnancy a secret. It wasn’t like that kind of thing was regular, even in Ifigia, and humanity had to earn the right to learn of all the fantastic things that the kingdom could offer.

Back with their feet on the ground, Milo had been grounded until graduation day, and Kai had visited him every day so that they would study together. But that wasn’t what was bothering his friend. Ever since he had been to see Sebastian, Milo had been waiting for his prince to make an appearance.

Only that, for some unfathomable reason, Sebastian hadn’t cared to come to see Milo yet, and Kai had no idea what to say. Tani told him that the forums were already betting on who would snatch the handsome prince of Ifigia, who had been declared, instantly, the most eligible bachelor in all the known universes.

Milo sighed. “Yay,” he said, but his heart wasn’t into it.

“He’d just been crazy busy, you know, with all those shows on TV and meeting presidents and stuff,” Kai began.

Milo pursed his lips and waved. “Don’t defend him. The next time I see that asshole prince, I’ll give him a piece of my mind.”

Kai didn’t dare to ask what that meant, but Milo looked pretty scary, something that was entirely out of character for him. “I bet there’s a good explanation for everything.”

“Yes. That he’s an asshole,” Milo said promptly. “Do you think he got himself a new concubine by now?”

“No way had he done that. Sebastian’s not like that, and you should know him better.”

Milo hunched his shoulders and let them drop. “Do I really know him? Like, for real, I was just joking about that mother-in-law thing. I guess he just got cold feet because I joked around.”

Kai stared at his friend. “You joked about wanting to become his husband?” Hmm, but Sebastian seemed somewhat incapable of understanding jokes, at least, according to Pepin. Like there was some unique sense telling him that he needed to check his phone for the latest news, he grabbed it. The hashtag was blowing up again. “Milo, my dude, you need to get home ASAP.”

“What? Why? Hey, weren’t we supposed to hang out with the rest of our classmates?”

“Trust me. This is far more important.” Kai grabbed Milo by the shoulder and began pushing him toward the exit. “Thank me later.”

Sebastian accepted the small glass with a murmured thanks. Mr. Bennett was sitting across from him, his tie loose, his eyes darting at the fully armored guards behind Sebastian from time to time. “Bottoms up,” Milo’s father said, and Sebastian nodded.

The drink burned his throat, but not in an unpleasant way. Well, he hoped the Earth protocol demanded no more than just one drink since he was not one to indulge without the traitorous substance getting to his head.

In hindsight, maybe he should have left half of the prince’s guard at home. The spacious living room felt cramped with everyone in there. Outside, the carriage with the four white stallions had to be already the most photographed thing on the Internet during the last twenty-four hours, and Sebastian thought vaguely that maybe Ifigia customs, as Reya saw them, were just a tad overboard for Earth.

“So,” Mr. Bennett said slowly and took his wife’s hand like he was holding on to her than to assure her. “Um, Your Majesty, you’re here because,” he cleared his throat for a moment, “you want to ask for our son’s hand in marriage.”

“Yes,” Sebastian replied stiffly. These people appeared to be overwhelmed by the display of power in their living room, but at any point, they could say ‘no’. And if they did that, he would have to kidnap Milo and take him to Ifigia, which wouldn’t sit well with the budding relationships between Earth and his kingdom. While he was willing to go to war, it would have been much better if they hadn’t gotten to that point. Maybe Milo’s parents weren’t aware of what hung in the balance. Would it be a good idea to point it out to them? But no, that would very much feel like he was pressing them into accepting, and they had to be free to do so by their own conviction.

“He’s a bit young,” Mr. Bennett mumbled and stole another nervous glance at the guards.

“Nonsense, dear,” Mrs. Bennett intervened, in a strained, a bit high-pitched voice. “My cousin married at sixteen!”

“And divorced at seventeen,” Mr. Bennett pointed out patiently.

There would be no divorce in their case. Sebastian was sure of it.

“Why do you have to focus on the negative?” Mrs. Bennett asked and made a face that caused Mr. Bennett to pull away like a frightened rabbit. “Your Majesty--” she started.

“Please, call me Sebastian,” Sebastian said.

“Sebastian,” she continued and smiled, “we would be honored--”

“But we should let Milo decide,” Mr. Bennett said quickly and then withdrew to his side of the table like he was afraid of some instant retaliation.

Mrs. Bennett seemed on the point to say something as she turned her head toward her husband, but there was a commotion at the door, and a very disheveled Milo made his way through the guards until he reached the table. “Sebastian, what are you doing here?” he asked.

Sebastian had to keep himself from grabbing Milo and kissing him on the spot. Everyone back home had insisted that he should show a bit of restraint until he brought his husband-to-be to the palace for the wedding ceremony. So he stood and buttoned his ceremonial jacket. “I am here,” he said solemnly, “to make an honest man out of you, as you asked.”

Milo’s eyes grew wide and traveled to his parents. He waved at them as if they were sitting at a significant distance from him. “Hi mom, hi dad,” he mumbled. “I graduated today.”

“Congratulations, son,” Milo’s father said.

“And now you’re getting married,” Milo’s mother said promptly.

Sebastian could feel his head pounding. Why did his future father-in-law like those stiff drinks so much? He groaned as Milo pushed him on the bed and took off his boots. “We should travel to Ifigia soon. They’re waiting with bated breath for me to bring my beloved home,” he drawled the words. They were in Milo’s room while the guards were housed at a nearby hotel. The carriage and horses were still photographed, but an army of veterinarians and volunteers who loved horses were on the grounds to offer the best care for the beasts.

“And they’ll wait until you’re no longer hangover. Man, you sure know how to propose.”

“That’s how a prince does it,” Sebastian declared and held one hand high. Milo grabbed it and kissed it.

“My parents are beyond themselves. My mom doesn’t know what to wear. My dad wants to know if you have enough alcohol.”

“Luna will take care of your mother’s wardrobe. You can tell your father that there is alcohol in Ifigia, although maybe nothing as vile as what he gave me all afternoon.” Sebastian didn’t protest as Milo turned him on all sides and undressed him completely. “Are you sure they’re all right with my sleeping in your room although we’re not yet married?”

“You have some really funny moral principles all of a sudden. We already did all kinds of crazy things, right? And mom wants to make sure that you’re not changing your mind.”

“What about your father?”

“He’s not going to go against my mom. By the way, you should have asked me first.”

“What?” Sebastian rubbed his face against the pillow and groaned.

“You know, the marriage stuff.”

“For real? But I wanted to make sure that I wouldn’t have to start a war.”

“What war? Sebastian?” Milo pressed against him, covering him with his body.

“A war against Earth, for you,” Sebastian explained, and his eyelids closed. He would never drink again.

Epilogue

Kai helped his mom climb the steep stairway that led to the Shimmering Cavern by offering his arm like a gentleman. They were there for Seb's and Milo's wedding, but they had arrived earlier, at Reya's insistence. That in itself was enough of a shock to last him a lifetime, and first, he had had to ensure that the ice goddess wasn't just looking to get her hands on Pepin and destroy the shard after all.

It appeared that everything was water under the bridge now, so, all in all, life was good. He couldn't tell exactly what made him think that he should take his mom there, among the many beautiful places in Ifigia, but he knew, deep down, that it mattered. There was one nagging thought that hadn't left him alone for a while now, and now he had the feeling that the magical cavern must have the key and answer to his questions.

"It looks like I did my cardio for the week," his mom joked when they finally reached the cave's entrance. "I still cannot believe that we are in another world. Your dad used to imagine the most fantastic things about worlds different than others, and I always laughed at him for having too much of a vivid imagination. And now, here we are. If only he were here with us today," she added, and her voice dropped low, barely a murmur.

Kai was dying to tell her mom about how he had dreamed of his dad while in Ifigia and how it all led there, to this cave, but he was waiting for something. The magical place needed to give them a sign, right?

He took his mom's hand, and together, they walked inside.

"So beautiful," his mom said breathlessly, and not only because she had climbed that stairway and gotten her cardio for the week. "I don't think I've ever visited a more beautiful place. Your dad liked to explore caves like this one. Well, not quite like this one, since you're telling me this place has magic."

Kai released her hand to let her walk around and wonder aloud at the crystals sprouting from the walls and the light that illuminated the entire room without any visible source. "Mom," he started, "you know how everybody wonders why I, of all people, managed to reach this world?"

"Do not mind them too much, Kai," his mom said. "They're envious they haven't been the one."

"The truth is I've wondered about it, too, lately. You know, why I got isekai'd."

His mom hid a playful snicker behind her hand. "To think that you really did get isekai'd. I would have never thought that I'd come to use this word so seriously. But you want to tell me something, right?"

Kai walked closer to her and looked at the walls, smooth in places. They looked like mirrors. Sebastian told him something about how Luna believed Reya made this place from love. It was hard to imagine, with Reya being Reya and all, but Kai honestly thought it was the real deal.

“Yeah. I saw dad,” he said.

“What? What do you mean?”

“While I was here, like in a dream, and then, he also brought me here while I was looking for Pepin through the forest.”

His mom looked at him, her eyes wavering between hope and uncertainty. “Are you sure that it wasn’t just a dream? I know how much you loved your father.”

“Just think of it this way, mom,” Kai said quickly and began rubbing the wall in front of him. “Where was that sign when you needed one? “Dad talked often of fantastic things, right?”

“Yes, but it was mostly so he would entertain you kids. I don’t think he really believed those things to be real.”

“But what if he caught a glimpse of such worlds? What if he really did believe?” he insisted.

His mom pondered for a second. “Seeing how the truth is right in front of my eyes, and I’m certain that I’m neither dreaming, nor going insane, I cannot contradict you. What did your dad say? How did he look like?” she asked, and it seemed that hope had won the battle in her eyes.

“He encouraged me, told me things about I shouldn’t worry so much that I’m going to become a dad and stuff. And he looked well, you know, like himself.”

“I wish he’d come to me sometimes, too,” his mom said in a regretful voice. “What are you doing, rubbing the wall like that?”

“I really thought that this magical cave would show dad to us both,” Kai said and groaned in frustration. “Maybe I should have asked Reya about it. No, not Reya, because she’s so scary. But Luna, at least. I wanted to bring you here, since it’s a magical place and all. But it looks like my knowledge of magic and all needs to level up.”

His mom caught his arm and rubbed it in sympathy. “Don’t worry, Kai. It’s a beautiful place, and I’m happy that you told me about your dad. Let’s go back now. Pepin promised to show me the palace and said there is no other more qualified than him to do so. He knows the place like the back of his hand.”

“All right,” Kai admitted. He was disappointed, but he didn’t want to let it show too much.

His mom took his arm, and they walked toward the exit when she suddenly stopped and looked back.

“What is it?” Kai asked.

“Did you hear that?” his mom asked.

“No, I didn’t hear anything.”

His mom let go of him and took a few steps back. “Kai, go ahead and wait for me outside,” she said.

“Why?” he asked.

She turned toward him, and her face looked young and radiant again. “Because your dad says so,” she explained with a small, secretive smile.

“Pepin, aren’t you tired already? And shouldn’t you get some rest given your condition and all? You’ve been on your feet all day,” he said. He was the tired one, but it was possible to lay it on Pepin, so why not take that? Plus, he wanted to be alone with him since they had been surrounded by people all through the day.

Tani held on to Pepin’s arm, clearly not yet wanting to let go. “But Kai,” she complained, “Pepin still hasn’t shown me the treasure room.”

“You’re not allowed to see the treasure room, dumbass,” Kai replied. “You need like super special clearance for that.”

“Kai, don’t call your sister a dumbass,” his mom said sternly.

Actually, not so sternly, as she had been happy beyond herself all through the day. Kai hadn’t dared to question her about seeing dad in the magical cave, and it looked like she was holding on to a secret of her own. Whatever it was, it made her glow with a new light, and he wasn’t the kind to question magical stuff, to begin with.

Tani stuck her tongue at him, triumphant that she had mom on her side.

“Tani, it’s late. Let Kai and Pepin go to sleep.”

Kai grinned at his sister and yawned. “Yeah, totally.”

“Pepin’s not tired,” Tani pointed out, in one last-ditch effort to delay the inevitable, which was going to sleep.

Mom took her by the shoulders and began dragging her away. “Tomorrow’s the wedding. Don’t you want to stay until late like the rest of us?”

“Yeah, I totally want that,” Tani replied, suddenly convinced that she needed her sleep. “Good night, brother-in-law,” she said and waved at Pepin. “Bye, brother-in-no,” she added and gestured at Kai like she wanted to make him disappear by performing a magic trick.

“Bye, dumbass,” he said under his breath.

“I heard that!” Tani threw at her as mom pushed her to walk toward their room, down the large hallway.

Kai moaned as soon as they were out of earshot. “Can you believe my sister? She’s like a leech. Once she grabs a hold of you, she doesn’t let go.”

“I don’t mind,” Pepin said and linked their arms together.

“Well, I do. I want you at least a bit to myself. She had you all day.”

Pepin laughed softly and bumped into Kai’s shoulder. “You know what your mother says?”

“I don’t unless you tell me.”

They walked through the door to the room they were sharing for the duration of their stay in Ifigia. Pepin had insisted on having his old room, even if it was a servant’s quarters. Kai was more than pleased with that. Pepin’s room was cozy, nothing as grand as Sebastian’s royal quarters, and Kai preferred it. Plus, everything there smelled like candy, just like Pepin.

And the bed was narrow enough to have them sleep plastered one against the other. Pepin had managed to send away the servants instructed to bring an extra bed to the room at the last moment. Kai had seen that, too.

“She says that we should have a ceremony, as well, once we’re back on Earth. Surely, nothing as opulent as this,” Pepin gestured and blushed.

“Are you asking me to marry you?” Kai demanded to know.

“If you want to, of course.” Pepin looked away.

“I totally do,” Kai replied like it was the most natural thing in the world. “I mean, we’re becoming parents, anyway, so it’s like the logical thing to do.”

“Logical?” Pepin turned a bewildered face toward him.

Kai scratched his head. “No, no, what I meant was, it’s our duty. Oh, shoot, that’s not right, either. Romantic?”

Pepin slapped his shoulder. “I can’t believe you!”

Kai gulped. “Shit, shit, shit. You can’t be mad at me, okay? I’ll get on one knee, okay?” He did exactly that and took Pepin’s hand. Pepin had his face covered by one palm. It took Kai a few good moments to realize that his soon-to-be spouse was laughing behind his hand. “You’re a dumbass just like Tani! Anyway, marry me and stop laughing!”

Pepin helped him to his feet and then kissed him to appease him. Like there was any need, Kai wanted to comment, but it felt good to have Pepin fuss over him a little. “I’ll marry you, sure. But now let’s rest. Tomorrow it’s a big ass day.”

“Big ass day? What is Tani teaching you?”

“A lot of things,” Pepin chirped. “I just love the Internet! And all those drama shows!”

“Sure you do,” Kai said, a bit miffed that Tani was getting ahead and showing Pepin all the stuff he wanted to show to him. “Just make sure to stay away from spoilers.”

“Spoilers? What are those?”

Good. It looked like he still had some things to teach his boyfriend.

“You know what, Your Majesty?” Milo whispered under his breath while holding his golden cup close to his lips to hide his words from the rest.

“What, Your Majesty?” Sebastian asked smoothly and mimicked the same gesture. With all the people there wanting to talk to them every single moment, nothing was beneath him to keep them at bay, even pretending that he liked to indulge in alcohol.

Milo snickered. “I’m a majesty now, too. This is so weird.”

“You’re the prince’s consort. Proper honor should be paid--”

“I know, I know. Your mom made my head this big. It looks like I have so many responsibilities that I’ll have to juggle college and being your royal consort like really well.”

“Don’t worry about her. You can skirt your responsibilities here and see about your education without worries.”

“Well, about that. I was thinking. How about creating a school opened to both people of Ifigia and Earth? You know, so that they could learn about each other.”

“That could be your project,” Sebastian offered.

“For real? I bet it will cost some serious dough.”

Sebastian straightened up in his high chair. “I assure you that I have plenty of dough to afford it.”

Milo laughed behind his glass again. “O. M. G., I’m turning into a millionaire’s wife, handling charities and all that.”

“As long as it makes you happy,” Sebastian offered somewhat stiffly. He still had plenty of catch-up to do on what was considered a joke and whatnot in the eyes of Earthians. “Oh, no, it’s time for another toast, already?”

“Let me handle it,” Milo said and stood to his feet.

Sebastian didn’t even listen to what Milo said while raising his glass. He was turning a big deaf and daft when he was staring at his consort like that. Milo indeed had it in him to be a great ruler. Even his mother had to accept that his choice had been made well.

He noticed Kai Martin sitting by himself by one of the open windows. With all the drinking and thousands of candles getting burned to keep the wedding celebrations going, it was no wonder that some people needed a bit of air. Even he needed that.

“Hey, man.” Kai turned as soon as he noticed that he was no longer alone. “Call me a bit nostalgic or whatever, but I wanted to stare a little at this sky.” He pointed at the canvas peppered with stars out the window. “Things are not all that different, right?”

“Some aren’t, it’s true,” Sebastian admitted.

“Hey, I’ve been meaning to ask you. Does Pepin need to be here to give birth and that?”

“Yes. Only at the Shimmering Cavern the ritual can be performed. And you don’t have to worry. Reya will not hurt your child,” Sebastian added. Kai had his reasons to worry, but they weren’t, fortunately, founded anymore.

“She’ll be the midwife, right?”

“Don’t call her that to her face. She might just freeze you for half a day, just for the lulz,” he said with a smile.

Kai laughed. “Funny how fast you got a hold of all the memes.”

“They are funny,” Sebastian pointed out. “I must thank you for that time,” he added after a short silence.

“What time?” Kai scrunched up his face as if trying to figure out what Sebastian meant by that.

“When you tried to take the curse upon himself.”

“Hey, no sweat. And I didn’t do anything, actually. You did. You practically sent me and Pepin tumbling down into my world.”

“It looks like I have certain abilities I’m not well aware of.”

“Did you know that my mom saw my dad at the Shimmering Cavern? He’s there, in some form. A spiritual one, I think.”

“Reya says that the cave collects unique souls when they become free of their bodies, so it doesn’t surprise me so much.”

“Yeah,” Kai admitted quietly. “So, we didn’t have proper time to talk, and I did mess some things while I was in your place, so I need to ask. Are we cool?”

Sebastian shrugged. “You did nothing wrong, actually. Yes, we are cool.”

Kai smiled a goofy smile. “Really? Then this is the best time of my life. Bro fist?”

Sebastian considered the offer. “Bro fist,” he repeated and then bumped his fist into Kai’s.

THE END